

The Northeast Conference on British Studies A Brief History

Chris Waters

Preface

In 2019 the Northeast Conference on British Studies celebrated its fiftieth anniversary conference, a successful gathering hosted at McGill University in Montréal by Brian Lewis and his colleagues in British history. A decade earlier I had assumed the presidency of the NECBS and had inherited from my predecessor – and from our able and organized secretary-treasurer at the time, Mary Conley – what passed as the organization's written archive, a couple of boxes of random papers, some that had been saved by former officers with a penchant for this kind of thing. Out of curiosity I began to rummage through what had been saved, already familiar with a number of conference programs that had previously been placed on what was, at that time, our relatively new website. I also imagined what had been lost, and what had never been saved by less assiduous officers whose names rarely if ever appeared in the assembled papers. As I slowly began to explore what the collection yielded, the historical arc of our organization's past became apparent. I was already aware of the vast gulf that existed between the practice of British Studies and its organizational structures in North America in my then present, 2009, and at the moment I had embarked on my graduate studies some thirty years earlier. The founding of what was initially known as the New England Conference on British Studies took me back another decade or more into what now seemed like a very distant past, a past worth reflecting upon and writing about.

Each team of officers of an organization like the NECBS is confronted with a series of issues that are to some extent unique to the moment in which they hold office. Around the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century we pondered issues such as how to welcome and cater for the growing number of graduate students on the annual conference program; we also reflected on the significant rise in the number of both speakers and conference attendees who hailed from far beyond our region; we debated the merits of acquiring formal, non-profit status; we discussed how to establish an enduring prize for the best paper presented each year by a graduate student at the conference; and we participated in what I realized was a long, on-going debate about the relationship between the regional bodies – ours in particular – and the North American Conference on British Studies. As I slowly began to immerse myself in the history of the NECBS, I reflected on the degree to which some of our own debates departed radically from those of earlier years while others merely churned over well-trodden territory. A decade later, for my sins of historical curiosity, I was asked by the organizers of the fiftieth anniversary meeting of the NECBS in 2019 to share my findings, reflecting on the organization's history in a brief luncheon address. This more formal, written history is a significantly expanded outgrowth of those remarks.

In finally writing this long-promised short history I have benefitted from the forethought of my predecessors who saw fit to keep a record of their official duties as officers of the NECBS. I urge those who follow me to do likewise, and also to ensure that our archive is held together, maintained, and dutifully cared for. As I will reflect upon below, we know much more about the earlier past of the NECBS than the more recent past due to the ephemerality of email, which will pose a serious problem for future historians. But we do have a history, and in whatever form it is recorded it is worth preserving. I imagine that there are some records pertaining to the history of the NECBS that are archived in the papers of the NACBS (housed in the archives of the George Washington University), records that might well enhance and expand upon the account I offer here. Sadly, I have not had the opportunity to peruse them, even though I have viewed personal

papers of a few of those figures whose activities are documented in this short history. Most of all, I have benefitted enormously from the memories and insights shared by a significant number of former presidents and other officers of the NECBS. In the wake of many conversations, and through the many written comments I have received on earlier drafts of this history, I have seen fit to develop some of the points I make here further, to correct some egregious errors, and to offer a little more nuance where required. But I have also learned that memories are very tricky things and that when written records are also scarce, getting things right – even the simple date of who was president when – is not as easy as I once believed. I am deeply grateful to my many interlocutors for their enthusiasm and good suggestions and I only hope that I have managed to fulfill their expectations for an accurate and hopefully compelling short history of the NECBS.

All histories need to come to an end and I felt that this history should end with the fiftieth anniversary conference in 2019. Little did any of us know then that a pandemic was around the corner that would bring further transformations to the workings of the NECBS, some of which have yet to be fully comprehended. I thus take this history into the beginning of the 2020s, but I don't pretend to bring it up to the very present, and certainly not with the detail that I feel I can offer for earlier years. This is the chore for others, after me, to undertake. Meanwhile, although I am not sure that this history of the first fifty plus years of the NECBS can offer any lessons for the next half century, I offer it as a document of a particular moment in the rich practices of British Studies in New England and Eastern Canada.

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Introduction

In 1950 scholars of the British past established the Conference on British Studies (CBS), an academic organization incorporated in the state of New York in 1965 and formally renamed the North American Conference (NACBS) on British Studies in 1980. Over the years a number of regional bodies, at first only loosely affiliated with what became the NACBS, emerged. At the time of writing there were six such regional affiliates of the NACBS, one of which, the NECBS, is the subject of this brief history. Initially known as the New England Branch of the Conference on British Studies, or simply the New England Conference on British Studies, the organization is currently incorporated as a non-profit entity in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and known as the Northeast Conference on British Studies.¹

Tracing the history of the organization is revealing in a number of ways. Like the on-again, off-again relationship between Britain and the Common Market, and subsequently the European Union, the relationship between the NECBS and its “parent” body, the NACBS, has at some moments been fraught and at others quite cordial, but always revelatory of the tensions between conflicting regional and national aspirations. The historical development and shifting relationship between the regional and national bodies also sheds a great deal of light on the growth of

¹ Despite the name changes that will be discussed in some detail in this short history, the acronym NECBS will be used throughout. Likewise, while before the 1980 name change the North American Conference on British Studies was simply the Conference on British Studies, the acronym NACBS will also be used throughout.

formalized administrative structures, bureaucratic practices, and institutionalized electoral politics. Last, and certainly not least, the history of the NECBS over a period of more than half a century sheds a great deal of light on what has, at different moments, counted as British Studies and who gets to speak on its behalf, illustrative of significant changes in the methodological and pedagogical practices of British history, both in North America and more broadly.

Beginnings

It might have pleased the founders of the NECBS to see that the small gathering they mounted in the Spring of 1968 would give rise to a professional organization for the study of the British past that, despite its ups and downs, would long survive most of them, providing a vibrant forum for the discussion of new work in British Studies in New England and Eastern Canada. It would certainly have surprised them to see an organization that had become less regional and more national and international in its focus, much more bureaucratized, more formalized in its relationship to the NACBS, and substantively different in terms of its conference programs. All of these changes were in part a result both of the rise of new communicative technologies and of the radical changes in the nature of historical practice that were only beginning to be felt in the decade in which the founders envisaged an organization for British historians in New England.

We might like to date the NECBS from Valentine's Day, 1967. It was on that day that Roger Howell, then chair of the History Department at Bowdoin College – and soon to be its tenth, and youngest, president at the age of 32 – wrote to David Berkowitz, professor of history and political science at Brandeis University, suggesting the desirability of bringing together British historians working in colleges and universities in New England.² Howell had previously been in touch with two officers of the national organization – Ruth Emery, Executive Secretary of the Conference on British Studies from 1951 to 1967, and Jean Hecht, then a member of the Executive Committee of the organization and associate editor of the *Journal of British Studies*, from whom he had obtained Berkowitz's name.³ In his letter Howell said that regional affiliates of the Conference on British Studies appeared to have a presence in the San Francisco Bay Area, around Pittsburgh, and in Southern Michigan, albeit not in New England. He wondered if a New England group might be established and noted that he had written to other British historians in

² Roger Howell (1936-1989), was an undergraduate at Bowdoin and subsequently a Rhodes Scholar. A seventeenth-century British historian, he was author of more than half a dozen books, perhaps best known for his study of Cromwell and for his ground-breaking local history of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and the Puritan Revolution. See the obituary written by Paul Fidler, a later president of the NECBS, in the newsletter of the New England Historical Association, *NEHA News* 16:2 (April 1990): 6. David Berkowitz (1914-1983), Harvard undergraduate and Ph.D. recipient, was a founding faculty member of Brandeis University in 1948 and author of a report on minorities and barriers to college admissions in that year, a prodigious bibliographer, author of *John Seldon's Formative Years* and works on the Pilgrimage of Grace. Brief biographical notes are provided throughout this short account of the NECBS, albeit only for those influential players in the organization's history who were deceased at the time this work was first drafted and about whom information was readily available.

³ J. Jean Hecht (1915-2007) taught at Smith College and was an associate editor of the *Journal of British Studies* from its founding in 1961 until 1967, as well as being a member of the Executive Committee of the Conference on British Studies. Recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1957, he was an eighteenth-century historian, author of two books on domestic servants in Hanoverian England, one of them focusing on continental and colonial members of the domestic servant class. Ruth Emery, who received her PhD from Cornell University in 1939 for a thesis on Pugin and the Gothic Revival, was one of the founding members of the Conference of British Studies when it began meeting at New York University in the very early 1950s; she served as its Executive Secretary until the year Howell wrote to her. A professor of history at Rutgers University and a founder of the Victorian Society in the United States, she was also president of the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians in 1958-59.

the region, soliciting their assistance as possible co-organizers, including Sidney Burrell (Boston University), Wilbur Kitchener Jordan (Harvard University), John Mahoney (Boston College) and Thomas Mahoney (MIT).⁴ Berkowitz responded favorably to Howell's initial enquiry and said that, along with Harvard's W. K. Jordan, they should meet and begin to move forward.⁵ In a subsequent letter, Howell wrote, "Do you think that we should go ahead at this first meeting and select some sort of slate of officers to see to arrangements in the future? Too much informality might cause our meetings to die almost before they are born."⁶ Howell was not too far off the mark. In its early days what became the NECBS lacked a consistent slate of officers and any written governing document, and while the organization's informality may have served it well, at least initially, over the next decade and a half it became increasingly apparent that some more formalized structure would be necessary were it to flourish in the ways Howell desired.

