Challenging History Conference

Veranstalter: City University London, Historic Royal Palaces; The Tower of London; Imperial War Museums; Lidice Memorial; Stiftung Haus der Geschichte; Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig; Grundtvig – Lifelong Learning Programme
Datum, Ort: 23.02.2012–25.02.2012, London
Bericht von: Anja Werner (geb. Becker), Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin

A culmination of a two-year collaboration of several history museums in London (UK), the Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig (Germany), and Lidice Memorial (Czech Republic), the Challenging History conference was open to interested museum professionals and historians from across the globe, though it mainly attracted Europeans. The Challenging History project itself was initially developed by representatives from various museums in the UK. After the project's first phase, however, it became clear that international collaborations would be both desirable and fruitful. International partners were consequently sought and funding secured from the Grundtvig Lifelong Learning Programme, an EU initiative to support and foster learning experiences among partners from different European countries.

Challenging History started in London in 2008.[1] As SAM CAIRNS (London) explained during the conference's opening session, its goal was to establish an international platform that would allow its participants to exchange knowledge about practices and projects in museums. JENNY KIDD (London) subsequently elaborated on the initiative's main objectives: 1) challenging subject matters; 2) challenging traditional approaches; 3) challenging visitors; 4) challenging institutional contexts; and 5) the challenge of being simultaneously a heritage professional and a human being. Representatives of the three participating partners then illustrated the idea by sharing their experiences with Challenging History from the perspectives of their respective museums, whereby each of them also stressed the fact that they had greatly benefitted from discussing the other participants' concerns. LUBA HÉDLOVÁ (Lidice) explained that the Lidice Memorial was looking for answers on how to use art to deal with history in museums and memorials. Artistic collections certainly allow for emotional approaches to historical exhibitions; the subject of emotion in history exhibits subsequently ran like a red threat through the conference sessions. YVONNE WALTER (Leipzig) shared the question of how to deal with contemporary witnesses in exhibitions of contemporary history. Finally, ALEX DRAGO (London) was concerned with educational programmes in museums, their functions and purposes as well as possible approaches.

Three keynote addresses provided food for thoughts by discussing similar issues from vastly different angles. The first was presented by DAVID FLEMING (Liverpool), who is, among other things, the Director of National Museums Liverpool. His central premise was that a social history museum was always emotional and thus challenging. Other types of museums such as art or natural history museums, he argued, tended to be less likely to provide emotional experiences. According to Fleming, the reason for that is that social history museums are about people rather than objects. He illustrated his point by displaying a letter written on April 13 in 1912 by a young girl to her father, who happened to be a steward on the *Titanic*. It had been the girl's first letter ever; her father, however, was not among the survivors. Displayed in a museum, the letter with its story recovered cannot fail to cause some type of sensation in the visitor of the museum. With their ability thus to inspire dialogues, so Fleming continued to argue, museums promote active citizenship by acting as agents for social change – they can change people. The question, then, would be how to get people to visit a museum. Fleming's answer is that museums have to become more emotive. In the final part of his presentation, Fleming proceeded to introduce various Liverpool museums to provide examples of how emotive museum concepts and displays could work, such as by discussing cultural diversity in the context of the International Slav-

[1] See also http://www.city.ac.uk/arts/creative-practice-and-enterprise/cultural-policy-and-management/research/challenginghistory (24.05.2012).

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

ery Museum in Liverpool.

By contrast, in the second keynote address, JAMES TAYLOR (London), Head of Research and Information, Imperial War Museum, London, and DAN TODMAN (London) postulated that emotion was not so much essential as the ability to challenge the visitor by presenting something unexpected. They exemplified their point by discussing aspects of the new World War I gallery at the Imperial War Museum, a section of the museum's permanent exhibition that is currently being revised. For instance, Taylor related that the trench experience – a room that tries to recreate the atmosphere of World War I trench warfare – will be removed, in spite of visitors' protests, as being too emotional at display. Then again, Taylor surmised that when people think of military history, they think of guns. But what does a museum's visitor actually get out of a display of guns? They are mass-produced functional items. When merely placed in the entrance hall of a museum, guns are decontextualized. Instead, guns should be used to tell personal stories. The unexpected element might thus be a personal story rather than meeting expectations by simply putting big guns on display. One could argue, however, that adding a personal story actually has the potential of (re-) emotionalizing an exhibition. Clearly, however, Taylor and Todman reasoned in favour of placing facts and objects in context rather than – as Fleming proposed – reaching out to the visitor with displays that seek to arouse emotions.

