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On Becoming a Big Historian

John A. Mears

Southern Methodist University

How does a conventionally trained professional historian interested in early modern Europe and focused primarily on seventeenth-century Austria become interested in what we now call Big History? If my experience is any indication, it seldom happens abruptly, nothing like the remarkable dreams that conveyed to Rene Descartes on the night of November 10, 1619 a sense of divine approval for his conviction that the structure of the universe was mathematical and logical. Rather, my awareness of Big History's possibilities developed over a period of three decades and continues to grow right down to the present day as the pace of scholarly advances in relevant disciplines has accelerated and my own mastery of our own rapidly maturing field has grown.

Unbelievable as it seems in retrospect, my journey began in the spring of 1955. I was a junior in high school completing my initial course in European history. One noon hour, while caught up in my own thoughts, the idea of becoming a college professor suddenly jumped into my head. Why the idea even dawned on me so early in my life remains a mystery, since I had never before shown much interest in an academic career. At the time, I had been inspired by my history instructor, Mr. Schofield, who persistently challenged his students to reexamine their most cherished assumptions. More important, perhaps, I had been provoked by my reading of his class's core text, the 1940 edition of Carl Becker's *Modern History*. This pioneering work had

In this issue of the IBHA Members' Newsletter, we feature:

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been widely used in high school classrooms during the decade prior to Pearl Harbor. While much of its luster had been lost by 1955, Becker's approach may have left a greater imprint on my thinking than I was prepared to recognize at the time.

Throughout his career, Becker had remained grounded in a nineteenth century Eurocentric view of the past. But his emphasis on "the rise of a democratic, scientific, and industrial civilization" had appealed to educated young Americans in the 1930s because it demonstrated how their national history might be integrated into a larger vision of the European heritage. In any case, Becker's interpretation of recent centuries together with Schofield's relentless assault on complacent thinking surely enlarged my youthful outlook, which may explain why I turned the following summer to H. G. Wells' *Outline of History*, conveniently located in my parent's library, and read that intimidating volume cover to cover.

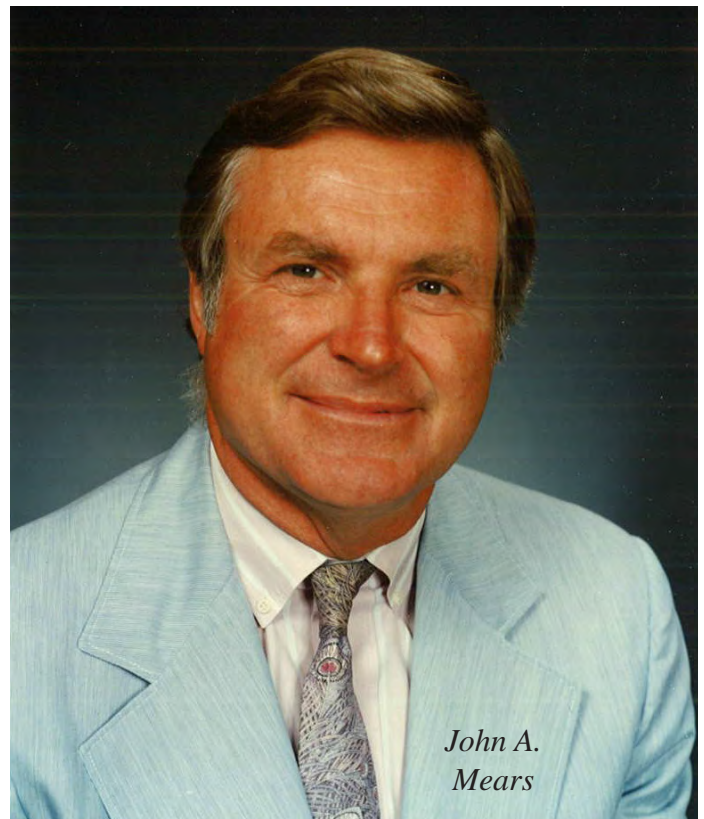
I recognized that Wells was not a professional historian, but recall nonetheless being enthralled by the broad sweep of his narrative. I responded readily to his understanding of humankind as an integral part of nature and a product of evolving life forms on our planet, perhaps because I spent so much of my youth in the north woods of Minnesota and Wisconsin. I found no reason to quarrel with his view of history as a single story of progressively more intricate relationships which imparted significance to particular events or his contention that "history as one whole is amenable to a more broad and comprehensible handling than is the history of special nations or periods." And I found his presentation of larger, interpretive conclusions quite thought-provoking.