While Howell noted in his initial letter to Berkowitz that he had contacted several other British historians, all in the Boston area, neither of them could assemble a substantial list of all the British historians at work in New England. From its earliest days, and until the advent of the internet, the leaders of the new organization became obsessed with compiling, maintaining, and updating written membership lists in order to cement a community of British historians in New England, and later in Eastern Canada. Constant anxieties about who had the membership list, and whether it was up-to-date, pervaded the correspondence files of the NECBS. At its very beginning, Howell wrote to Berkowitz noting that he had contacted Ruth Emery, in her capacity as Executive Secretary of the national body, requesting a list of all of the registered members of the NACBS with addresses in New England. This was the first of many such requests, some of which were honored, some of which were not, often on grounds of confidentiality.⁷

Less than a fortnight after receiving Howell's initial letter, Berkowitz noted that he was confident that a small group of enthusiasts – shortly to meet for dinner at the Pillar House on the Newton/Wellesley border in Massachusetts – might like to think of themselves as a "sponsoring committee" and decide upon "the niceties of the organization" before calling for a broader, open meeting.⁸ In receipt of enthusiastic responses from several individuals he had contacted from the NACBS mailing list, Howell concurred, noting that there was enough interest to suggest the establishment of what he referred to as the "New England Affiliate of the Conference on British Studies," the first mention of a name for the new organization.⁹ The dinner at the Pillar House took place on March 10, 1967. Those who said they would attend included not only Howell (Bowdoin), Berkowitz (Brandeis), and Jordan (Harvard), but also John "Jack" Battick (University of Maine), Sidney Burrell (Boston University), H. D. Jordan (Clark University), David Trafford

⁴ Letter, Roger Howell to David Berkowitz, February 14, 1967. All correspondence and printed material cited in this history is to be found in the archives of the NECBS.

⁵ Letter, David Berkowitz to Roger Howell, February 17, 1967.

⁶ Letter, Roger Howell to David Berkowitz, February 22, 1967.

⁷ Letter, Roger Howell to David Berkowitz, February 22, 1967. Keeping the membership list up-to-date, with individualized notecards on each member, became an obsession of Ed Wall, president of the NECBS throughout much of the 1980s, on whom more below. The founders of the NECBS generally considered the New England region to consist of the six states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

⁸ Letter, David Berkowitz to Roger Howell, February 27, 1967. The restaurant was a long-standing institution in a historic home, since moved and turned into a private residence: see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allen_Crocker_Curtis_House%E2%80%93Pillar_House

⁹ Letter, Roger Howell to David Berkowitz, March 8, 1967.

(University of Maine) and Edward “Ed” Wall (College of the Holy Cross), all of whom were members of the national Conference on British Studies.¹⁰

Those dining at the Pillar House, a beloved culinary institution from 1952 to 2001 in a Greek revival home dating from 1828, agreed to stage a conference the following April and to establish an organization that was known during the first two decades of its existence by various names: the New England Affiliate of the Conference on British Studies; the Conference on British Studies, New England Region; the New England British Studies Conference; the North American Conference on British Studies, New England Region; and, more often than not by the 1980s, simply as the New England Conference on British Studies. Howell agreed to serve as the leader of the new body, although with no formal organizational structure he simply became known as its secretary, or sometimes executive secretary. But what kind of organization was this to be? There was no coherent, shared pattern in the evolution of any of the regional British history groupings, and while Jean Hecht had asked Mortimer Levine, Tudor historian at West Virginia University, to send Berkowitz a description of the Upper Ohio Valley Group of British historians, Berkowitz was not impressed. He noted that the group appeared to hold little more than “a strictly social gathering,” some fifteen of its members, based largely in the Pittsburgh area, meeting twice a year, albeit not to hear any formal presentations. While he thought that this model might work in a concentrated urban area, such as Boston, he viewed it as lacking if the purpose he and his colleagues envisaged was to bring together historians from all over New England.¹¹

Even at its initial, organizational meeting those present opted to hold a formal meeting at which papers would be read the following year. Howell agreed to host the first conference of the new organization at his own institution, Bowdoin, on Friday and Saturday, April 19-20, 1968. The College formally announced the conference, noting that some forty scholars would shortly assemble at Bowdoin for the first annual meeting of the New England Conference on British Studies, the regional conference for scholars interested in all aspects of British Studies. The conference was only open to members of the organization and Howell was described as the “Secretary and Coordinator” of the group.¹² Like all of the subsequent conferences that were staged during the first decade of the organization’s existence, the first conference was a small, chummy affair. It consisted just of two panels, on which six papers were read by established scholars in New England, including Fred Cazel (University of Connecticut; “Political Parties in the

¹⁰ Although he was never a formal officer of the NECBS, W. K. Jordan (1902-1980) – fourth president of Radcliffe College, from 1943-1960, and professor of early modern British history at Harvard, best known for his detailed studies of the growth of philanthropy, and of religious toleration, in early modern England, as well as for his two-volume life of Edward VI – was also a member of the Executive Committee of the NACBS from 1963-1967 and was deeply committed to the early success of the NECBS. Sidney Burrell (1917-2003) was later president of the New England Historical Association, helping to cement the ties between the NEHA and the NECBS, crucial in the 1980s for the survival of the latter organization; see his obituary written by a later president of both the NECBS and NACBS, Fred Leventhal, in the January 2004 issue of the *Perspectives* of the American Historical Association: <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/january-2004/in-memoriam-sidney-a-burrell>. David Trafford (1916-1993) would be vital for the success of the NECBS in the 1970s, serving as the organization’s executive officer from 1976-1980 before becoming a major player in the Institute of American Studies Abroad. See the introduction to his archived papers: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/findingaids/482/>. Ed Wall (1928-2001), as we shall see, played a significant role in the history of the NECBS in the 1980s, before retiring from the College of the Holy Cross in 1993; see his obituary in the *Worcester Sunday Telegram*, August 12, 2001.

¹¹ Letter, David Berkowitz to Roger Howell, March 31, 1967.

¹² Bowdoin College News Service, “N. E. Conference on British Studies to Meet at Bowdoin Friday, Saturday,” April 17, 1968.

Minority of Henry III"); Harvey Mansfield (Harvard University; "Hobbes and the Science of Indirect Government"), David Roberts (Dartmouth College; "Intellectual Development and Social Reform in Early Victorian England"), and Robin Winks (Yale University; "A Case Study in the 'Man on the Spot' Theme in British Colonial History").¹³ The program also showcased a speaker from Britain, a coup for the very first meeting of the organization, the Tudor historian Stanley Bindoff, who that year was a visiting professor of history at Harvard and who spoke on "The Early Tudor Section of the History of Parliament."¹⁴

A common thread ran through the annual conferences of the NECBS in the decade or so after the organization's founding: seldom were there more than four panels on the program of any annual meeting; those meetings invariably took place in April or May; papers were delivered primarily by men who were based in academic institutions in New England; graduate students did not deliver papers (although many younger scholars just starting out in an academic position did); and the colon in paper titles was not quite as ubiquitous as it would become in the next century. At some meetings, panels were not topically-oriented; rather, each panel would be devoted broadly to a particular time period – one designated "Tudor/Stuart," one "Hanoverian," one "19th and 20th Century England," and perhaps one "Medieval," for example. And at every conference there was usually a banquet of some kind. The 1973 conference concluded with "a lavish banquet followed by brandy and cigars." The 1974 conference registration fee (\$8.00) included coffees and lunch, as well as sherry before dinner (the meal was an additional \$8.50), which was followed by "claret and brandy" – a nod to the traditions of the senior common room as a means of creating community amongst the isolated British historians spread across New England.

Of course, during a period of rapid change in the practices of British history, and in the historical profession more broadly, those changes did not leave the NECBS unaffected. The first paper delivered by a woman was read at the second meeting of the NECBS in 1969, held at the University of Connecticut, where German emigré, Ann Beck (University of Hartford) presented her pioneering research on the British medical administration in East Africa.¹⁵ She was followed

¹³ Both Fred Cazel (1921-2011), the English medieval constitutional and legal historian at the University of Connecticut, and David Roberts (1923-2016), historian of nineteenth-century paternalism and social reform at Dartmouth, served as presidents of the NECBS in the early 1970s. For a list of all of the chief officers of the organization, see Appendix One. For Cazel, see <https://today.uconn.edu/2011/08/emeritus-history-professor-fred-cazel-dies/#>. For Roberts, see <https://networks.h-net.org/node/16749/discussions/116294/david-roberts-historian-england-1923-2016>. All of the NECBS conference programs thus far located can be viewed and downloaded by clicking on the "Conferences" tab of the organization's website (<https://www.necbs.org>). Information pertaining to specific conferences mentioned in this history is drawn from the conference programs and not footnoted.

¹⁴ Stanley Bindoff (1908-1980) was the first Professor of History at Queen Mary College, University of London, perhaps best known for his highly successful *Tudor England* in the Pelican History of England series. Fred Leventhal, soon to be the executive officer of the NECBS and later president of the NACBS, recalls driving up to Bowdoin with Harvard's John Clive for the inaugural conference. He also thought that Bindoff had been a visitor at Wellesley College that year, not Harvard, although Bob Tittler, later president of the NECBS, recalls Bindoff's recollections of his time at Harvard and W. K. Jordan's coolness towards him there (email, Fred Leventhal to Chris Waters, September 14, 2023; email, Bob Tittler to Chris Waters, September 13, 2023). Other speakers from Britain would follow in Bindoff's footsteps, often, like him, because they held a temporary appointment in the US. The next speaker at an NECBS conference from Britain, for example, was Peter Clark in 1973, then at the University of Kent but enjoying a year at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.

¹⁵ Ann Beck (1900-2002) was an avid, early enthusiast for the work of the NECBS, introducing colonial themes into the annual meeting and speaking again at the 1979 conference. See <https://www.courant.com/obituaries/ann-frank-beck-avon-south-windsor-and-storrs-ct/>

two years later at the conference held in Worcester, Massachusetts, at the College of the Holy Cross, by Mary Beth Norton, American colonial historian (then at the University of Connecticut), who spoke on “The Loyalists’ Image of England: Ideal and Reality.” But it was not until 1981 – over a decade after the first NECBS conference – that any paper was presented that focused on the history of women in Britain. In that year, at the annual meeting held at the University of New Hampshire, Susan Staves (Brandeis University English Department) spoke on matrimonial property in the eighteenth century, on a panel entitled “Women in English History.”

