

Holding Patterns: Postdoctoral Survival Strategies for British Historians

**Paul Deslandes
Texas Tech University**

There are no magic answers to the question: "So, how do I get by while I wait for that seemingly elusive tenure-track position?" In fact, the strategies for surviving the post-doctoral years are as varied as the multiple dissertation topics we peddle to publishers during our annual migration to the AHA. I would like to offer some brief comments (drawn chiefly from my own experiences and those of my closest academic friends) about surviving what I like to call the "post-doctoral slump." In so doing, I would like to focus on three specific categories: the practical, the professional and the psychological.

The Practical

Assuming you've applied often, early and diligently for all of the post-docs and tenure-track positions available in your field of study (and, assuming you've been unsuccessful in securing one of these gems), what next? The primary consideration that most face, of course, relates to the question of survival (in the most basic sense) during what might be an extended period of under- or unemployment. What, then, are the possible strategies one might pursue in trying to "get by"?

First, draw on the resources that are most familiar to you: partners, family and friends who might be willing to assist you with a place to live, something to eat, and a place to write while waiting "your turn." Establishing **support networks** becomes crucial

to your survival on every level and may, in fact, determine just how long you will be able to sustain yourself.

Of course, survival entails much more than finding a support network. To mitigate against the poverty which this version of academic purgatory often offers there are several things that the aspiring British historian might do:

Second, search for courses in the place where you are most likely to find them-- your **home institution**. Gain experience teaching courses on Western Civilization and World History as well as those relating more specifically to topics in European or British history. (Remember, most British historians are increasingly hired by departments as general Europeanists, not specialists in their field.)

Third, think very seriously about relocating for good **one-year positions**. Often times, the inclination is to assume that the move will not be worth it (I realize that certain restrictions apply to those people with partners or families unwilling or unable to move.) In fact, a one-year position in British history might make a huge difference as a professional credential on your curriculum vitae. Often times, full-time visiting assistant professorships provide full benefits, a chance to teach new courses and test the waters of academic life, and an invaluable opportunity for making great contacts (and gaining additional letters of recommendation in the process). Additionally, as loathsome as time away from New York, Boston or San Francisco might be, just think about all the money you'll save on rent by relocating to rural Virginia or my new home state of Texas.

Fourth, consider the applicability of the skills you've acquired as a British historian to work as a **public historian** in Canada or the United States. While this may require you to stretch a bit, most British historians can apply their skills as researchers to

public history projects in North America. In the first months out of my Ph.D. program, I was able to secure a job as a curator/researcher for an exhibition on the history of psychiatric treatment in the U.S. (with the assistance of a very generous mentor). While a bit far a field of my own research interests, this position provided a solid and steady income, some very useful research experience, and the basis for two separate academic articles. In finding a position of this nature, it is essential that you utilize whatever contacts you have to assist you in making this transition. Build up networks in your area by communicating with Canadian and American historians, museum administrators, and government officials. In this world, the prestige accorded to those with Ph.D.s may, in fact, provide you with a much needed (and pleasantly surprising) boost in confidence. Remember, the skills acquired in graduate school do have general applicability outside the university classroom or the PRO.

Questions related to the marketability of the British history Ph.D. are, of course, crucial in the current climate. There are, I believe, several factors that British historians must consider. (In addition to the comments that follow, readers should also consult the recent report, issued by the NACBS, on the state of the field.)

- British historians need to think very seriously about the **resurgence of imperial history**--a fact reflected in the job advertisements for British history positions that have recently appeared in *Perspectives* (most, in fact, seem to be asking for an imperial component). While I have my doubts about what departments are trying to do with these positions (asking British historians to cover, often inadequately, Africa or Asia) it is impossible not to see one ineluctable fact---Britain's relationship to the broader world currently sells. While I don't propose that all

aspiring candidates turn their research efforts to Empire, I do think that it is possible to prepare to teach this field by developing syllabi (excellent examples of which have appeared in recent years in *Radical History Review*¹) that you can include in your dossier.

