

Inaugural IBHA Conference

We do hope you will join us for the upcoming IBHA conference to be held at Grand Valley State University on August 2 - 5, 2012!

Please contact the IBHA office for further details or if you have any questions.

The conference will offer excellent keynote speakers, a variety of interesting panels, and stimulating discussions. Among the topics that will be addressed at the conference are:

- Graduate Work in Big History
- Research Agendas in Big History
- The History of Big History
- Little Big Histories
- Teaching Big History (all levels and formats, including E-learning)
- Big History and Ethics
- Big History and the Future
- The Politics and Future of Big History
- Artistic Contributions and Storytelling

The IBHA is excited to announce that the Midwest World History Association will also be hosting their Third Annual Conference concurrently with the IBHA conference: **“The Reshaping of Planet Earth: Connections Between Humans and the Environment in World History.”**

David Baker: Big History PhD student

My name is David Baker and I am a PhD student in Big History. I study under David Christian at the Big History Institute at Macquarie University in Sydney Australia. As part of the profile of graduate students in this newsletter, I’ve been asked to answer the following questions:

1. What brings about the decision to pursue Big History in graduate studies?

I am sure this differs from person to person and from discipline to discipline. I am not an expert on the question, but I do know my own story. I started my career as a conventional historian, and did my BA Honours and MA in Calgary, loosely affiliated with work in the French *Annales* school. Even then I was



David Baker

Main Conference Events

Registration begins: **Thursday, August 2, at 2:00 pm** (All times Eastern Standard Time)

Thursday, August 2, 6:00 pm – 8:00 pm

Combined Opening Reception, Grand Rapids Public Museum

Friday, August 3 – Sunday, August 5, (Sessions begin at 9:00 am)

Ongoing Panels, Discussions and Workshops, DeVos Center & Honors College, Grand Valley State University

Friday, August 3, 6:00 pm – 8:00 pm

Combined Reception, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, featuring MWWHA Keynote Speaker, Dr. Lawrence Gundersen (Environmental Historian and Professor, Jackson State Community College, Tennessee)

Saturday, August 4, 5:30 pm – 8:30 pm

Combined Conference Dinner, Kirkhoff Center, GVSU, featuring IBHA Keynote Speaker, Dr. Walter Alvarez (Professor of Geology, University of California Berkeley)

Sunday, August 5, 1:30 pm – 5:00 pm

Combined Wrap-up Session w/Keynote (TBA), followed by Combined After Glow Reception, DeVos Center, GVSU

Conference Registration Fees

IBHA Members: Regular \$220 | Late \$245

Non-Members: Regular \$360 | Late \$385

IBHA Full-Time Student Members: Regular \$120 | Late \$140

Registration runs through July 19, 2012

Late Registration begins on July 20, 2012

Guest Pass (good for entry to Evening Social Events only):

Regular \$130 | Late \$155

Conference Registration Fees include all of the following:

- Entry to all Conference Panels including the IBHA and MWWHA Essential Panels
- Attendance at the Opening Reception
- Attendance at the Friday Reception
- Attendance at the Conference Dinner
- Optional IBHA Business Meeting
- Lunch Provided for the 3 Full Days of Conference Activities
- Morning and Afternoon Coffee Breaks
- Wrap-up Session w/Keynote Address and Closing Remarks
- After Glow Reception
- And much more

Refund Policy Conference Refunds for Presenters and Panelists:

Presenters and Panelists who are unable to secure funding from their institutions to attend the conference may request a full refund if notice is received by July 19, 2012. After this date, a \$30 administrative fee will be applied. Requests must be made in writing or via email.

Conference Refunds for General Conferees: The last day for Conference Fee refunds (less \$30 administrative fee) is July 19, 2012. Requests must be made in writing or via email.

Housing Accommodations

All housing accommodations (except the Courtyard by Marriott) are close to Grand Valley State University and the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum and Grand Rapids Public Museum. The discount rates won't last. Please note: All Conferees need to make their own accommodations reservations, however if you need assistance, please contact the IBHA office.