Although speakers based at New England institutions dominated the programs of the early conferences of the NECBS, the growing strength of the organization as a forum for new work in British history attracted some individuals from across the border in New York state. At the fourth annual conference, held at Boston University in 1972 – hosted and organized by the twentieth-century British historian, Fred Leventhal, who had begun teaching at BU in 1969 and had just become the executive officer of the NECBS – papers were presented by Peter Marsh (Syracuse University) and Bernard Semmel (State University of New York, Stony Brook) on a panel on the social and political ideas of Methodism.¹⁶ Despite this early boundary crossing, no representative of a Canadian institution was to offer a paper at the annual conference until the Hanoverian parliamentary historian, Karl Schweizer, then at Bishop’s University, in Sherbrooke, Quebec, delivered a paper, “William Pitt, Lord Bute and the Fishery Question” at the thirteenth annual meeting of the NECBS, held at Worcester State College in 1980.¹⁷ It took nine years, however, before another historian based at a Canadian institution would appear on the program. In 1989, at the second meeting of the NECBS to take place that year, at the College of the Holy Cross, Robert “Bob” Tittler, the early modern British historian at Concordia University, offered a plenary address on “Civic Building and Civic Culture in Early Modern England,” a theme that he would develop further in his work over the years, both during and after his many contributions to the governance of the NECBS.

Floundering

By the time that he spoke, in 1989, Tittler – who would go on to play a major role in the transformation of the organization in the 1990s – could look back on a rather dismal decade in the history of the NECBS. Despite the enthusiastic beginnings, the organization lost momentum in the 1980s and in several years could not manage to host an annual meeting. Moreover, the lack of any formal governing document and established procedure for selecting officers (as well as defining their roles) further compromised the organization in terms of efficient functioning. This was noted by the executive of the national body as early as the 1970s when an effort was made – one of many – to establish a more formal, structured relationship between the NACBS and the various regional conferences. In 1977 Stephen Koss, the Associate Executive Secretary of the NACBS, wrote to David Trafford, the head of the NECBS from 1976 to 1980, noting that when Trafford’s predecessor, Thomas Kemnitz (University of New Hampshire), had represented the NECBS at the annual meetings of the Executive Committee of the NACBS the question had been

¹⁶ Marsh (1935-2022) and Semmel (1928-2008) would not remain strangers to the NECBS in years to come. Marsh is perhaps best known for his biography of Joseph Chamberlain and while he later became president of the Mid-Atlantic Conference on British Studies he was a regular attendee at meetings of the NECBS; see <https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/news/article/in-memoriam-peter-t-marsh-gifted-teacher-accomplished-scholar>. Semmel authored numerous books, including studies of imperialism and social reform, the Methodist revival (a topic aired at this conference), and the Governor Eyre controversy; see <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/bernard-semmel-1928-2008-november-2009/>.

¹⁷ Schweizer, born in Germany in 1946 but largely educated in Canadian institutions before studying under Herbert Butterfield at Cambridge, would move on to the New Jersey Institute of Technology and Rutgers University; he also spoke at the 1989 conference, by which time he had moved to New Jersey.

raised “about coordinating the electoral practices and possibly the meeting dates of the various conferences, national and regional.” Koss added that this seemed vital to him – that as the organization expanded, it was “important to maintain more effective connections between its component parts.” He lamented that the NECBS seemed to have “its own procedures” and told Trafford that it was “often difficult for us to ascertain the name of your previous year’s program chairman in time to send him or her an invitation” to the Fall meeting of the NECBS Executive Committee. Koss hoped that Trafford and his colleagues would not find him “too meddlesome,” but wondered if it might be possible “for the New England conference to bring its practice into line with that of the other regional conferences,” especially in terms of the length of the terms served by the officers of the NECBS and the definition of their precise roles.¹⁸

Koss was keenly aware of what others refused to admit, namely that the NECBS played by its own rules and was only marginally tied to the mandates of the national organization. While he hoped he was not being meddlesome, this was certainly how his “suggestions” were read in New England. Indeed, the regional resistance to Koss’s suggestions – or at least to his tone – was not insignificant. Trafford wrote to Berkowitz, enclosing the letter he had received from Koss, soliciting his colleague’s advice and suggesting that they might take up the issues Koss had raised at the next meeting of the NECBS, to be held in April 1978 at Assumption College in Worcester, hosted by the future secretary-treasurer of the organization, Paul Ziegler.¹⁹ Implicitly referring to Adolf Hitler’s program of coordinating organizations in the public sphere with the ideology of the Nazis, Berkowitz took umbrage at Koss’s suggestions, insisting that he objected to what might be read as “a veiled move for a ‘Gleichschaltung’” – a structural coordination of the regional branches. He added that the members of the NECBS had discussed this before and that both they and he had little interest in changing the way things were done. Moreover, in response to Trafford’s own stated desire to step down from his service to the NECBS, Berkowitz wrote that, were this to happen, “the appropriate procedure would be for the ‘elder statesmen’ (or the original chartering group) to discuss the matter of succession and use its good offices to persuade somebody to take over.”²⁰ Of course, it was precisely this informality that Koss at NACBS central complained about – and that would cause the NECBS so many problems in the 1980s.

Annual meetings of the NECBS continued to be held during the four years when Trafford was at the helm. But in September 1979, when Ed Wall sent a copy of the upcoming twelfth conference program to him (to be held the following month at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst), Trafford thanked Wall for the program but said that he had retired from teaching in July and, “hereby, tender my resignation as Executive Secretary and officially nominate you. Will you so inform the group that you are now the new Exec!” By this time many of the founding members of the NECBS had retired, or died, and Trafford asked Wall to accept the nomination as one of the few charter members still active in the organization.²¹ Wall had not been officially elected but

¹⁸ Letter, Stephen Koss to David Trafford, September 30, 1977. Fred Leventhal also recalled that Koss complained about the “foot-dragging” of certain NECBS officers (email, Fred Leventhal to Chris Waters, September 14, 2023). Koss (1940-1984), historian of modern British politics and the political press, taught at Barnard College and then at Columbia University. See his obituary in the *New York Times*, October 27 1984, sec. 1, 33 (<https://www.nytimes.com/1984/10/27/obituaries/dr-stephen-koss-expert-on-history.html>). See above for Trafford, fn. 10. Thomas Kemnitz was a Victorianist who taught at the University of New Hampshire, until being denied tenure in 1975. See David Towie, “Tenure: Two That Were Denied,” *The New Hampshire*, December 9, 1975, 17-18. Kemnitz served as chief officer of the NECBS from 1974-1976 before going on to be a hugely successful writer and publisher of history books for young readers.

¹⁹ Letter, David Trafford to David Berkowitz, October 4, 1977.

²⁰ Letter, David Berkowitz to David Trafford, October 21, 1977.

²¹ Letter, David Trafford to Ed Wall, September 27, 1979.

took over the management of the NECBS in 1979, confirmed at the next meeting, held at Worcester State College in November 1980. In January that year he wrote a letter to Trafford, thanking him for the contributions he had made “over the years to the launching and nurturing of the organization. Its survival – this was our twelfth annual meeting – is due to you more than anyone else.”²² Once again, however, what was happening in New England was not reported to the officers of the NACBS. Its president, Martin Havran, wrote to Wall in February, “I feel quite badly that we in the national organization had not known of your election, which to me indicates quite strikingly the difficulty of communications between the national and regional conferences that I have been attempting to improve.”²³

Wall would serve at the helm of the NECBS for the better part of the next decade. During that time the ties between the regional and the national organization remained tenuous at best and conferences – when they took place – remained relatively small affairs, largely confined to speakers and attendees from New England. That said, the regional boundaries of the NECBS were debated as early as Wall’s assumption of the leadership of the organization. When Wall apologized to Havran for not informing him that he was filling in for Trafford on a temporary basis until the next meeting, he also asked if anything had come of a 1978 memorandum to the NACBS Executive Committee that mentioned the possibility of consulting Canadian members of the NACBS about changing the name of the New England Conference on British Studies to the New England and Eastern Canada Conference on British Studies.²⁴ Havran, Canadian by birth, wrote back to Wall noting that there was no formal restriction on name changes by the regional affiliates and that some other regions had changed their names in the past. He added that he would “welcome any action which would recognize our Canadian constituency and which would increase regional and national membership among our Canadian colleagues” – just as he also hoped that the Conference on British Studies might, in due course, also be renamed the North American Conference on British Studies.²⁵ Nothing came of this at the time, at least not in terms of formal organizational structure, the location of the annual conference, or even the institutional home of the speakers at those conferences. But the ground was at least set for the substantial changes that would be undertaken a decade or so later.

By 1980 notices calling for paper proposals for the annual conference of the NECBS were regularly placed in both the *British Studies Intelligencer* (the semi-annual newsletter of the NACBS) and the *AHA Newsletter* (later the *Perspectives* of the AHA). Moreover, conference reminders were also mailed out to all members in the region, the list of which was assiduously kept on notecards by Ed Wall, who led the NECBS throughout the decade. That said, the 1980s probably marked the lowest point in the history of the organization. Looking back, Bob Tittler, a future president of the NECBS, recalled that the group had become moribund by the mid-1980s, noting that one meeting had to be cancelled because “we couldn’t get a program together.”

²² Letter, Ed Wall to David Trafford, January 11, 1980 (written in the aftermath of the twelfth meeting of the NECBS in 1979).

²³ Letter, Martin Havran to Ed Wall, February 20, 1980. Havran (1929-2000) was the first Canadian-born president of the NACBS (1979-1981) and a historian of Catholicism in early modern England who taught at the University of Virginia at the time of his NACBS service.

²⁴ Letter, Ed Wall to Martin Havran, July 5, 1980.

²⁵ Letter, Martin Havran to Ed Wall, July 14, 1980. Later in the year he expressed his hope that Wall would be successful in increasing membership from the eastern provinces of Canada (letter, Havran to Wall, November 19, 1980). Under Havran’s leadership the Conference on British Studies formally became the North American Conference on British Studies that year.

Indeed, only three conferences were held in the six years from 1983 through 1988.²⁶ The 1986 meeting, held at Boston College, was mounted in conjunction with the New England Historical Association – as was a subsequent conference held at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, in 1991. These two collaborative conferences were slightly larger than most of the stand-alone NECBS conferences held at the time, and they certainly benefitted from the efforts of those officers of the NECBS who also held office in the NEHA. On some level they kept the NECBS afloat, albeit at the cost of being largely subordinate to the host organization; at one of the joint conferences only two of the eight panels on the program had been assembled and contributed by the NECBS.