- Relating to this point, British historians in search of tenure-track jobs should contemplate creating a **syllabus in world history** that might also be included in a dossier. Training in imperial history will allow for some flexibility (and perhaps greater ease) in creating courses that deal not only with Europe but also with Asia, the Caribbean, and Africa. In preparing such syllabi, caution must be taken not to replicate an older imperial framework by examining only how the British influenced the world "overseas". Rather, the focus should be on the cultural encounters that imperialism entailed, exploring the symbiotic relationship between "colonizer" and "colonized" (categories, which, in and of themselves, should be interrogated in courses on world history).
- British historians must assert with greater force their claims to **general expertise in European history**. Search committees often need reminding that Britain is indeed a part of Europe and that job candidates in this field must be considered equally with those who work on France, Germany, Italy or Spain.

A final **pragmatic consideration** relates specifically to our role as researchers. During this period of underemployment, you should pursue as vigorously as possible your research agenda. We often hear today about the need to publish as a professional qualification but I might argue that it is also essential on another level: it sustains you.

When experiencing doubt about your prospects, returning to a book or an article (or even

just sifting through some random research notes) will remind you of the joys of being an historian and, in the process, reaffirm your commitment to the profession.

Professional Development

Probably, the greatest difficulty encountered while maintaining this "holding pattern" relates to the issue of professional identity. Indeed, this period in the life of the British historian is best characterized as one of being betwixt and between (you are neither part of the "student world" nor part of the "professorate"). There are, however, several ways in which British historians might alleviate some of the difficulties that this predicament undoubtedly produces.

Carve out a professional identity for yourself. If you are doing part-time teaching at an institution, assert your presence and ask to be included in departmental colloquia, social functions and special events (relating to this issue, the NACBS might encourage all history departments to reflect on the ways they treat adjunct faculty and demand that they help people early on in their careers establish this professional identity).

Rely on graduate student acquaintances and friends to **create a reconstituted "community of scholars"** (different from that created while in graduate school). Remember that most of us are trained at places that produce more than one British historian. Rely on these people (most of whom will also be under- or un-employed) to help you maintain a professional identity. With these contacts, form study groups (which might meet in person or via e-mail) that will help you remain connected and productive (for example, by imposing on participants a loose, and usually very helpful, writing schedule). Groups of this nature, aside from providing intellectual sustenance, also provide an excellent opportunity to vent about the job market, a recent article rejection or

a new book in your particular area of study.

Join the NACBS, attend its regional and national meetings as often as possible and use these occasions to make new professional contacts. While often an intimidating prospect, you should not shy away on these occasions from introducing yourself to senior and junior scholars who might be interested in reading an article or book manuscript.

(Advice to senior people: be receptive to an unfamiliar face. Rebuffs hurt and often add to the recent Ph.D.'s sense of alienation. The responsibility for creating a community of scholars rests with all of us.)

Create connections with scholars not only in Canada and the United States but also with those **in the UK**. While travel to the UK may be difficult during these transitional years, you should not hesitate to build-up e-mail connections and professional contacts that might, in the future, provide invitations to conferences, research opportunities or, even jobs.

Psychological Considerations

In addition to the innumerable practical and professional issues that confront the British historian trying to maintain this "holding pattern," are the many psychological considerations that impinge directly (and perhaps most importantly) on her/his career during this difficult period. How do you survive the rejection, the uncertainty, and the occasional depression of these years? While everyone copes with these problems in her/his own way, there are several general points worth considering.

There are several points about the job market in history that need to be stated emphatically: the market is capricious, random, frustrating and, most often, inexplicable. Who knows why Dr. John Smith gets a job over Dr. Jane Doe? In many

instances, search committees are often unable themselves to offer any satisfactory responses to this question. Good historians get jobs; good historians don't get jobs. On occasion, even people we might consider bad historians or, worse yet, bad teachers might even get jobs. Rather than agonizing over these inevitable facts, candidates in "holding patterns" should focus on how they can convince a department that they are indeed a good historian, a good teacher and a good colleague. Don't worry about other candidates, don't second-guess search committees (their reasoning is often beyond any comprehension) and, most importantly, don't second-guess yourself.