Holiday Inn

The IBHA has a block of 60 double rooms at a discounted rate of \$112 per night (single/double/triple/quad occupancy). Room Reservations are on an individual call-in basis at 888-465-4329 (toll-free) or 616-235-7611. In addition to a restaurant and indoor

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pool, more details of amenities can be found at the following link: <http://www.holidayinn.com/grandrapidsdt>. Reference: International Big History Association. Discount rates are not guaranteed after JULY 2, 2012. City Flats HotelThe IBHA has a block of 8 double (1 w/handi-cap facilities), 5 King, and 7 Queen rooms at a discounted rate of \$129 per night on Thursday and \$155 per night on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday (single/double/triple/quad occupancy). Room Reservations can be made by calling 616-451-1892. Reference: International Big History Association Conference. In addition to being a green/sustainable hotel, more details on amenities can be found at the following link: www.cityflatshotel.com. Discount rates are not guaranteed after JULY 25, 2012.

Courtyard by Marriott (Amway Hotel Collection)

NOTE: NOT WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE – NEED TRANSPORTATION The IBHA has a block of 25 double rooms at a discounted rate of \$139 per night (single/double/triple/quad occupancy). Room Reservations can be made by calling 800-971-4762 (toll-free) or 616-242-1500. Reference: International Big History Association Conference. Hotel amenities can be found at the following link: www.Marriott.com/Courtyard. Discount rates are not guaranteed after JULY 2, 2012.

JW Marriott (Amway Hotel Collection)

The IBHA has a block of 20 double rooms at a discounted rate of \$159 per night (single/double/triple/quad occupancy). Room Reservations can be made by calling 888-844-5947 (toll-free) or 616-242-1500. Reference: International Big History Association Conference. Rooms may also be booked online through the website at: www.ilovethejw.com. Enter Group Code: *ibhibha*. Discount rates are not guaranteed after JULY 2, 2012.

Experience everything Grand Rapids has to offer at www.experiencegr.com. We are looking forward to seeing you in Grand Rapids, Michigan! Registration You may register online through our website at www.ibhanet.org, where you will find more information on the conference, membership, accommodations, transportation, extra activities, and the International Big History Association, check the IBHA website at www.ibhanet.org. If you have any problems with registration or have any further questions, please e-mail us at: ibha@gvsu.edu.

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looking to cover a broad chronology. I studied questions that spanned both the medieval and early modern periods and got to look into a vast array of demographic and economic historiography and do Latin and French paleography for both periods. The chronology of my two theses, unusually long by conventional historical standards, amounted to just 500 years. This is a very small figure compared to the 13.7 billion years I now study, but even that seemed weighty to my colleagues who were researching sources that covered a couple of years or a decade or two at a stretch. Some professors said that long chronologies couldn't

be done. Or that they should be the summation of a long and tiresome career. There would be just too much detail involved, but I was happy to learn that the amount of detail an answer requires depends upon the nature of the question. This is how Big History research at a graduate level can operate without being swamped by data. This is also how specific questions can be pursued by graduate researchers in Big History just like any other genre of history – but questions that can only be answered by looking at the big picture.

To continue, it was in my MA that I became troubled at what I was setting myself up to do with the rest of my

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life. In my graduate coursework, a lot of the debates seemed trifling, subjective, self-indulgent, and often without the slightest hope of a productive answer. So what was the point of engaging in these debates, aside from the appeal of hearing the sound of your own voice? In our study of various historical methodologies, a lot of them (and they shall remain nameless here) seemed to evade or even wilfully ignore the basic principles of science. Bizarre and controversial arguments seemed to be invented just for the sake of having an argument, to publish a paper, or to establish a career. I studied entire methodologies that were literally invented to highlight the meaningless nature of seeking truth in history – and they took thousands of words to express that meaninglessness. I nevertheless gritted my teeth and engaged in arguments in which I had no interest or stake, perfected my skills of bullshit artistry, and flung polemics and platitudes around the room as good as the rest of them. But aside from my teaching duties – actually educating undergrads about their history – I did not feel I was making a tangible contribution to society. What a way to spend your life...shut up in the Ivory Tower writing a paper that only a dozen people would read and only half a dozen people would remember! I could not see the point. In fact, one of the questions that seldom raises a satisfactory answer in honours and graduate history seminars is ‘what is the point of our doing history?’ Most people opted for glib sentiments; some people for paradoxes; some people said that historians should be more politically involved (!); yet, I usually opted for Cicero or sarcasm (in the case of the former, ‘to not know what happened before you were born is to forever remain a child’). But indeed it is difficult to justify spending your short existence on this Earth by writing, let us say, ‘The Marxist-Feminist Interpretation of Pumpernickel