If, in the 1980s, the NECBS lost momentum and failed to mount a vibrant conference schedule, the relationship between the region and the national body also continued to be a problematic one in this decade. This can be seen clearly in the two years – 1982 and 1988 – when the NACBS desired to hold its national meeting in New England in conjunction with the NECBS. Planning for the 1982 meeting was chaotic from the start. Harvard's John Clive, the vice president of the NACBS at the time, had no idea who the president of the NECBS was, despite residing in the region, and hence had no contact to approach about the possibility of a joint meeting. He learned from Fred Leventhal at Boston University (and formerly at the helm of the NECBS) that Ed Wall was currently the head of the NECBS. Clive subsequently wrote to Wall saying that Harry Hanham at MIT had offered to host a joint meeting in 1982, but that "we need to be sure that the regional body wishes to meet, that year, with the national body." He then added, "I feel somewhat awkward, thus asking to be invited (which one should never do)."²⁷ Clive subsequently informed Martin Havran, president of the NACBS, that Wall was the regional officer in charge of the NECBS. Havran had been writing to Wall's predecessor, David Trafford, wondering why he had not heard back, and apologized to Wall that he did not know of the transition in the NECBS leadership.²⁸ The letters flew back and forth, with Wall planning a 1982 meeting of the NECBS at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and the NACBS most eager to accept Harry Hanham's offer to host the joint meeting at MIT in the same year. Jacob Price, Executive Secretary of the NACBS, wrote to Wall, hoping the NECBS would give serious attention to the proposal that the NACBS might meet with the New England conference at MIT in the Fall of 1982: "Harry Hanham of MIT is very anxious to have his institution act as a host and the national CBS is equally anxious to reestablish cordial cooperation with the New England conference." Eventually Wall withdrew the offer to meet at the University of Massachusetts and accepted Hanham's offer to host a joint meeting at MIT, even though Hanham only seemed to have been

²⁶ Email, Bob Tittler to Chris Waters, January 29, 2010. There are no records of (or programs that have been found to date for) conferences in 1984, 1985, 1987, and 1988, although the sequential numbering of subsequent conferences on the printed programs suggests that, in addition to a meeting in 1986, one conference did take place in these years. See Appendix Two.

²⁷ Letter, John Clive to Ed Wall, February 12, 1980. A fortnight earlier Fred Leventhal had written to Wall, informing him that he might expect to hear from Clive in the wake of the NACBS Executive Committee having decided to hold its 1982 conference in New England and to accept Hanham's invitation to host it at a facility at MIT (letter, Fred Leventhal to Ed Wall, January 27, 1980). John Clive (1924-1990), intellectual historian of Victorian Britain and biographer of Thomas Babington Macaulay, would be president of the NACBS when the 1982 joint meeting took place; see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Leonard_Clive. H. J. Hanham, born in New Zealand in 1928, a political historian recognized for his major studies of Scottish nationalism and of elections and party management in the age of Disraeli and Gladstone, was professor of history at Harvard from 1968-1973 and Dean of the Humanities and Social Sciences at MIT from 1973-1985, at the time of the proposed conference, before assuming the Vice Chancellorship of Lancaster University in 1985.

²⁸ Letter, Martin Havran to Ed Wall, 20 February, 1980.

marginally involved with the NECBS.²⁹ While he finally agreed to work with Hanham, he also needed to be prompted by John Clive to establish a local arrangements committee and a local program committee to work with that of the NACBS. He eventually did both, but he also complained to Fred Leventhal, “I think the National was a little high handed in what they did.”³⁰

The joint NACBS/NECBS meeting finally took place at MIT in October 1982, with Harry Hanham serving both as local arrangements coordinator and regional program chair. It was a very small, one-day affair, consisting of a mere four panels, along with an end-of-conference dinner speaker, Anthony Lewis of the *New York Times*, and a luncheon talk by the Melbourne-based Australian historian, Geoffrey Blainey, “Riding the Seesaw of British Studies.”³¹ The conference was not a great success, especially by comparison to the more robust joint meetings that would take place every six or seven years beginning in 1993. But at least it did take place – something that cannot be said of a hoped-for joint meeting in 1989, another year in the turbulent relations of the NACBS and NECBS. The previous year, Diane Willen, Executive Secretary of the NACBS and historian of gender, religion, and the public sphere in early modern England at Georgia State University, wrote to Ed Wall, sending him a copy of the new memorandum of cooperation between the NACBS and the regions. In her letter, gently chastising Wall, she complained that the NECBS had no formal constitution and no elected officers, and that it also lacked a local arrangements committee. Furthermore, she added, “I believe in recent years the New England Conference has not been meeting regularly, and when it has, you have done almost all of the work.” This, she said, made it “out of the question” for the national body to contemplate holding its 1989 meeting in New England, where, technically, it should have been held that year.³²

By the late 1980s the NECBS faced near-extinction. Not only was it quite impossible for the organization to host a national meeting, but in too many years the regional meetings also failed to materialize – and when they did take place they were often held at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, carefully curated by the now long-term head of the organization, Ed Wall, but remaining very small affairs that drew few attendees. The situation proved intolerable for a younger cohort of soon-to-be leaders of the NECBS. Bob Tittler and Susan Amussen, both future presidents of the NECBS, subsequently reflected on the dismal state of the organization in the late 1980s, prompting the rumblings of a palace coup.³³ Beginning in 1988, Roger Howell, along with several, more recent recruits to the organization, began to wrest the NECBS away from Wall. Howell delivered his final paper at the nineteenth meeting of the NECBS, held at Holy Cross in April 1989, on “Christopher Levett and the Promotion of New England Colonization.” He

²⁹ Letter, Jacob Price to Ed Wall, March 25, 1980. See also letters from John Clive to Ed Wall, February 23, 1980; Ed Wall to John Clive, March 14, 1980; Ed Wall to Martin Havran, July 5, 1980; Martin Havran to Ed Wall, July 14, 1980; Ed Wall to Martin Havran, November 5, 1980; Martin Havran to Ed Wall, November 19, 1980. Jacob “Jack” Price (1925-2015), historian of the early modern Atlantic economy, taught for some thirty-five years at the University of Michigan; see <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/legacyremembers/jacob-price-obituary?id=17589727>.

³⁰ Letter, Ed Wall to Fred Leventhal, 24 March, 1980; letter John Clive to Ed Wall, November 9, 1981.

³¹ Fred Leventhal had anticipated that the MIT conference might attract some seventy-five attendees, on a par with a previous joint conference in 1972 (letter, Fred Leventhal to Ed Wall, January 27, 1980; email, Fred Leventhal to Chris Waters, September 14, 2023). Lewis (1927-2013) was a legal journalist and a Pulitzer Prize winner; see https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/opinion/lewis/bio_lewis.html.

³² Letter, Diane Willen to Ed Wall, April 21, 1988. Successful joint NACBS/NECBS conferences have taken place regularly from the early 1990s: in 1993 (Montréal), 1999 (Cambridge), 2006 (Cambridge), 2012 (Montréal), and 2018 (Providence). It will be held once again in Montréal in 2025.

³³ Email, Bob Tittler to Chris Waters, January 29, 2010, June 28, 2010, and September 13, 2023; email, Susan Amussen to Chris Waters, March 5, 2010 and September 11, 2023.

died quite suddenly, at the age of 53, that September. A memorial note appeared in the printed program of the twentieth meeting of the NECBS – the second meeting of the NECBS to be held that year at Holy Cross, in November – praising him as “the person most responsible for starting the NECBS.” At that conference Paul Fideler, historian of the Old Poor Law at Lesley College, and soon to be central in the revival of the NECBS, offered his own memorial tribute to Howell.³⁴ The two conferences held in 1989 remained rather small affairs, but at them papers were delivered not only by Bob Tittler and Paul Fideler, but also by Susan Pennybacker (Trinity College), Chris Waters (Williams College), and Paul Ziegler (Assumption College) – all of whom would play a significant role in the revival and consolidation of the NECBS in years to come. It was the passing of an age.

Renewal

If the 1980s perhaps marked a low point in the early history of the NECBS, the 1990s saw a slow but remarkable revival of the organization, placing it on a firmer footing as it faced the new century. It was again capable of staging annual conferences that were much larger than they had been in the organization’s earliest days – and of hosting the NACBS for vibrant joint conferences every six or seven years. As had been the case in the 1980s, there were too few paper proposals received to stage a formal conference in 1990, Ed Wall reflecting in June that year on the difficulty of “putting together a balanced program”, and then, two months later, on the “disintegration of the program.”³⁵ Nevertheless, the two conferences held in 1991 marked a watershed in the history of the NECBS. In the wake of the inability of the NECBS to host the NACBS for a joint meeting in 1988, and at the insistent prompting of Roger Howell, Ed Wall finally drafted a basic constitution for the organization that has continued to serve it remarkably well for over three decades. On the eve of the first 1991 conference, Wall claimed that he was about to write to all of those who planned to attend the upcoming conference, informing them that he hoped approval would be given to “some general constitutional guidelines designed to give the New England CBS a little structure and permanence.” The new, proposed structure was a simple one: a president would initially be elected for a two-year term; a vice president would be elected who would serve as the organization’s conference program chair and would then ascend to the presidency after a two-year term; and the executive committee (consisting of the president, the immediate past president, the vice president, and the secretary-treasurer) would appoint a new secretary-treasurer, when required, to serve for a certain time determined by that committee. Wall argued that the changes would give responsibility for the organization to a group of democratically-elected officers who would “know that their term of office would end in the foreseeable future” (which was, of course, not at all the case for Wall himself). Wall also proposed annual membership dues of \$5.00 and suggested that the changes he was now putting forward would be “more likely to assure [the organization’s] permanence than the present arrangements.”³⁶

At the first of two conferences held in 1991, in April at Assumption College, the new constitution for the organization was approved unanimously, new administrative and meeting procedures were formalized, the decision was taken to move all future meetings to a regular, Fall schedule, and preliminary discussions were held to change the name of the organization to incorporate British historians working in Québec and Eastern Canada. Wall decided to stand down as the main coordinator of the activities of the NECBS and a slate of new officers was approved, with Paul Fideler elected as president and Susan Pennybacker as vice president. The new officers asked Assumption’s Paul Ziegler to serve as secretary-treasurer, which he agreed to do, Fideler

³⁴ For Fideler’s subsequent, published obituary of Howell, see above, fn. 2.