Wells' overriding supposition that "there can be no common peace and prosperity without common ideas" seemed to me reasonable enough, even though I no longer view the ways of the West as inherently superior. Wells had been driven to complete his monumental study by the destructive fury of World War One, convinced that an integrated treatment of humanity's shared past would help his readers understand more fully the realities of the modern age. Since my earliest memories of momentous historical events had been acquired in the last stages of World War Two, I readily accepted his assertion that the human experience had turned into a race

between education and catastrophe. As a high school student in the Eisenhower era, I firmly believed that education would be the ultimate victor, naïve though that may seem today.

In the autumn of 1956, I entered the University of Minnesota with no further thoughts about universal history. Whatever my first responses to studying the past may have foreshadowed about my ultimate concerns, I never evinced much interest in the writings of more metaphysically-minded scholars such as Oswald Spengler and Pitrim Sorokin, who had achieved prominence in the first half of the twentieth century, although I did peruse the two-volume abridgement of Arnold J. Toynbee's *A Study of History* whenever the comparability of civilizations or such concepts as "challenge and response"—complicated problems provoking creative innovations—seemed relevant to my intellectual concerns. I initially concentrated my course work on the familiar terrain of my own country in preparation for graduate school. Then, as an upper classman, I made my next abrupt turn.

Again in my junior year, I encountered the extraordinary lectures of John B. Wolf, an expert on



John A.
Mears

the age of Louis XIV. He accustomed me to thinking about the past in terms of overriding problems I had never considered before, such as the ways the great wars of seventeenth-century Europe drove the immediate historical process. His lectures exposed me to a highly analytical approach that increasingly directed my attention away from American history and toward the early modern, German-speaking world. I received my graduate training at the University of Chicago, fully anticipating a conventional career as a specialist in the emergence of the Hapsburg Monarchy. But once again, I was exposed to influences that would ultimately push me off my anticipated path.

At Chicago, nothing affected me more in the long run than my encounter with William H. McNeill. His graduate classes, while seemingly traditional in form, gave particular attention to cultural interactions between peoples and societies as a means of explaining transformative changes over time. More important, however, was the publication of his *The Rise of the West*, a book I examined with great interest and would return to again with a more critical eye in the 1980s. It reignited my enthusiasm for the magisterial character of macrohistory and heightened my awareness of how a holistic approach might deepen our perspectives on what the human condition has become in recent times.

Just three years after the appearance of *The Rise of the West*, L. S. Stavrianos, in the midst of his own distinguished career at nearby Northwestern University, published the first textbook that treated the history of humankind from a genuinely global perspective. Meanwhile, my dissertation adviser at Chicago, Donald F. Lach, whose own postulates about world history had already led him to initiate what would become the multi-volume *Asia in the Making of Europe*, reinforced McNeill's influence by encouraging me to consider the ways in which important developments within a given society could have their origins in knowledge of far off lands. Another important mentor, Louis Gottschalk, a distinguished expert on the French Revolution, had begun the task of editing volume four of the *UNESCO History of Mankind*. And although I did not recognize it at the time, I was indirectly affected by the seminal thinking of Marshall G. S. Hodgson, an Islamicist whose interest in the power of enlarged perspectives

guided the writing of what ultimately became his three-volume *The Venture of Islam*. As I can see in retrospect, Hodgson's insistence that all societies, but notably Islam and Europe, should be positioned within a single global framework had already begun to alter the thinking of other prominent scholars in the Chicago academic community.