Prepare yourself for the unexpected. Fortunes turn very quickly in this profession. Things do indeed happen at the last minute. On April 22nd, after being rejected from three tenure-track jobs for which you've had on-campus interviews, you might suddenly receive a phone call for an on-campus interview for a great one year-position. Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and take advantage of the opportunity that has been presented. Resiliency is required during these months or years of uncertainty. Be prepared to shift gears, cancel classes, juggle a variety of tasks (you should have a number of different job talks and lectures prepared) and fly away unexpectedly (better take out another credit card). While this can produce untold anxiety, try to maintain some sense of equilibrium by setting time aside for relaxation, pleasure and non-academic pursuits.

Avoid the blame game. Jobs go to people for a variety of different reasons. One disturbing trend I observed during my years on the job market, was the tendency among (especially white, middle-class male) candidates to assume that the reasons they weren't getting jobs were related in some way to affirmative action policies. While there is

certainly a (very necessary) premium placed in some departments on diversifying their faculties, these efforts have not led to a stoppage in the hiring of white men. In fact, while employment figures for female candidates are slightly higher than for those of men, it is clear that men continue to form a very substantial portion of recent hires.² The representation of African-American (or Canadian), Latinos, and Asian-American (or Canadian) historians in British and European positions remains, however, very low (something the NACBS may in fact wish to consider in the future). Ultimately, obsessions with and gripes about affirmative action are counterproductive, potentially dangerous and ultimately divisive, I think, for the profession.

Celebrate the successes of others: The worst thing that you can do in trying to survive this difficult period is to become bitter. It makes you unpleasant and often rears its head (however unintentionally) in job interview situations. The notion of community that to me seems so necessary to getting by as a scholar and teacher in these difficult times is severely challenged by excessive competition, back-stabbing and witty barbs. Jealousy is, of course, natural (and to a large extent a healthy coping mechanism) but you should not let it consume you (as I myself did on occasion while looking for a permanent appointment). To avoid this, establish friendships with your competitors (and let's face it, we're all competitors). Over the past several years, I've routinely met with a colleague at the annual meeting of the NACBS to discuss our previous year's adventures. As finalists for the same position on a number of occasions, we've been able to share stories about on-campus interviews, compare notes on the job market, and have a good laugh about the eccentricities of particular search committees. In the process, we've also taken time to congratulate each other on successes, share advice, and develop a good

professional friendship.

Above all, keep in mind the reasons why you've done this. While such a reminder may appear trite, I do think it is essential that we recall, in difficult times, our love of the discipline, our research topics, and teaching. Keeping these points in mind will sustain you through tough spells and will act as a gauge that will help you measure how long you should stay on the market. If the passion has disappeared, it might be time to think about other options. There is also another practical side to all of this, of course: recalling why it is that you have chosen to do what you do will help to breed enthusiasm—an essential trait that search committee members look for as they assess job candidates.

In providing these brief comments for this forum, my intention was to be suggestive not prescriptive. I realize that the professional issues each one of us faces on a daily basis differ according to personal circumstances and hope that people will feel free, in the future, to share their particular strategies for coping with this difficult transitional period. It is my hope that these comments will spark further discussion and provide some basis for the conversations we have with each other in our offices, in various British archives and record offices, and in the conference hotels where many of us meet on an annual basis.

¹ See, [Radical History Review](#) 67 (1997), pp. 129-186 and *Radical History Review* 71 (1998), pp. 133-181.

² These comments are based on a very casual reading of recent statistics. See, for example, "History Ph.D. Production Hits 20-Year High," [Perspectives](#) 38,1 (January 2000), pp. 3-4.