Production in Sixteenth Century Westphalia’ (and by this I mean no disrespect to any Marxist-Feminist historians of Westphalian pumpernickel, should they actually have the heavy burden to exist) or ‘The History of Masturbation’ (an actual example of scholarship I was aghast to come across). But I do not

mean any snide disrespect to pumpernickel or masturbation. Any topic has the potential to be interesting if you write about it well. But in some cases, it is more difficult to illustrate the point of it than others. In Big History there is no such ambiguity. We tell the greatest story ever told. The readers of an IBHA newsletter will have some idea of the potential for an intellectual and cultural revolution the expansion of Big History wields, so I will not waste space or your time

waxing profound about it here.

At any rate, it was in this state of deep discontent that I was asked to take a graduate course in the department of biological sciences. It was for the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin’s birth and 150th anniversary of the publication of the Origin of Species...around the table sat a group of very bright biologists, each with their own specific fields and impressive research projects. In addition, there were philosophers and one lone historian, yours truly. We spent a semester reading through the first edition of the Origin, chapter by chapter, in addition to bringing readings to the table from a variety of sources, and discussing every implication – scientific, cultural, philosophical, historical – of one of the most earth-shattering works ever written by man (the professor in charge, the indefatigable Jeremy Fox, would not hesitate to say the most). We also sat around the table with people from various disciplines, each with their own background, each with their own training; I was amazed at some of the profound and startling things

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we came up with. It could not have happened if we were all stuck in a room with people of our own disciplines. Bouncing ideas back and forth between our very differently constructed minds, we came up with some of the best results in discussion I have ever had in academia. And what is more - it felt productive; it felt significant; it felt sincere; it felt honest. From that moment on I was convinced of the virtues of interdisciplinary work at a high level. From that moment on I hungrily sought more.

I spent the final year of my MA (my thesis and oral defence almost seeming like an afterthought and whizzing by with equal indifference) reading up on works suggested to me by my new colleagues in the sciences. I scoured the libraries on my own to read the words of C.P. Snow, of Hawking, of Krauss, of Chaisson, of Dennett, of Dawkins, and Spier and Christian. My own background in demographic history and the French *Annales* brought me into contact with Peter Turchin of *Secular Cycles* and *Cliodynamics* fame (which last year published a *Big History* edition). I learned it was possible to combine the disciplines in the examination of history – and to great effect. I researched and wrote on a new topic, by new methods, that eventually amounted to a project that I am happy to say was recently published. I learned of the virtues of the grand narrative. I expanded my mind and awareness of the universe around me in a rapid amount of time. The nagging sense of futility and discontent disappeared. It was replaced by a sense of purpose. I then had the very good luck to fall into contact with David Christian. He was back at Macquarie and said he would be willing to supervise my next project. I packed up in September 2010 and arrived in Sydney to be the first of his new graduate students to exclusively be researching and writing in *Big History*. I was thrilled to find out on my arrival (I had previously been entirely unaware) that Bill Gates was sponsoring a high school curriculum. I crafted a project along the lines of *Big History* and set my sights on helping to prove that *Big History* can foster graduate work – research projects like any other genre of history – but interdisciplinary, broad sweeping, and dealing with the profound picture of 13.7 billion years. Proving this point is the task upon which I am currently engaged.

2. *What does Big History graduate research look like once you are in it?*

The next two questions are significantly easier to answer, and, you'll be glad to know, with shorter length. The simple answer to this question is that: nobody knows for sure. At the time of my

Graduate research at this point, must, like any historical thesis, focus on a specific question. It just happens to cover a broad time period. It must also tie back to the grand narrative of 13.7 billion years.