Todman also presented examples of new research and how it could be incorporated in new exhibits. More specifically, new research allows the museum professional to recreate exhibits that challenge popular opinions about World War I. For instance, Todman challenged the notion that soldiers were typically alienated from the home front. He also observed that according to recent scholarship, total wars could not be possible without popular consent. But myths such as soldiers' disillusionments are hard to break, so Todman conceded, as even his third-year students, in spite of factual evidence to the contrary, were slow in accepting alternative views. Another challenge for the Imperial War Museum that Todman addressed was the issue of representations of other soldiers – such as the Indian army – in the context of World War I. Like Todman and Fleming, Taylor had also introduced the subject of cultural diversity by observing that for the Imperial War museum, an important point was the idea of empire and how to get people of non-English origins interested in a critical reappraisal of the British Empire. The idea of diversity thus aroused was certainly another aspect that surfaced again in different panels in the course of the conference.

The third keynote was presented at the historic site of the Tower of London rather than at City University, thus virtually visualizing the challenges of presenting history on the part of museum professionals. BERNADETTE LYNCH (Manchester), a museum consultant and scholar, discussed fittingly the challenges faced in the interactions of museums and communities with regard to what Lynch referred to as „uncomfortable histories." The gist of her paper presented a case study of a four years of work with Somali-refugee women and how the participants navigated through conflicts as well as what implications the project had and has for museums.

During the three days of the conference, much time was devoted to three types of professional exchanges: workshops, panel discussions, and paper presentations. The conference was thus able to cover a wide range of possible approaches to museum work, including practical aspects as well as historical background research. Workshops were meant to explore practical problems for museum professionals besides discussing ongoing projects that allow museums to reach out to different audiences. For instance, the Workshop „Battling Shakespeare: The Fantasy and Reality of Elizabethan Fighting" allowed its participants to learn more about swords and staged sword fights. The workshop is actually primarily addressed to youngsters who study Shakespeare plays in school so that they may get a better idea of the different times. Attendees of the workshop at the Challenging History conference nonetheless also raised the issue of whether the workshop could be developed further to raise awareness of the dangers of gang fights today. Other workshops took up the question of how to incorporate new me-

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

dia in museum displays or introduced specific historic events and their representations in public history. The workshop on how to interact with contemporary witnesses in contemporary history museums allowed its attendees to take up questions from the keynote addresses such as how to walk the thin line of emotive displays, historical research, and visitors' expectations. For instance, while occupied with recent German history, the three museums in Leipzig, Berlin, and Bonn that are part of the House of History Foundation (Stiftung Haus der Geschichte) – due to their different foci and also geographic locations – receive different feedback from visitors with regard to the museums' respective narratives. The workshop also provided a positive example of ongoing dialogues between visitors and museum professionals thanks to feedback cards and the museum professionals' openmindedness to discussing the feedback both with visitors and with colleagues.

Panel discussions, in turn, allowed for museum professionals as well as historians to tackle concrete problems such as difficult heritages or how different societies remember their pasts. These panel discussions provided particularly fruitful platforms for exchanging ideas across national borderlines. But the fact that the same historic event could be interpreted quite differently from different national perspectives was also apparent in the various rounds of paper presentations that allowed historians to present new research and museum professionals to share insights about exhibition concepts and educational programmes accompanying exhibitions. To provide an example, in the Challenging Memorialisation session, it became obvious that the Holocaust is presented very differently in British museums than in museums in, for instance, Eastern Europe, as the national experiences and thus the national narratives differed greatly. For Great Britain, the Holocaust was something experienced mainly by receiving refugees and by the fact that nineteenth-century Jewish immigrants were affected by loosing – and also being able to save – Central and Eastern European family and friends. For mainland Europeans, British Holocaust exhibits might thus appear less haunting than the stories told at former sites of extermination camps. Such realizations of national differences in presenting public history were among the particularly worthwhile results of the conference.

