

British History Today

Call for Papers

Keynote speaker: Professor Julia Laite

Location: Queen Mary University of
London Mile End Road, E1 4NS

Date: 1-2 May 2025

Submission deadline: 24 January 2025

Type: 20 min paper or
panel discussion

Abstract Length: 250-300 words

What might a history of Britain and the world which speaks to the problems of our current world look like? What new histories need writing? Which explanations of the past require reworking, and which assume a renewed urgency for historians today? Which actors, sites, institutions or structures command our attention? Which are the key moments of transformation or periods of endurance? What are our chronologies and temporalities? What, indeed, are the new forms that our histories might assume? What are the conceptual categories that they might mobilise?

In the midst of our multiplying crises, disputes over the interpretation of Britain's pasts have become increasingly prominent. The authority of the academic historian competes with many others. Museums, statues, schools and national institutions from the Church of England to the National Trust have become the terrain on which competing political visions of the past compete. Many agents are driving these battles. Both 'decolonisation' campaigners working for new visions of social justice, and 'anti-woke' activists building populist coalitions are advancing their causes through historical references. There is an urgency to History. Our discipline has become the moral touchstone for our political lives in a manner that was unimaginable even a decade ago. No wonder that these discussions in turn raise questions as to how history is researched and taught within universities.

British history remains at the heart of our curricula, both in school and universities. It has been accompanied by a huge outpouring of superb scholarship, driven by a new generation of excellent historians. The field today is thriving. But it has flourished at a time of straitened circumstances in our professional lives. Colleagues across North America have for some time been working in a position of precarity and restricted opportunity. Now, across the UK, historians are caught up in the consequences of an adverse environment for the humanities as a whole.

In this transformation of history's social, political and institutional setting, certain themes and topics have predominated. They are ones which historians of Britain are well placed to address. Slavery and abolition, empire and decolonisation, immigration and citizenship—these are histories with obvious stakes for our present moment. But the issues facing us multiply: resurgent populism; the relationship between "Britain", and "Europe"; the future of the Union; social abjection and an emptied public purse; inequality and social protections; the politics of sex, gender and identity; climate catastrophe; the impact of disruptive technological

change; religious diversity; geopolitical competition and military conflict; public order and the rights of protest; freedom of speech.

How can we understand and explain the pasts that have shaped or have use for our present? In addressing these themes, and connecting our disparate answers together, this event is predicated on the possibility for a renewed history of modern Britain. We will take stock of the field and consider what an agenda shaped by the demands of our present might be. If we are to value the practice of historical imagination and understanding, it requires not that we simplify the past to meet the stark battle lines of the present, but that we insist on the complexity of the past, and its otherness. There can be no guarantees about which sites, actors, or times require or demand our attention as we press the questions of our present to the past; rather, it is the very loss of guarantees *in the present* that holds the possibility of *opening the past up* to us anew.

The above questions describe the challenges of historical imagination, interpretation and understanding that confront us, but we also hope to ask how the historical profession might meet these challenges for a new history while engaging with the vast popular demand for history? How might we act on our responsibilities to the discipline as a whole, to the wider publics we seek to engage with, and to the generation of early career researchers who have demonstrated the vitality of the field though in circumstances that offer far fewer personal career rewards? The public appetite for history—whether judged by podcasts, documentary or drama, or the display arrangements at any given book store—appears undimmed. How might we embrace this demand and articulate a renewed, democratic history? How can we engage, listen and develop new historical understanding? How can we articulate with clarity and purpose a more complex, bolder, popular understanding of the past that matters for our professional and public lives in Britain today?

Please submit proposals of c.250-300 words for 20-minute papers to qmcbs@qmul.ac.uk

Alternatively, submit proposals for panel discussions of around 90 minutes. Use the subject line ‘**British history today**’. The deadline for submissions is **Friday 24 January 2025**.

Further information will appear at: <https://projects.history.qmul.ac.uk/qmcbs/>

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