During the years that immediately followed graduate school, a number of unconnected developments further reconfigured my career interests. In retrospect, they all pushed me in the direction of Big History. One involved avocational reading in the natural sciences and in anthropology. New discoveries about cosmic evolution and the unfolding of our lineage fascinated me, and geologist Preston Cloud's *Cosmos, Earth, and Man* provided an accessible overview. At about the time I began to collaborate with high school world history teachers in their efforts to resolve persistent conceptual and pedagogical challenges, I experienced personal frustration over the mounting intellectual fragmentation of the academy. Then, quite unexpectedly, the sermons of a Unitarian-Universalist minister named Dwight Brown on the theological ramifications of twentieth century science that he delivered in the early 1970s played a significant role in shaping my responses to these other developments. What struck me about his theology was the insistence that only our examination of the interacting systems of the whole of the universe will reveal the most comprehensive truth about our existence. Through the development of our human potential, he argued, we become active agents in the creative process, giving significance to the cosmos as we impart, through our personal growth, significance in our own lives.

By the 1980s, I had reached another turning-point in my thinking, due in part to an opinion piece published by Theodore D. Lockwood, president of Trinity College, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on the mounting difficulties across the country involved in the implementation of undergraduate curriculum requirements. Concerned about the impact of increasing professional specialization, President Lockwood asked: "Do we as faculty hold enough convictions in common to enable a new principle of curricular organization to emerge—a principle that grows organically from

widely shared assumptions and that can win general assent?” In 1986, I felt myself ready to answer his question and published an article in *JGE: The Journal of General Education* entitled “Evolutionary Process: An Organizing Principle for General Education.” Without realizing it at the time, I had taken my first step into the realm that David Christian later taught us to call Big History.

What I stressed in my article was our capacity as academics to maintain links between a wide range of disciplines, setting forth the essential reasons why that would be feasible and how it might benefit our research as well as our teaching. “Every discipline,” I suggested, “embraces an element of historicity; every discipline is connected in one way or another with how relationship patterns between apparently disparate phenomena alter over time; and whatever our discipline, we discover—when we observe the evolutionary process over long time spans—a persistent direction in the order and sequence shaped by our minds, a direction that moves things from the singular to the plural, from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous, from the simple to the complex, from isolation to integration.” Explaining what I meant by the concept of evolutionary process, I then showed how it might be implemented in a twelve credit core curriculum taught in collaborative fashion by a succession of faculty, many of them coming from the natural sciences.

I had already been a member of the fledgling World History Association for about three years, learning how to approach the human experience comprehensively by examining the transcendent interactions between peoples and societies in comparative ways. Ever more impressed by the advantages of long-term perspectives, I determined in the early 1990s to develop a year-long history survey for my undergraduates. Seeking to underscore the ceaseless change and ephemeral character of everything we can possibly encounter and our interrelationships with the Earth’s environment, other terrestrial life forms, and the larger universe as well, I devoted about half of the fall semester to a series of topics that started with the Big Bang and ended with the onset of the Holocene. Using what would soon be labeled Big History—a study of the past that embraces the whole of time, integrating the evolution of the physical universe, of our planet and its life

form, with the history of humankind—I set the stage and established the context within which my students might discover meaning in the dominant themes of humanity’s shared past by learning how to examine particular events and developments from a viewpoint as universal as they could possibly muster.

In 1994, moved by the rapid maturation of World History as a body of approaches for teaching and research together with the explosion of valuable scholarship in so many relevant disciplines, I began thinking about how my classroom approach might be turned into a book designed to reach beyond undergraduates to my fellow academics and even elements of the educated reading public. I hoped to acquire for myself a heightened awareness of my own operating assumptions and their relationship to an emerging intellectual framework that I viewed as indispensable for my purposes. For more than a decade, I have struggled to set forth what I hope will be regarded as a defensible master narrative that that defines the overall shape of the human experience. I quickly discovered that any attempt by a single scholar to interpret that experience persuasively as a single, unified whole resting on a foundation of Big History commences in hubris and concludes in humility. I have expanded my project from one volume to two, and only now am I nearing the completion of the first volume. Yet my labors, far from being in vain, have already left a significant imprint on every aspect of my profession work. From writing to teaching to service activities, my thinking invariably reflects the ways of knowing I have acquired through my study of Big History.