³⁵ Letters, Ed Wall to Bob Tittler, June 24, 1990 and August 2, 1990.

³⁶ Letter, Ed Wall (“Coordinator, NECBS”) to Members of the Acting Executive Committee, April 1, 1991.

thanking him and suggesting that the new ruling triumvirate “ought to be able to move this already modestly successful organization forward a bit.”³⁷

In the aftermath of the successful conference in April, Fideler wrote to Robert Webb, president of the NACBS, informing him in some detail of the changes that had recently been made. He noted that Roger Howell had urged some of those changes and that Ed Wall had kept the NECBS on an even keel, caring for the organization for a dozen years before agreeing to step down. He said that conferences had, alas, been relatively modest affairs and that there was a need to postpone the planned 1990 conference to the Spring of 1991. He added that he had already arranged a joint Fall meeting with the New England Historical Association (of which he had been a president in the late 1980s) at the John F. Kennedy Library, in conjunction with the University of Massachusetts, Boston, in order to get the NECBS back on a regular autumnal meeting schedule.³⁸ A prolific correspondent, Fideler wrote to the members of the NECBS in September, explaining the changes that had been made, noting Wall’s contribution of a new constitution for the organization, and praising him “for his unswerving dedication to NECBS’s survival over the years.” Additionally, he mentioned that he had also canvassed Webb about a name-change for the organization and, on the advice and enthusiasm of Bob Tittler, asked the members to inform him about whether they would be willing to attend a joint meeting of the NECBS and the NACBS were it to be held in Montréal.³⁹

Fideler served as president of the organization from 1991 to 1993, a period of change that began with the adoption of the new constitution and election of a new slate of officers and ended with the first substantial – and very successful – joint NACBS/NECBS conference in Montréal. As future president Bob Tittler (1995-1997) would recall, Fideler “should go down in our annals as the man who rescued the conference from oblivion, or at least ‘near death’.”⁴⁰ The various goals he set for himself included changing the name of the organization, the better to attract “more members and more participation” in the organization.⁴¹ As we have seen, as early as the 1970s discussions had taken place about expanding the boundaries of the New England Conference on British Studies to include British historians working in Eastern Canada. A decade later, Tittler pushed for such an expansion, complaining that Montréal continued to be “a most inactive outpost of the field of British History,” thus forcing him to attend regional conferences elsewhere, especially the Midwest Conference on British Studies.⁴² In the aforementioned letter he wrote to

³⁷ Letter, Paul Fideler to Paul Ziegler, July 25, 1991. On the same day Fideler wrote to Wall, announcing the news of Ziegler’s agreement to serve as the new secretary-treasurer and noting that Ziegler would shortly contact him in order to acquire the organization’s mailing list and files. He also expressed his hope that Wall would agree to serve on the new executive committee as immediate past president. Ziegler (1938-2008), a modern European and British history at Assumption, published biographical studies of Lord Palmerston and Joseph Hume, the radical “People’s MP.” See the *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*, January 30, 2008 (reprinted: <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/telegram/name/paul-ziegler-obituary?id=13199314>).

³⁸ Letter, Paul Fideler to Robert K. Webb. May 8, 1991. At the time, Webb (1922-2012) taught at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Among many other works, he authored the seminal textbook, *Modern England*. Ed Wall had undertaken his doctoral work with Webb when Webb taught at Columbia University. See the obituary published in the *Perspectives of the American Historical Association* in November 2012: <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/november-2012/in-memoriam-robert-k-webb>.

³⁹ Letter, Paul Fideler to NECBS members, September 10, 1991; e-mail, Paul Fideler to Chris Waters, March 21, 2010.

⁴⁰ Email, Bob Tittler to Chris Waters, October 10, 2008.

⁴¹ Email, Paul Fideler to Chris Waters, March 21, 2010.

⁴² Letter, Bob Tittler to Ed Wall, October 17, 1986.

Robert Webb in 1991, in the aftermath of his assumption of the presidency of the NECBS, Fideler again raised the issue of changing the name of the organization, which, he claimed, had first been suggested to him by Howard Nenner, the seventeenth-century English constitutional historian at Smith College from 1968 to 2006.⁴³ Future NECBS presidents Susan Pennybacker and Bob Tittler also encouraged a name change, both to recognize the growing importance of the role played by historians in Québec and the Canadian Maritimes in the work of the organization and to cement academic ties across the broader region.⁴⁴ The new name – the Northeast Conference on British Studies – first appeared in the program of the twenty-third annual NECBS conference, organized successfully by the vice president and program chair, Susan Pennybacker, and held at Trinity College in Hartford in 1992; it was formally ratified and announced at the joint conference held by the NACBS and NECBS in Montréal in 1993.⁴⁵

During Fideler's presidency the relationship between the national organization and the regional branches was further cemented and codified – and this time with few complaints about any undesired “Gleichschaltung.” As president of the NACBS, Webb wrote to Fideler, noting that the Executive Committee had voted at its last meeting “to establish a somewhat firmer control than has existed in the past over our annual meeting arrangements,” about which the NECBS would be informed shortly.⁴⁶ A formal memorandum of cooperation between the NACBS and the regional bodies was adopted in July 1991 and updated periodically thereafter. The president or secretary of each region was now required to inform the associate executive secretary of the NACBS promptly of the results of annual elections (which had not previously been standard practice, at least not as far as the NECBS was concerned). Moreover, the annual meeting of the NACBS was henceforth to be held “in conjunction with the meetings of the regional conferences on as regular a rotation as possible,” with the dates of the combined meeting established two years in advance (which, again, would mark a new departure for the NECBS). An integrated program was to be delivered by the two program committees working side-by-side, while both expenses and profits were to be shared equally by the national and the regional conferences. The dense, three-page memorandum detailed the logistics of joint conference planning, further binding the NECBS and the other regional bodies to the larger, national organization, enhancing a form of bureaucratic centralism that might well have surprised those who had established the NECBS a quarter of a century earlier.⁴⁷

⁴³ Letter, Paul Fideler to Robert K. Webb, May 8, 1991. Webb replied that he would raise the issue with the NACBS Executive Committee (letter, Webb to Fideler, June 13, 1991). Even though Nenner would never serve as president of the NECBS, there is considerable correspondence between him and the various officers of the NECBS in the Howard Nenner Papers in the Smith College archives (CA-MS-01104): see <https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/4/resources/1428>.

⁴⁴ Email, Bob Tittler to Chris Waters, June 28, 2010.

⁴⁵ The new name first appeared on the masthead of *Albion* only three years later, in 1996. Over the next two decades the name sometimes was written as the “North East Conference on British Studies” and on other occasions as the “Northeast Conference on British Studies.” The latter nomenclature eventually won out, becoming the accepted norm, emblazoned in the legal documents through which the NECBS became a legally-recognized non-profit entity.

⁴⁶ Letter, Robert K. Webb to Paul Fideler, June 13, 1991.

⁴⁷ Memorandum on Cooperation between the North American Conference on British Studies and the Affiliated Regional Conferences,” adopted July 1991. The Memorandum was first updated in 1997 and again on many occasions since. Despite the new ground rules, this is not to say that joint NACBS/NECBS relations were henceforth always harmonious. Bob Tittler and Fred Leventhal both recall several inter-organizational conflicts, especially pertaining to the 1999 joint meeting held in Cambridge, Massachusetts (letter, Bob Tittler to Joseph Block, September 30, 1997; email, Bob Tittler to Chris Waters, September 13, 2023; email, Fred Leventhal to Chris Waters, September 14, 2023).

The 1992 meeting at Trinity College – albeit as small as most of the earlier conferences had been in terms of the number of panels on the program – was viewed as a success, leading Fideler to write, “We were getting our footing and feeling confident enough that we decided we would take on our next scheduled responsibility for the NACBS in fall 1993.”⁴⁸ Although the NECBS membership had been canvassed in 1991 and seemed enthusiastic about holding a joint meeting in Montréal, clearly there were risks involved in holding a joint meeting north of the border. Despite his enthusiasm for such a meeting, along with his willingness to undertake the local arrangements, Tittler had wondered if there would be enough interest in such a meeting, writing that “if Canadians are to come and find only themselves, both the Executive and I will have more than a trace of egg on the face.”⁴⁹ Former president of the NECBS, Fred Leventhal, served as the program chair of the NACBS, while NECBS vice president Susan Pennybacker served as regional program chair, staging a joint conference in Montréal with thirty-five panels and two plenary speakers. Despite the initial anxieties, the conference was a huge success, with an attendance of some 340 individuals (and a net profit for the NECBS of some \$3,000).⁵⁰ Robert Webb, outgoing president of the NACBS, wrote to Tittler acknowledging the relaunch of the NECBS as a cross-border organization and complimenting him on a “splendid meeting.” He also expressed the hope that the second national meeting planned for Canada (in Vancouver the following year) would be equally as successful.⁵¹ The 1993 conference was indeed the first extensive and successful joint conference of the NECBS and NACBS – and the first since the rather chaotic, dismal joint affair of 1982. In the aftermath of the conference Fideler wrote to the members of the NECBS, praising the work of the various officers, national and regional, who had made the conference such a resounding success. He also announced the results of the second formal election of NECBS officers under the new constitution, Susan Pennybacker being elevated from vice president to president (the first woman to hold the presidency in the quarter-century of the organization’s history), Bob Tittler elected to the vice presidency, and Paul Ziegler agreeing to serve another term as secretary-treasurer.⁵²

The later years of the 1990s witnessed a consolidation of the new procedures put into place in the early years of the decade. In a lengthy May 1995 memorandum entitled “Some Wholly Unofficial Thoughts about Running an NACBS Conference,” soon-to-be president, Bob Tittler, reflected on his organization of the successful 1993 conference in Montréal and laid out in detail what was required in planning such a conference, a valuable tool for NECBS officers for years to come. In a second memorandum, also written in May 1995, “Wholly Unofficial Thoughts on Constructing the Annual Programme for NECBS,” Tittler reflected more broadly on both the evolution and the future of the NECBS, especially in a section of the memorandum entitled “Questions of Identity and Purpose.” He noted the growth of the national organization and the regional groups (now totaling seven) from the early 1950s establishment of the Conference on British Studies, then consisting of a small number of primarily early modern English political historians who met at New York University. He also celebrated the recent growth of the NECBS and its welcoming of Canadians in the wake of the organization’s name change and the highly successful joint 1993 conference in Montréal. More broadly, he also reflected on the widening

⁴⁸ Email, Paul Fideler to Chris Waters, March 21, 2010.