Last but not least, a few special treats completed the diverse conference programme. As museums nowadays do not only present exhibits but also provide space for additional educational programmes and presentations, a few examples of such activities were offered each day during lunch break. DAVID ODDIE (Plymouth) performed excerpts from a one-man-play called „Albert and Equiano" and explained how this performance has been used in combination with various workshops to educate young adults about the transatlantic slave trade. In another performance entitled „Bunyip and Frogman, Telling Cross Cultural Stories," DIANA OLUTUNMOGUN (London) related an aborigine story from Australia, elaborating thereafter also on the historical roots, the meanings and purposes of such tale-telling for indigenous peoples as well as for Europeans today. Then again, JOELENE MAIRS (Belfast) presented a screening of the film „Unseen Women: Stories from Armagh Gaol" about former female political prisoners and prison wardens in Northern Ireland. The film was subsequently discussed in a paper presentation. Last but not least, ANNA FARTHING (Bristol) and BEA ROBERTS (London) gave insights into their work-in-progress, a new play on the history of chocolate production and its implications for British workers at chocolate plants.

During the conference reflections, it was concluded that it would indeed be very desirable to continue building up international platforms of exchange for museums professionals and interested historians. Already in the opening session, JOANNE SAYNER (Birmingham) had introduced a follow-up project on the subject of *silence* in museums and the various meanings and causes of such silences. Thanks to project funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, a conference on the subject is already planned for 17th to 19th July 2013 at Buckfast Abbey (UK).

Conference Overview:

Keynote presentation: The Emotional Museum

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

David Fleming, National Museums Liverpool (Liverpool, UK)

Challenging History project overview, with Sam Cairns (Challenging History, London, UK), Alex Drago (Historic Royal Palaces, London, UK), Yvonne Walter (Forum of Contemporary History, Leipzig, Germany) Luba Hédlová (Lidice Memorial, Lidice, Czech Republic), Jenny Kidd (City University, London, UK), Joanne Sayner, (University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK)

Performance by David Oddie (Plymouth, UK): Albert and Equiano

Three concurrent sessions
Panel Discussion 1: Remembering and Interpreting Difficult Heritage
Chair: Nikki Spalding (Newcastle University, Newcastle, UK)
Justin Sikora, Bryony Onciul, (International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, UK)

Workshop 1: Contemporary witnesses in museums
Gundula Klein, Annett Meineke, Simone Mergen, and Yvonne Walter (Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, House of History of the Federal Republic of Germany Foundation, Berlin, Leipzig, and Bonn, Germany)

Workshop 2: Riding the tandem: Trust, agency and participation in relational working
Jane Sarre, (Hackney Museum, London, UK), and Petra Hilgers (deep:black, London, UK)

Four concurrent sessions
Papers 1: Challenging Exhibitions
Chair: Miranda Stearn (Courtauld Institute, London, UK)
1. Geoff Cubitt (University of York, UK): Forging Links: Symbolic and Material Uses of Chains in Slavery Museums and Exhibitions
2. Laura Philips (British Museum, London, UK) and Harwinder Singh (Sikh Education Council, London, UK): Unwrapping the Sikh fortress turban: community partnerships, display and conservation
3. Alix Powers-Jones (Hugh Miller Museum, Cromarty, UK): Ripples in the pebble pool: dark narrative as maxim, metaphor and memorial

Workshop 3: How should the Industrial Revolution be remembered?
Alf Wilkinson (Historical Association, London, UK)

Workshop 4: Francis Galton's Centenary: Commemorating Contentious Legacies—A Case Study in Bethlem
Debbie Challis (Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London, UK) and Sarah Chaney (University College London, UK)

Workshop 5: Challenging Histories: Moving from theory to Practice where History Teaching is International Politics
Jonathan Even-Zohar (EUROCLIO, The Hague, Netherlands) and Ivana Dobrivojevic (Institute of Contemporary History, Belgrade, Serbia)