We have organized the International Big History Association just as I am approaching retirement. Our opening meeting reminded me of how much I have mastered of our exciting endeavor and how much I still have to learn. For me, becoming a Big Historian has been a relentless quest that offers no conceivable end point. The existence of our fledgling Association will keep me actively engaged, and given how preliminary so much of my understanding remains, I am deeply grateful for the possibilities that our newly acquired “collective learning” has given us.



The Dominican Big History Summer Institute: A Story of Collective Learning

A cold Tuesday afternoon in 2009 saw a group of us Dominican faculty come together with an odd mix of enthusiasm and weariness to work on curricular revision. We gathered in Dominican University's Hunt Room, surrounded by colorful murals of a posh hunt sequence featuring horses and hounds and were well aware of the power of transformation manifested even in the building itself. The summer estate residence of the de Young family—founders of the San Francisco Chronicle and the de Young Museum—had been purchased for \$10 by the ever-resourceful Dominican Sisters in 1918 and had served the purposes of education as a residential and assembly hall ever since. Now, in 2009, we were attempting another transformation: a reform of our general education curriculum. Would we rise to the occasion?

Our small sub-group had been specifically tasked with revamping our first-year programming, hence the mix of trepidation and eagerness. We were eager since we recognized the great potential of a six-unit first-year sequence, and yet we were disheartened as extensive research of other institutions had shown us the great disparity amongst freshman seminars and first-year programs. Many were skills-based; almost none were foundational. The content options that presented themselves seemed a throwback to the 1980s and '90s: Western Civilization, Great Books, or World History. All were valuable and wonderful courses and yet

On that Tuesday afternoon, my esteemed colleague Phil Novak entered the discussion with even more fervor than usual and for the first time we heard the term "Big History." He had carried in a heavy bag of books and now began taking them out. We heard more unfamiliar names and titles that day, and as Phil continued to describe a course that seemed to draw on astronomy, chemistry, biology, geology, anthropology, sociology, art, and history, our collective hearts sank. We shook our heads at this idealistic and impractical man, and as we left the

room, one of my colleagues quietly remarked to me, "I wouldn't want to teach that." And therein lay the crux of the argument: who would want to teach such a crazy course that obviously lacked a disciplinary home and would have instructors teaching outside their area of expertise?

Of course, the regular readers of the IBHA newsletter already know that Phil Novak carried the day, and that Dominican University developed its own version of a First Year Experience based on Big History. We did rise to the occasion and an ambitious transformation did indeed take place—with the support of our committee, the faculty, the administration, and the Board of Trustees. How did this come about? First, Phil enlisted the support of Big Historian Cynthia Brown, a professor emerita in our School of Education, who attended our sub-committee meetings regularly and engaged in inspiring conversations with us; second, we recognized the need for faculty training and preparation to teach such a course. Senior faculty on the committee used their clout to convince the



Jaime Castner and Mojgan Behmand



administration to fund a seven-day Big History Summer Institute in May 2010. The Summer Institute took place and the rest is Big History! Or, as I like to say, a story of collective learning.

Why collective learning? The Big History enthusiast is familiar with the concept of collective learning and the key role it plays in the human history section of Big History. And, with the adoption of our new first-year program, we Dominicans soon realized that the successful implementation of a Big History program requires actually living this key Big History theme. The schedule for our first Big History Summer Institute was hammered out by Cynthia Brown, Phil Novak, and myself, and we had included all we deemed necessary for the program: sessions on the Big History content, the incorporation of writing and research skills into the courses, the collective development of course descriptions and learning outcomes, and the possible conflict of religion and science. Cynthia Brown and I were co-facilitators and a few faculty with expertise in specific areas were also asked to teach sessions. We invited guest speakers—the inspiring cosmologist Brian Swimme, research scholar Russell Genet, and cartoonist Larry Gonick — and kicked off the event with thirty of our colleagues.

