

Getting (and Surviving) the Job Interview

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The [*A.H.A. Perspectives for November 1999*](#) contains a guardedly optimistic report on the current state of academic employment. Subtitled "Significant Improvement in Job Openings," this piece goes on to admit that the biggest gain between 1998-99 and 1997-98 was in the job listings for senior historians. Turning to the employment picture for junior faculty, this report notes that 1998-99's 8% increase in jobs available to new Ph.Ds. barely kept pace with the recent growth in the production of new Ph.Ds. Finally, we learn from Robert Townsend's report that jobs in European history were 11% more plentiful in 1998-99 than they were in 1997-98--an encouraging trend, to be sure, but one that pales beside the recent demand for specialists in, say, Middle East history.

I now more often think in such aggregate terms because last year I served on a University of Washington History Department search committee charged with finding a tenure-track assistant professor to teach modern European subjects. Specialists in modern British history were eligible to apply for our opening, and 36 of them did so. As a matter of fact, it seemed to the search committee that just about anyone who was even remotely equipped to offer courses on modern Europe ended up applying. In all, we received 304 complete applications. We richly deserved this flood of files because our official job

advertisement read like a lottery promotion: "Candidates will be expected to teach an upper-level survey course on Europe since 1815 and an introductory level survey course on Europe since 1648, as well as undergraduate and graduate classes in areas of scholarly specialization. The Department has a particular interest in the following subjects: colonialism, imperialism, and migration; transnational issues; comparative fascism; and international studies, including war and diplomacy."

To be honest, had I been a newly-minted Ph.D. in modern British history last year, I'd have thought twice about applying for a job advertised in such terms. As a social historian, I'd have looked askance at the very traditional periodization suggested by the dates 1815 and 1648. And I would have been tempted to assume that the U. of W. History Department was so internally divided over what sort of Modern Europeanist it wanted that it was resorting to the old "trolling for stars" job search strategy: cast miles of net and pray that a few prize fish get caught. Ultimately, my Department's all-too-real ambivalence about the candidate it sought played out as a decision to hire no one. This despite the fact that at least eighteen of our applicants--several experts in modern Britain among them--possessed solid platinum credentials.

What's the moral of this story for today's newly-minted (or soon-to-be-minted) Ph.Ds. in British history? Four observations spring to mind.

First, in the short-term, a dearth of openings in British history is likely to remain the norm, therefore job seekers must be willing (and able) to sell themselves as European historians who happen to have a specialization in some aspect of British history. Having syllabi in hand to show search committee members will go some way toward reassuring them that you are not, in fact, an "insular" authority on Britain.

Second, and along these same lines, seriously consider developing a "thematic" field to complement your British history specialization. By a "thematic" field, I mean a historical concentration that is not chronologically defined, but instead emphasizes interdisciplinary learning. Among the thematic fields that impressed our committee last year were the history of science, the history of medicine, and comparative colonial regimes.

Third, should you make the "final cut" in a job search (that is, should you be invited to an on-campus interview), arrange to have a "mock" interview conducted 4 or 5 days before you fly off for the real deal. If at all possible, see to it that your mock interview includes several obliging faculty members who are ready to critique everything from your hand gestures to your use of slides.

Fourth and last, never, ever denigrate your own accomplishments. Search committees early on, and full departments later in the selection process, will be desperately keen to cut down their large applicant pools. Be certain that you don't inadvertently help them with this cutting process by apologizing for what you bring to the table. See that your teaching portfolio is well organized. See that you've done sufficient background checking to ask perceptive questions about life in Department "X." And see to it that you are equipped to parry the subversive "So, what difference does your dissertation really make?" challenge.

Being prepared on these grounds should instill confidence in you--and, crucially, in your prospective colleagues. For make no mistake about it, landing a job in today's academic environment remains, in part at least, a confidence game.