Patrick Boylan (City University, London, UK): Provocation on the conference theme

Keynote presentation: The Challenges of Interpreting the First World War
James Taylor (Imperial War Museums, London, UK) and Dan Todman (University of London, UK)

Four concurrent sessions
Panel Discussion 2: As a society, how do we remember the past, and in what form?
Chair: Emma King (Sharing European Memories at School project, Brighouse, West Yorkshire, UK)
Representatives from Aranzadi Society of Sciences (San Sebastian, Spain), Futura Spa (Bologna, Italy), Stiftelsen Arkivet (Kristiansand, Norway), Royal Armouries Museum (Leeds, UK)

Papers 2: Challenging Memorialisation.
Chair: Yvonne Walter (Leipzig, Germany)
1. Krisztina Robert (University of Roehampton, London, UK): No, No, Never': The Memorialisation and Commemoration of the 1920 Trianon Peace Treaty in Postcommunist Hungary
2. Judith Vandervelde (Jewish Museum, London, UK): Challenges faced at the Jewish Museum today in the field of Holocaust education
3. Vojtěch Kyncl (Lidice Memorial, Lidice,

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

Czech Republic): Family History as a Foundation of the Memory of a Nation

Papers 3: Challenging Pedagogy
Chair: Amy Ryall (Imperial War Museum, London, UK)
1. Karin Doull (Roehampton University, London, UK): Engaging with learning for student teachers on museum placements
2. Ceri Jones (Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK): Frames of meaning: young people, historical consciousness and difficult heritage
3. Amanda Shamoon (Tower of London, UK): To Kill a King

Papers 4: Challenging Reminiscence
Chair: Joanne Sayner (University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK)
1. Rhian Tritton (ss Great Britain Trust, Bristol, UK): "..still telling what is told": oral histories of ss Great Britain's salvage and their role in the creation of personal narratives
2. Nazan Haydari (Maltepe University, Istanbul, Turkey): 'Remembrance' of Radio Days in Turkey: Gender, Modernization and Identity
3. Juliet Steyn (City University, London, UK): Vicissitudes of Representation; Challenging History and the Holocaust

Two concurrent events
Screening of Unseen Women: Stories from Armagh Gaol, with Jolene Mairs (University of Ulster, Belfast, UK)

Performance by Diana Olutunmogun (London, UK): Bunyip and Frogman, Telling Cross Cultural Stories

Four concurrent sessions
Workshop 6: Battling Shakespeare: The Fantasy and Reality of Elizabethan Fighting
Emma Bryant, Jocelyn Hunt, Bridget Crowley (Wallace Collection, London, UK), and Alison de Burgh (London, UK)

Workshop 7: Challenging history with digital media
Amy Ryall (Imperial War Museum, London, UK), Jamie Wyld (Lighthouse, Brighton, UK), Juliette Buss (Lighthouse, Brighton, UK), and Martin Bazley (Martin Bazley Associates, Wimbledon, UK)

Workshop 8: Remembering and Forgetting Controversial Moments in America's Past
Tom Haward (Oriel High School, Sussex, UK)

Workshop 9: Best Practice Workshop – Testing a new international framework for identifying and sharing best practice
International Council of Museums (ICOM) Committee for Education and Cultural Action (CECA) Marie-Clarté O'Neill (Ecole du Louvre-Institut national du Patrimoine, Paris, France), Amy Ryall (Imperial War Museum, London, UK), and Sam Cairns (Challenging History, London, UK)

Four concurrent sessions
Papers 5: Challenging Representation
Chair: Juliet Steyn (City University, London, UK)
1. Verena Alberti (Getulio Vargas Foundation, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil): Controversies around the teaching of Brazilian „Black history"
2. Pauline Hadaway (Belfast Exposed, Belfast, UK): Belfast Becoming
3. Claire Sutherland (University of Durham, Durham, UK): Borders of Belonging: Migration Museums as Nation-Building Sites