⁴⁹ Letter, Bob Tittler to Paul Fideler, September 3, 1991.

⁵⁰ Email, Bob Tittler to Chris Waters, June 28, 2010.

⁵¹ Letter, Robert K. Webb to Bob Tittler, October 6, 1993. George Mariz (Western Washington State University), associate executive secretary of the NACBS, echoed Webb’s sentiments, noting that the 1993 Montréal conference “will go down in the lore as an all-time meeting” (letter, George Mariz to Bob Tittler, October 7, 1993).

⁵² Letter, Paul Fideler to the NECBS membership, January 21, 1994. Susan Pennybacker’s predecessor at Trinity College was George Cooper, co-founder of the *Journal of British Studies*. At Trinity she would teach two future presidents of the NECBS, Paul Deslandes and Mary Conley.

definition of what constituted “British Studies” and the growing presence of graduate students at the annual conferences, mostly from institutions near where the meetings were held. Looking forward, he suggested that future regional conferences might cycle between the Boston area, western and southern New England, and northern New England and Montréal in order to ensure fairness of access. In terms of conference planning, he suggested that each panel might include a balance of younger and more established scholars, and that while it was important to accept proposals to present papers submitted by scholars who resided outside of the catchment area of the NECBS, at least half of all conference participants should be based in the Northeast in order to maintain the regional identity of the organization. “We should,” he insisted, “manage to provide a research forum and a social meeting place for the core of our membership, so that they may establish and sustain continuing relationships with a number of others in the same region and field. It takes a certain critical mass of ‘core’ people to do this, which I think we now have.”⁵³

Tittler’s memorandum, in both welcoming those outside of the region to the annual conferences of the NECBS and stressing the need for the organization to build an academic community amongst students of the British past in the Northeast captured a contradiction that would, as we shall see, become more pronounced in the new century. At the beginning of the 1990s, the conference still consisted of papers presented primarily by a relatively small number of scholars in the Northeast, as it had done for much of its existence. At the successful 1992 conference at Trinity College, organized by Susan Pennybacker, for example, every speaker on each of the five panels hailed from an institution in the Northeast, the one exception being the sole plenary speaker, David Cannadine, who spoke on “Monarchy and Matrimony in Modern Britain” and who was based at Columbia University in New York City. This would change in the aftermath of the joint NACBS/NECBS conference in Montréal. For the remainder of the decade each annual meeting would normally consist of twelve panels – roughly three times the size of the earlier meetings of the NECBS. Moreover, graduate students were increasingly present as panel participants, not just as audience members. And the number of panelists who hailed from institutions outside of the Northeast region grew rapidly – from 25.9% in 1994, to 37.5% in 1995, 44.8% in 1996, and 51.9% in 1997.⁵⁴ The Northeast Conference on British Studies, like other regional branches of the NACBS, was gradually becoming much more of a national, and even international, organization; it had, by the new century, certainly outgrown its beginnings as a small meeting of historians of Britain in New England.

Institutionalization

Since the revitalization of the NECBS in the early 1990s there has been no year in which the organization has failed to hold an annual meeting, even if during the Covid pandemic it was necessary to replace the regular, in-person conference in 2020 with a small, on-line graduate and early career workshop. This was followed in 2021 by a full-scale conference, albeit, again, wholly virtual. The in-person annual conferences resumed in 2022. Moreover, unlike in its early days, every six or seven years since the successful 1993 Montréal meeting the NECBS has continued to host the NACBS for a joint conference – in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1999 and 2006, again in Montréal in 2012 and 2025, and in Providence, Rhode Island, in 2018. With regular conferences and regular elections, not to mention an emergent on-line presence, there was a

⁵³ Robert Tittler, “Wholly Unofficial Thoughts on Constructing the Annual Programme for NECBS” (May 1995): 3.

⁵⁴ The percentages are culled from the programs of the NECBS annual meetings, virtually all of which are available under the “Conferences” tab on the NECBS website (see <https://www.necbs.org>). The number declined slightly to 37.5% in 1998 while the 1999 meeting was held jointly with the NACBS in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

need for organizational practices to be codified and passed on from one leadership group to the next. As early as the mid-1990s Bob Tittler, as president, had lamented the constant need to reinvent the wheel and stressed the importance of keeping much better records of what had worked and what hadn't: "we don't keep any written record: a disgrace to the fraternity," he wrote.⁵⁵ The point was also echoed by the secretary-treasurer of the NECBS at the time, Paul Ziegler, who argued that "the one area that cries out for remediation is the need for some record of how we have managed our annual meetings from year to year." He called for further work "to standardize our procedures, avoiding the tendency to operate *ad hoc*," and urged future leaders to add their reflections to the organization's files which "would become some sort of historical record for the organization and food for thought for those who plan for the future."⁵⁶

Some records from the earliest days of the NECBS had been kept and were passed on from one leadership team to the next. Other records remained with various officers. Some got lost. Some were rediscovered and added to a growing archive. Bob Tittler had kept a little blue "ledger book," with valuable organizational thoughts, that was passed on to subsequent officers before becoming lost, only to be tracked down and found by Malcolm Smuts – president of the NECBS from 2003 to 2005 and court historian of early modern England at the University of Massachusetts, Boston – in his personal papers, albeit a decade and a half after Ziegler's plea that some effort be made to collect various files related to the history of the NECBS. By that time, in part to establish the basic outline of this short history, a concerted effort was made to organize and safeguard a more formal archive of the NECBS and its history, a task largely undertaken by Mary Conley, historian of modern Britain and the empire at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, who served several terms as a crucially important secretary-treasurer of the organization from 2005 to 2010. As she wrote at the time, "I'm in the process of sorting through and organizing necbs files I received in 2005 from Peter [Hansen, NECBS president, 2005-2007]. I can only say that the current organization of these files reflects the reality that we do this work on a part-time basis. What's great is that there are files. But, it would be nice for things to be sorted through and for historians to have a bit of respect for our own history."⁵⁷

By the time a paper trail of the organization's history could reasonably be accessed, the work of the NECBS was increasingly being undertaken electronically. The formal, written letter, on which much of the first part of this historical essay is based, had largely disappeared, to be replaced by email correspondence. This, unfortunately, has not been archived with the same due diligence, making the writing of the more recent history of the NECBS much more difficult.⁵⁸ Moreover, from the early years of the new century the NECBS also sported a website, initially developed by secretary-treasurer and then president Peter Hansen, modern British and global historian at Worcester Polytechnic Institute where the site was hosted. Subsequently, Margaret

⁵⁵ Tittler, "Wholly Unofficial Thoughts," 1.

⁵⁶ Letter, Paul Ziegler to Bob Tittler, November 3, 1995.

⁵⁷ Email, Mary Conley to Chris Waters, July 27, 2010. Bob Tittler had attempted to assemble an archive of NECBS materials in the 1990s and subsequently lamented the (temporary) loss of his notebook. He also shared Conley's sentiments: "I do think a group of historians ought to be able to chronicle themselves, and it seemed appropriate at a time when we were attempting resurrection in general to create such a thing." (Email, Bob Tittler to Chris Waters, January 29, 2010). Conley was herself about to assume the presidency of the NECBS (after serving two years as vice president) at the time the final revisions were made to this short history in 2025.

⁵⁸ In a letter to the membership on November 10, 1996, announcing the replacement of Paul Ziegler by Peter Hansen (Worcester Polytechnic Institute) as secretary-treasurer, along with the election of Susan Amussen (Union Institute) as vice president and program chair, Bob Tittler included his email address at Concordia University, the first appearance of an email address in any of the written files in the NECBS archive.

Hunt, historian of gender in early modern Britain and Europe at Amherst College and president of the NECBS from 2011-2013 had the website professionally redesigned in WordPress and also purchased the current domain name (necbs.org), thus guaranteeing the NECBS a continuing, independent, on-line presence. Hunt also designed the red griffin logo that still adorns both the NECBS website and its official correspondence.⁵⁹

The internet changed everything, extending the remit of the various regional conferences on British Studies beyond the region they were initially intended to serve, increasingly rendering the formerly important membership lists irrelevant. As we have seen, until the mid-1990s, New England conferences were very small affairs, the call for papers printed in various professional publications, including the *British Studies Intelligencer* and the *AHA Newsletter* (later the *AHA Perspectives*). Most importantly, they were also mailed to all formal, dues-paying members of the NECBS, making it essential to keep the membership lists up-to-date. According to the 1991 constitution, it was the explicit job of the secretary-treasurer to “maintain the mailing list, the membership list, and the funds of the organization.” Whatever shortcomings others might have seen in his work, Ed Wall, throughout the 1980s, was meticulous in keeping the membership files in order, a crucial undertaking when the vast majority of speakers and annual conference attendees all resided in the region. Throughout the first three decades of the organization’s existence, anxieties about the status of the membership lists permeated the correspondence files. As late as 2010, then NECBS president Chris Waters (2009-2011), historian of modern Britain and of sexuality at Williams College, remained obsessed about maintaining an accurate membership list, begging the NACBS for a list of all *Journal of British Studies* subscribers in New England and Eastern Canada, even while questioning the importance of such a formal list. As he pondered in that year, “who is a ‘member’ [of the NECBS] – a British Studies academic residing in the region; a formal, dues-paying member of the NACBS who resides in the region; [or] speakers at our annual conference?” His solution was to compile a list of all of the dues-paying NACBS members in the region, complemented by the names of all of those who resided outside of the region but who had spoken in recent NECBS conferences – all of whom would be informed via email of upcoming conferences.⁶⁰

The question of membership was no academic matter. If formal members of the NECBS were both to nominate and elect officers every two years at the annual conference, then who, exactly, could nominate a new vice president and program chair and who could actually vote on the nominations? As the new century unfolded, it became increasingly the norm for the current office-holders to put forward one name of a vice presidential successor, which was then rubber-stamped by all of those in attendance at the conference – not just members of the NECBS, a category that was itself now rather fuzzy. This departure was not something that was anticipated when the organization’s constitution was adopted in 1991, a moment when the lines between who was a member and who was not were less problematic.⁶¹ By extending the opportunity to attend

⁵⁹ Email, Margaret Hunt to Chris Waters, October 18, 2023.