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I have no idea what my future prospects are. I have taken a risk here, as myself, my colleagues, and my supervisor readily acknowledge. I may yet finish up my scholarship, gain my PhD, and promptly starve. But that is a risk I am willing to take. I believe in this. Passionately.

arrival, my supervisor had no idea what a Big History research project would look like, and while I had my theories and my ideas and fruits of collaboration, I was not much more confident. And my initial ideas changed as I talked with Dr. Christian and had the good fortune to teach in his course. Things have evolved naturally. My mind changed the more I learned. And with the addition of another graduate, Isaiah Moose, who is also doing a research project specifically geared toward historical scholarship and source work, we do have a clearer idea of what graduate research might look like. Graduate research at this point, must, like any historical thesis, focus on a specific question. It just happens to cover a broad time period. It must also tie back to the grand narrative of 13.7 billion years. It should also be strongly interdisciplinary in character, and, if possible, use case studies and specific evidence to prove its point just like any other historical thesis. I work with the idea of the Darwinian algorithm, I work with ecological and evolutionary theories, I work with the theories and concepts of biologists, cosmologists, and my own supervisor David Christian. I can tie it to case studies, but I can also tie it to the significant sweep of the 13.7 billion years, the rise of complexity, and the place of humanity in the universe. I will not give a resume of my research project here, nor will I make any more pronouncements about what a Big History graduate research project 'should' be. It is far too early in the game. And those standards evolve by precedent, not pronouncement. All of the graduates currently engaged upon it have their own ideas. I have my Darwinian algorithm; Isaiah has his network theory; Rich has his pedagogy; and Esther has her Little Big History. A number of newcomers doubtless have their own ideas. Teaching in the Big History course has taught me that there are a number of questions, problems, and debates that can only be addressed at a Big History level. There are research agendas for many years to come. The point is that we must strive to do as good a job as possible on our own projects to set a precedent for graduate research in Big History and help it attain a level of respectability as any research genre in academic history, to make it viable for future historians to spend their academic careers in Big History, and, if fortune smiles upon us, come out with some surprising and profound results that shed light on the grand unfolding tale of 'life, the universe, and everything.' Presumably Douglas Adams has not anticipated us all by figuring out that the answer is 42. At present, if anything, I strongly suspect $\Omega = 1$ is closer to the mark...

3. *What sort of career paths might open?*

That question has a very straightforward but entirely

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David Baker continued

unsatisfactory answer: No idea. As graduate students, we have all taken tremendous risks casting in our lot with Big History at this stage. Presumably this means we are all here because we believe in it and want to help further it as an academic discipline and beyond as a cultural contribution. It seems possible that teaching positions may open up as Big History hits the mainstream in the next few years. The inaugural meeting of the IBHA, the release of the Bill Gates project, and the interest of Davos, TED, Al Gore, and television companies in Big History, are all good portents of what may lie ahead. It is also comforting to know there is a vast worldwide network of established scholars who fight valiantly to advocate Big History as a discipline. Barry Rodrigue's Big History directory is certainly one way of calming the nerves and getting some sleep at night.

For me, personally, my concerns are, 1) getting Big History taught to as many students at a university level across the world, and 2) to establish Big History as a research discipline within academic

history. I'd like to see students do a full career course with us some day: BA, MA, PhD. There is the possibility of higher level courses in Big History developing in the near future, and also the supervision of theses at a graduate level. I've already had dozens of interested inquiries from undergraduates interested in pursuing careers at my limited time at Macquarie. However, for that we need manpower to teach, to supervise, to foster and collaborate. And for that, I would happily do my part in supplying. But we also need funding. And this depends on the goodwill of people beyond my acquaintance who know nothing of me or my sentiments. Ideally, I'd like to teach Big History someday, whether as an introductory undergraduate course or running higher level seminars and research projects. But this is going to take a fight...and a lot of luck, yet at this point the outcome is not yet clear. I have no idea what my future prospects are. I have taken a risk here, as myself, my colleagues, and my supervisor readily acknowledge. I may yet finish up my scholarship, gain my PhD, and promptly starve. But that is a risk I am willing to take. I believe in this...passionately. And I take comfort in the fact that very few people can say that about their jobs. In that respect, I am very fortunate.



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The views and opinions expressed in the International Big History Association newsletter are not necessarily those of the IBHA Board. The IBHA newsletter reserves the right to accept, reject or edit any material submitted for publication.