Papers 6: Challenging Method
Chair: Anna Farthing (Bristol, UK)
1. Massimo Turchi (Associazione Linea Gotica, Bologna, Italy): Using the living diorama in the educational project 'The war of the fathers narrated by sons'
2. Daniel Ferguson (Hampton Court Palace, Surrey, UK): All the king's fools
3. Judith Bryan (Roehampton University, London, UK): Making them laugh, making them cry: Theatre's role in challenging history

Papers 7: Challenging Authenticity
Chair: Gundula Klein (Berlin, Germany)
1. Bjorn Tore Rosendahl and Ingvild Ruhaven (Stiftelsen Arkivet, Kristiansand, Norway): Authentic site, museum and education centre: The experience of Stiftelsen Arkivet – a Gestapo regional headquarters during the 2nd World War in Norway
2. Alex Drago (Tower of London, UK): Developing the Challenging History approach at the Tower of London
3. Chris Lee (Artemis Cultural & Educational Services, Glasgow, UK): Margaret's Wardrobe, a Portrait in Clothes

Papers 8: Challenging Media

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

Chair: Sam Cairns (Challenging History, London, UK)
1. Judith Brocklehurst (Institute of Education, London, UK): Frauenkirche Now
2. Katrayna Warpas (University of Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton, UK): Playground Museum – exploring digitally enhanced play spaces for shared engagement with museum objects
3. Fiona MacFarlane, David Atherton, Elizabeth Henderson (Remembering Scotland at War Project, Edinburgh, UK): Remembering Scotland at War
4. Rosie Sherrington and Simon Jarrett (English Heritage disability project, London, UK): Reclaiming the Institution? English Heritage's disability history web project

Keynote Presentation: Challenging Ourselves: museums and communities face up to uncomfortable histories and confront current practices that serve to obstruct participation
Bernadette Lynch (Museum consultant and scholar, Manchester, UK)

Three concurrent sessions
Paper Panel 9: Challenging the Unspeakable
Chair: Alex Drago (Tower of London, UK)
1. Matt Mead (De Montford University, Leicester, UK): „I don't know what word I can use here": Writing with photographs in the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum
2. Rosa Martinez (Sharing European Memories at School, San Sebastian, Spain) and Mikel Errazkin (Aranzadi Society of Sciences, San Sebastian, Spain): "…Teach them to respect my memory…" Recuperating the historical memory of the Spanish Civil War and Franco's dictatorship (1936-2011)
3. Felicia Smith and Janine Marriott (Arnos Vale Cemetery Trust, Bristol, UK): Arnos Vale's Selective Memory: The challenges of interpreting a historic, working Cemetery
4. Joel Chalfen (Oxford, UK):The Rest is Silence

Paper panel 10: Challenging Collaborations
Chair: Jenny Kidd (City University, London, UK)
1. Ashild Andrea Brekke (Arts Council, Oslo, Norway): A question of trust – or how to engage in dialogue with someone who hates your guts: addressing historical injustices with the Norwegian Romany
2. Jolene Mairs (University of Ulster, Belfast, UK): Unseen Women: Stories from Armagh Gaol – The use of collaboration in the recording, editing and exhibition of contrasting memories of a contested space
3. Miranda Stearn (Courtauld Institute, London, UK): Contemporary challenges – artist interventions in museums
4. Diana Walters (Cultural Heritage without Borders, Stockholm, Sweden): The 1+1: Life & Love Simultaneous Exhibition – joint working through museums and heritage in post conflict countries

Workshop 10: Stories and Fictions
David Gunn (Incidental, London, UK) and Victoria Ward (Sparknow LLP, London, UK)

Performance with Anna Farthing (Bristol, UK) and Bea Roberts (London, UK): The Chocolate Plant

Gundula Klein (Berlin, Germany), Alix Powers-Jones (Hugh Miller Museum, Cromarty, UK), and Joanne Sayner (University of Birmingham, UK): Conference Reflections

Sally Dixon-Smith (Tower of London, UK): Hidden histories at the Tower – private tour

Tagungsbericht *Challenging History Conference*. 23.02.2012–25.02.2012, London, in: H-Soz-Kult 02.06.2012.

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.