⁶⁰ Chris Waters, NECBS Annual Report (as submitted to the Executive Secretary of the NACBS), October 2010, 3. It is unclear whether fixed, “regional boundaries” were ever firmly demarcated. The expansion of the NECBS into Eastern Canada in the early 1990s brought together Québec, all the Canadian maritime provinces, and the six New England States. All but one of the annual conferences of the NECBS have taken place in this region, the one exception being in 2015 when the meeting took place at the University of Ottawa, a city that sits on the provincial border between Ontario and Québec.

⁶¹ The practice has drawn several complaints from previous officers over the years. See in particular the emails from Bob Tittler to Chris Waters, October 7, 2008, September 27, 2010, and September 13, 2023. In his 2010 missive, Tittler argued that “while the practice of the Vice-Pres/Programme chair moving automatically on to the presidency is uncontested and should probably remain so, and the appointment of the Secretary/Treasurer could well continue to be without election, I and some others have wondered why

or to speak at an NECBS conference to those who resided at some distance from the Northeast region, the internet obviously played a major role in rendering irrelevant the question of membership.

Moreover, the internet also changed the character of the annual meeting itself. Already by the later 1990s, as we have seen, an increasing number of speakers at NECBS conferences hailed from regions outside of the Northeast. This only grew in the new wired age. The internet connected scholars far and wide, democratized access to conferences, and reached people far beyond those on any formalized membership list. This, coupled with the felt need by graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and early career historians to get exposure for their scholarship at professional gatherings – no matter where they might be institutionally based – fueled the continuing transformation of the conference demographics. As Waters noted in an annual report to the executive secretary of the NACBS, “Increasingly all regional conferences have become national conferences as the dissemination of calls for papers spreads far and wide through the internet,” adding that while “a significant minority of speakers at this year’s NECBS conference [2011] were affiliated with institutions in our region (the New England states, Québec, and the Canadian maritime provinces), some 53% came from other parts of the country (or, indeed, from the UK or other countries).”⁶² What had seemed new and novel in the 1990s had become commonplace by the second decade of the twenty-first century. Roughly half of the panelists at stand-alone NECBS conferences in that decade hailed from US states, Canadian provinces, and other nations outside of the primary regional focus of the NECBS: 64% in 2010; 53% in 2011; 45% in 2013; 48% in 2014; 63% in 2015; 58% in 2016; 43% in 2017; and 43% in 2019. At that final meeting of the decade, at which the NECBS celebrated its first fifty years, speakers hailed from Britain, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Nigeria.⁶³ Brian Lewis, McGill University historian of nineteenth-century industrialization, class, and philanthropy, as well as more recent queer history, hosted the remarkably successful fiftieth anniversary conference of the NECBS at McGill that year, sporting a broad program of global participants, curated by vice-president and program chair, Caroline Shaw, historian of modern Britain and humanitarianism at Bates College.⁶⁴

If, by the 2010s, NECBS conferences drew speakers from a much broader geographical area than hitherto had been the case, they were, in addition, much larger in size. During its first decade in existence, annual meetings consisted of an average of four panels, as we have seen. This had grown to an average of a dozen panels by the later 1990s, and to some twenty panels a decade or two later – and a whopping twenty-five panels at the fiftieth anniversary conference in Montréal in 2019.⁶⁵ Paradoxically, by drawing both panelists and attendees from far and wide

we no longer, as we used to, have an actual call for nominations from the floor and genuine election in choosing the V-P/Programme chair.”

⁶² Chris Waters, NECBS Annual Report (as submitted to the Executive Secretary of the NACBS), November 2011, 2. See fn 60 for reflections on “our region.”

⁶³ The percentages are again culled from the programs available on the NECBS website. In 2012 and 2018 the NECBS hosted the NACBS for joint conferences (and hence figures are not presented for these two meetings). The high proportion of non-regional panelists on the program of the 2015 meeting can in part be explained by the fact that the conference was held in Ottawa and drew a significant number of speakers from Ontario.

⁶⁴ Lewis, who had already hosted and arranged previous successful meetings in Montréal, would shortly become the president of the NECBS (2021-2023). Shortly thereafter he would serve as president of the national organization, following in the footsteps of Fred Leventhal, Susan Pennybacker, and Deborah Valenze, the three other presidents of the NECBS who went on to serve as presidents of the NACBS.

⁶⁵ 18 panels appeared on the conference program in 2007, 20 in 2008, 12 in 2009, 18 in 2010, 20 in 2011, 2013, 2014, and 2016.

to its annual meetings the NECBS could host larger gatherings even while the field contracted in terms of employment opportunities. At the 2014 gathering at Bates College, for example, there were seventy-nine participants on twenty different panels. Nevertheless, while then president Krista Kesselring (2013-2015), historian of marriage, law, and the state in early modern England at Dalhousie University noted both the regional diversity of conference speakers and the strong presence of graduate students that year, she also lamented that “participation from some of the larger, research-intensive institutions is perhaps lower than one might expect.”⁶⁶ This echoed a complaint often heard from time to time, especially in the new century, serving to differentiate the NECBS from some of the other regional branches in which such participation was much more commonplace.

In the 2010s NECBS conferences also tended to gravitate North. When David Howell had initiated discussions about creating a New England organization of British historians, he had complained that it was lonely for him, up North, in Maine, teaching at Bowdoin College.⁶⁷ Some twenty-five years later, as we have seen, Bob Tittler worried about whether or not NECBS and NACBS members would actually come to a joint conference were it to be held in Montréal. Not only was the joint meeting held in Montréal in 1993 a resounding success, but in the new century well-attended, stand-alone NECBS conferences would also be held in locations that were not on the radar screen in the very early years of the organization’s existence. Vermont hosted its first ever NECBS conference at the University of Vermont in 2010, organized at his home institution by Paul Deslandes, future president of the organization (2015-2017) and historian of masculinity and the body in modern Britain. Six years later the conference would return to the Burlington, Vermont region, hosted by Jennifer Purcell, historian of gender and popular culture at St. Michael’s College. And although the initial meeting of the new organization had taken place at Howell’s Bowdoin College in 1968, the NECBS would not return to Maine until conferences were successfully hosted in Lewiston at Bates College, benefitting from the organizational skills of Bates historian, Caroline Shaw (NECBS president, 2019-2021), both in 2014, and again in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic in 2022. Moreover, it was perhaps most noteworthy that Canada became an increasingly favorable destination for stand-alone NECBS gatherings. Conferences were held at McGill University in 2004 and again in 2019, at Concordia University in 2000, at the University of Ottawa in 2015, and at Dalhousie University in 2007 and 2023, the latter both hosted and organized by Krista Kesselring, who brought the conference to Halifax, Nova Scotia for the first time. Following in the footsteps of Bob Tittler, both Brian Lewis and Krista Kesselring served to consolidate the identity of the NECBS as a genuinely broad-based, cross-border, regional body; the NECBS was certainly no longer just the New England Conference on British Studies.

It is a paradox that the overall size of NECBS meetings – both in terms of the number of speakers on the program and conference attendees – has grown significantly while the field has shrunk, with fewer and fewer new jobs available in North America in British history, even broadly construed. This led the NECBS to follow in the footsteps of the NACBS, hosting panels in recent years on the current state of the field and new approaches to its configuration and teaching. At the 2009 meeting, held at Brown University, the program included a panel, “Teaching British History in North America – New Approaches,” with reflections offered by an impressive group of British historians, all based in the northeast region: Arianne Chernock (Boston University), Eliga Gould (University of New Hampshire), Nicoletta Gullace (University of New Hampshire), Tim Harris (Brown University), Brendan Kane (University of Connecticut; NECBS president, 2017-2019), and Brian Lewis (McGill University; NECBS president 2021-2023). The moderator of the

⁶⁶ NECBS Annual Report (as submitted to the Executive Secretary of the NACBS), September 16, 2014; see also NECBS Annual Report, submitted October 27, 2015.

⁶⁷ Letter, Roger Howell to David Berkowitz, February 14, 1967.

panel mentioned a decade-old article, “The Strange Death of British History,” reflected on recent NACBS panels on the state of the field, and wondered whether or not there was a future for the NECBS, especially in the wake of the recent demise of the Northwest Conference on British Studies.⁶⁸ And yet the reach of the internet, the hard work undertaken by many officers of the NECBS – and the increasing vitality brought to the annual meetings of the organization by a plenitude of graduate students – secured the continuation of the organization in an increasingly dire job market throughout the region and beyond.