Well, our first Big History Summer Institute was a resounding success: not because it was perfect (evaluations even included complaints about chairs

and the lack of cushioning) but rather because we had exhausted ourselves with getting to know each other, learning from one another, and building community. Faculty lauded the “robust engagement with colleagues,” “the cumulative knowledge,” and the “willingness to revise and reevaluate approaches to teaching in FYE and even the creation of FYE as a whole.” We learned that collaborative work is rewarding but also demanding and at times messy. Flexibility in responding to the needs of the group was crucial. And learning from the experience meant carrying this work forward through a constant process of collaboration, revision, and refinement. The evaluations had numerous pertinent suggestions. They included requests for more “Dominican guest lecturers,” “the modeling of class sessions,” expanding the “role of philosophy, thought, story, and art in the Big History program,” and creating a balance “between optimism and doomsday.” We also emerged with the plan of having one-day retreats every semester and weekly lunch meetings.

In the 2010 Summer Institute evaluations, one prescient colleague had predicted, “Next year we will bring our experiences!” And we did exactly that in 2011. In the first year of our launch, we had learned that knowing the Big History content was very different from teaching it. Most Big History courses around the world were being taught by scholars in large-lecture format to a self-selecting student body; our program was a requirement for

all freshmen and this group of young students struggled with the abstract nature of the Big History narrative and the seemingly impersonal story of the stars and planets. Lengthy lectures were not the key to remedying that. Student evaluations also showed our students struggling with their perceived insignificance in view of this vast narrative. Of course, ending the narrative with projections for the remote future and the destruction of the world in about 5 billion years only added to this sense of futility.

By May of 2011, as our second Big History Summer Institute approached, we shifted our focus to pedagogy. How could we help students connect with this vital narrative in a personal and tangible way? The Summer Institute content was rethought to include the modeling of class sessions followed by short discussions. Emphasis was placed on interactive modules and reflective inquiry that could be incorporated into the courses where appropriate. We had also realized the need for greater agreement on the goals of the program. In 2010, we had written course descriptions and drafted learning outcomes but had never quite settled on the objectives of this First Year Experience; yet, those objectives would inevitably drive all other components. In 2011, we began our second Summer Institute with a visioning exercise in small groups where we each expressed our intended outcomes for the program and ultimately brought those together to articulate them as program goals. First Year Experience “Big History” was designed to promote:

- recognition of the personal, communal, and political implications of the Big History story, including insight into the interdependence of humans and their environment;
- critical and creative thinking in a manner that awakens curiosity, enhances openness to multiple perspectives, and increases willingness to challenge one’s own assumptions; and
- development of reading, thinking, and research skills to enhance one’s ability to evaluate and articulate understanding of one’s place in the unfolding universe.

Consistent with the pedagogical focus, faculty

shared insights and activities, many of which became staples in our program: the “Solar System Activity,” the “Skull Lab,” and the “Opinion Snake” are only three of those. Whereas the first Summer Institute had merely opened us up to collaboration, this second iteration underscored collective learning as the main force propelling us forward. Participants “appreciated ... opportunities to build community and bond with one another through engaging (playful) activities,” “being a part of a pioneering development in education that is unique to our school,” “exploration of best practices ... skillful facilitation,” and “leadership we can trust.” We entered the second year of our program with new insight and confidence, an array of in-class activities, and a number of planned co-curricular events such as lectures by cosmologist Brian Swimme and sociologist Robert Bellah and an evening of stargazing on campus with the San Francisco Amateur Astronomers. Subsequent student responses, both in surveys and reflections rewarded our efforts and showed that we were on the right path.

By the summer of 2012, as our third Big History Summer Institute approached, the demands had changed. We had refined our application process, limited the number of our participants, and opened the Summer Institute to external faculty. The focus was to remain on pedagogy but the challenge was to engage the veteran Big History instructors, teach the faculty new to Big History, and meaningfully integrate the external faculty. We welcomed



colleagues from South Korea and India and enjoyed the cross-pollination of ideas and disciplines. By now, we were also conscious of having moved exponentially fast and being in the unique position of having notable pedagogical insight in Big History because of our collective learning process. Richard Simon, Thomas Burke, and I had begun working together as writers and editors to collect and shape our faculty's contribution for publication in our own planned book on Big History pedagogy, *Teaching Big History*.

Accordingly, the Big History Summer Institute in 2012 witnessed the faculty present on effective teaching of all thresholds and specific innovative approaches to teaching thresholds 5, 6, and 7 (the latter lectures which were refined and presented at the IBHA 2012 conference and published in Dominican's own Big History e-journal *Thresholds* in January 2013); an increased focus on development of activities for each threshold; and a further delving into the intersections of religion, science, faith, and meaning. We came away with a strengthened sense of purpose and potential. As one participant observed, "Big History is a wonderful curriculum that will prepare our students to succeed not only in their university pursuits but also in developing

and attaining future goals. I feel a renewed sense of commitment to liberal arts education and excited about the possibilities for our next generation of students."

By the end of Fall 2012, Dominican faculty came to feel that their commitment had been rewarded. A new Big History survey administered to first-year students at Dominican University showed that after only one semester of Big History 80% of students thought or talked about the content of the course outside of class; 72% of the students surveyed indicated that their Big History experience had changed the way they saw or understood aspects of the world. That changed perspective ranged from seeing "the 'bigger picture,' or how all things are complex and interconnected" to "my role in the vast universe" to "the future of Earth and/or humanity." We had of course always hoped for such results but had not dared expect such clear evidence of Big History as a transformative experience.

So, another cold Tuesday afternoon saw a group of us Dominican faculty come together in the Hunt Room for our weekly Big History lunch meetings. The semester was drawing to an end and the fatigue of teaching and grading should have been written on all the faces. Yet the room buzzed with enthusiasm because a group of professors, idealists and believers, felt that they were making a difference in the world through the kind of education they were providing. As we sat in the room, surrounded by the colorful murals of the hunt, I thought about our Dominican heritage and history, and knew that we had indeed risen to the occasion and made palpable on our campus the transformative power of education.

To learn more about Dominican University of California's First Year Experience "Big History", visit us at <http://www.dominican.edu/academics/big-history>.

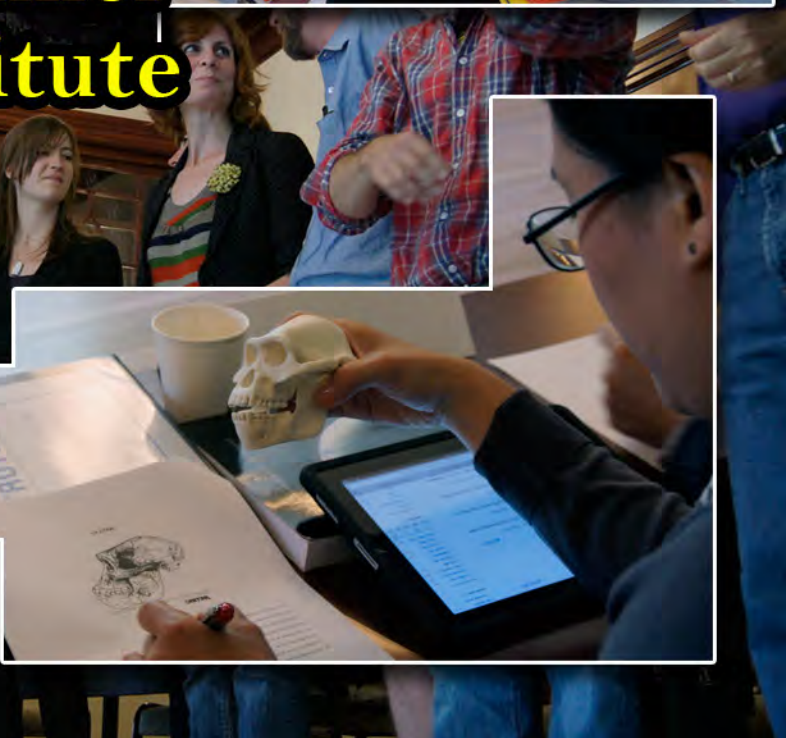
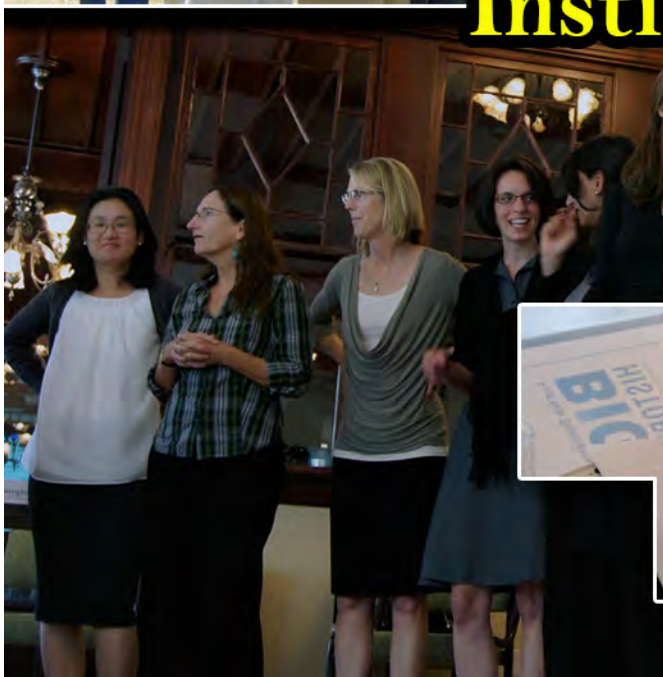
To learn more about the Dominican Big History Summer Institute or apply to attend the 2013 Summer Institute (June 17-21), visit us at <http://www.dominican.edu/academics/big-history/summer-institute> or write us at bighistory@dominican.edu.



Phil Novak



The Dominican Big History Summer Institute



STUDENTS' BIG HISTORY RESEARCH CONFERENCE



FIRST STUDENTS' BIG HISTORY RESEARCH CONFERENCE

June 13-15, 2013, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

This conference will bring together young big history researchers to exchange ideas and discuss the career possibilities that are currently available as well as those that the future might bring. Supervisors, other interested scholars and potential sponsors are more than welcome to come and support the future generation of big historians.

The conference will start on Thursday June 13. The morning sessions of June 14 and 15 are reserved for presentations, while the afternoon sessions will be devoted to discussions about two relevant themes: energy and big history research challenges. The conference will be concluded with a keynote speech by Fred Spier.

Attendance through Skype will be possible.

We invite you to submit an abstract of your paper before February 28 to Esther Quaedackers (E.Quaedackers@uva.nl). For more information, please don't hesitate to contact Esther Quaedackers or Melanie During (Melanie.During@student.uva.nl) or check our Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/IBHASTudentsConference>).

We very much hope that you will join us for the first students' big history research conference to be held at the University of Amsterdam on June 13-15, 2013!



International Big History Association
Brooks College of
Interdisciplinary Studies
Grand Valley State University
1 Campus Drive
Allendale MI 49401-9403

<http://ibhanet.org/>

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In case you missed it... A Lively Wrap-Up Session at the 2012 Inaugural Conference

The wrap-up session concluded the IBHA Inaugural Conference where participants engaged in a lively session of highlights and inspirational moments, many sharing their enthusiastic vision for the future of Big History.



Craig Benjamin



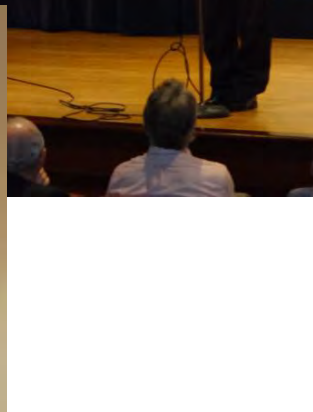
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