For the 2008 NECBS conference, held at Boston College and organized by former president Peter Weiler (1999-2001), eighty-six individuals formally registered, forty of whom were graduate students.⁶⁹ While graduate students had certainly been a growing presence at NECBS meetings in the 1990s, in the new century their presence would become even more important. As the president of the organization wrote in his annual report to the NACBS in 2011, “... as we presume is the case with other regions, the NECBS is often the venue at which many graduate students – in the region and beyond – deliver their first papers; at our most recent conferences roughly a quarter to a third of all papers read at our meetings were the work of graduate students.”⁷⁰ Graduate students brought new life into the organization and showcased new work being undertaken in the field. Recognizing the increasingly important function of the NECBS as a forum for younger historians to present and discuss their work – and, furthermore, to encourage them in their efforts – the NECBS inaugurated its first conference prize, awarded for the best paper presented by a graduate student at the annual meeting. The prize was named in honor of David Underdown, historian of seventeenth-century political culture in Britain who, during his time as a professor at both Brown and Yale universities, was not only an enthusiastic supporter of the NECBS but also encouraged his own graduate students to present their work at NECBS conferences, engaging with other scholars in their field.⁷¹

Initially the Underdown Prize consisted of an award of \$250 and a citation read at the subsequent meeting. The first award was made for a paper read at the annual meeting in 2010, held at the University of Vermont and at which Malcolm Smuts (NECBS president, 2003-2005) gave a talk in honor of Underdown’s contributions to the field, “Puritans, Social History and Europe’s Wars of Religion.” Before the inauguration of the prize, discussions had taken place between then president, Chris Waters, vice president, Margaret Hunt, and secretary-treasurer, Mary Conley, about eligibility requirements for the prize. Collectively they agreed that the prize should be awarded to any graduate student, in any field of British Studies – and based at any institution, in North America or overseas, not just from an institution located in New England or Eastern Canada. This again suggested the growing internationalization of the regional British Studies conferences. Indeed, the first prize, in 2010, was awarded to Eve Colpus, a DPhil student at Oxford University, for her paper, “‘The Week’s Good Causes’: Philanthropy and the British Broadcasting Corporation.” The following year, in 2011, the prize was shared by Padraic Scanlan, a PhD student at Princeton University, for his paper, “‘The Seeds of Reformation’: Colonialism in Sierra Leone after the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1808-1815,” and Desmond Fitzgibbon, a PhD

⁶⁸ Chris Waters served as program chair for the 2009 meeting and moderated this discussion. The article mentioned was J. C. D. Clark, “The Strange Death of British History: Reflections on Anglo-American Scholarship,” *The Historical Journal* 40, no. 3 (September 1997): 787-809.

⁶⁹ See the “NECBS 2008 Conference Budget Report, prepared by Mary Conley, Secretary-Treasurer.”

⁷⁰ Chris Waters, NECBS Annual Report (as submitted to the Executive Secretary of the NACBS), November 2011, 2.

⁷¹ For Underdown (1925-2009), see the brief note and links in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Underdown. For the prize, see the memorandum, “The David Underdown Memorial Prize of the Northeast Conference on British Studies: Prize Guidelines and Mechanics.”

student at the University of California, Berkeley, for his paper, “Auctioneers, Estate Agents and the Culture of the Property Market in Nineteenth-Century England,” All three students went on to formal academic positions after receiving their degrees, Colpus at the University of Southampton, Scanlan at the University of Toronto, and Fitzgibbon at Mount Holyoke College in the NECBS “home” region.⁷² Within a few years of its inception, the prize was attracting a dozen or more submissions after each conference, with graduate students often commenting on the welcome and support they received at NECBS meetings.⁷³

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the organizational complexity of the NECBS and the NACBS would continue to increase and would have startled the founders of both organizations. In 2011, the “Guide for Local Arrangements Committees for the NACBS Annual Conference,” sent to regional officers to aid in the planning of joint conferences, had already grown to seventeen densely-packed pages, accompanied by eighteen appendices, including copies of hotel contracts and instructions for the printing of the written conference program. It would grow much larger. By the 2010s, the work of the regional conferences was increasingly coordinated with the national body – at least in those years in which a joint meeting took place – and with little of the resistance that had characterized relations from the 1970s into the 1990s. Recognizing this growing administrative complexity, the unitary position of NECBS secretary-treasurer was split into two distinct offices. Moreover, in the context of establishing the Underdown Prize – and all the better to secure tax-free donations for that prize and other work of the organization more generally – Mary Conley (secretary-treasurer from 2005-2010) led the NECBS through the time-consuming and costly process of becoming formally incorporated as a charitable, non-profit entity under chapter 180 of the General Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, subsequently receiving tax-exempt status for the NECBS through Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code in 2010. In order to comply with the legal requirements, this entailed the acceptance of formal by-laws, now spelt out in a twelve-page document, a far-cry from the very basic, one-page set of ground rules drafted by Ed Wall for the consideration of members of the NECBS two decades earlier.⁷⁴

In 2019, as we have seen, the fiftieth anniversary meeting, held in Montréal at McGill University, hosted twenty-five panels, more than at any previous meeting of the NECBS. Little did the speakers know then that this would be the last in-person conference for three years due to the unwelcome interruptions caused by the Covid pandemic. Nevertheless, even though an in-person conference was not possible in either 2020 or 2021, Caroline Shaw, then president of the NECBS, and Brian Lewis, vice president and program chair, put together a small, one-day on-line conference in 2020, billed as a “virtual graduate and early career workshop,” continuing the organization’s emphasis on supporting and encouraging the work of younger scholars. This was followed by an extensive on-line conference in 2021, which consisted of nineteen panels as well as two plenary addresses, one delivered by former NECBS president Margaret Hunt, now

⁷² For a complete list of all Underdown Prize recipients, along with the prize guidelines, see the NECBS website: <https://www.necbs.org/underdown-prize>. Between 2010 and 2024, inclusive, there were nineteen Underdown awards, but only six received by individuals undertaking their graduate degrees at institutions in the NECBS catchment area: one at Boston College, one at Boston University, two at McGill University, and two at Harvard University. Since the prize’s inception, the dollar award amount accompanying the prize has been increased from the initial \$250.

⁷³ See the NECBS Annual Reports (as submitted to the Executive Secretary of the NACBS) for 2014 and 2015.

⁷⁴ Other regional bodies requested information about how, exactly, the NECBS navigated the path to incorporation as a non-profit entity. See the emails establishing long discussions of this issue: George Robb (Mid-Atlantic Conference on British Studies) to Chris Waters, February 25, 2011; Lia Paradis (Midwest Conference on British Studies) to Paul Deslandes, August 17, 2014.

teaching at Uppsala University, on “Fraud, Identity Theft, and Women in Early Modern Maritime London.” If, in the early years of the twenty-first century, the internet had expanded the reach of all the regional conferences on British Studies and transformed the nature both of conference attendance and participation, on-line conference participation through the Zoom platform made conference attendance possible at a time of pandemic lockdown. It has yet to be seen what the long-term impact of this will be, but in 2022 and beyond, the annual NECBS conference has returned to its pre-pandemic vibrancy and scale with both in-person and on-line participation.

From its rather humble beginnings more than a half a century ago, the NECBS now flourishes as a firmly-established, vibrant forum for scholars of the British past to share their intellectual work and enthusiasms and to enjoy the company of others engaged in similar pursuits, across New England and Eastern Canada and increasingly well-beyond. The early enthusiasts for a regional conference on British Studies might not recognize what the NECBS has become. Some might be duly impressed, welcoming the expansion of the organization from New England into Canada, the sizeable growth of the annual conference program, the firming up of the organization’s institutional presence, and the ever-increasing diversity of scholars at the annual conference in terms of age, identity, professional status, and, most of all, intellectual interests. But doubts might remain. How can the NECBS fulfill its principal original function to bring and hold together a regional body of scholars of Britain when speakers and conference participants hail from all over North America and far beyond? To what extent does this change the nature of the organization so much that it loses its regional identity and becomes little more than a smaller version of the NACBS? And, if this is the case, is there still a need for regional conferences on British Studies at all, other than to play an important role in hosting the national meetings every few years? And, if a need for the regional bodies does still exist, what form should they now take and what should their goals be? Finally, can the social and intellectual exchange that characterized in-person conferences continue to flourish on-line, and, if so, how? It is easy to lament some elements of the world that has been lost while simultaneously and most enthusiastically celebrating the democratization and diversity of what the NECBS has become. The NECBS has survived for fifty years because it has shifted with the times – and, indeed, has helped to shape what British Studies has become in North America. Let’s hope it can continue to do so for the next fifty years.

Appendix One

Chief Officers or Presidents of the Northeast Conference on British Studies

1968-1970	Roger B. Howell, Jr. (Bowdoin College)
1970	Fred A. Cazel (University of Connecticut)
1971	Bryce Lyon (Brown University)
1971-1972	Edward F. Wall (College of the Holy Cross)
1972-1973	Fred Leventhal (Boston University)
1973-1974	David Roberts (Dartmouth College)
1974-1976	Thomas Kemnitz (University of New Hampshire)
1976-1980	David Trafford (University of Maine, Orono)
1980-1991	Edward Wall (College of the Holy Cross)
1991-1993	Paul Fideler (Lesley College)
1993-1995	Susan Pennybacker (Trinity College)
1995-1997	Robert Tittler (Concordia University)
1997-1999	Susan Amussen (Union Institute)
1999-2001	Peter Weiler (Boston College)
2001-2003	Deborah Valenze (Barnard College)
2003-2005	Malcolm Smuts (University of Massachusetts, Boston)
2005-2007	Peter Hansen (Worcester Polytechnic Institute)
2007-2009	Joyce Malcolm (Bentley College)
2009-2011	Chris Waters (Williams College)
2011-2013	Margaret Hunt (Amherst College)
2013-2015	Krista Kesselring (Dalhousie University)
2015-2017	Paul Deslandes (University of Vermont)
2017-2019	Brendan Kane (University of Connecticut)
2019-2021	Caroline Shaw (Bates College)
2021-2023	Brian Lewis (McGill University)
2023-2025	Jennifer Regan-Lefebvre (Trinity College)
2025-2027	Mary Conley (College of the Holy Cross)

It is difficult to reconstruct with complete confidence the list of the chief officers of the NECBS before 1991 as good lists were not maintained locally and changes in officials were not always reported to the national organization in a timely manner (or at all). The names appearing above (along with dates of office) have been culled from the front pages of *Albion*, the *Journal of British Studies*, and the *British Studies Intelligencer*. This has all been verified where possible by material in the NECBS correspondence and program files as well as through extensive personal correspondence with former officers of the organization. The title of “president” was only used consistently in the wake of the adoption of a formal constitution by the NECBS membership in 1991; before that time the terms “coordinator,” or “secretary,” or “executive secretary” were also used interchangeably to refer to the anointed head of the organization.

Various individuals active in the NECBS have suggested slight variations on the above list. Bob Tittler believes that the organization was wrestled away from Ed Wall as early as 1988, although records seem to suggest this was only the case informally. David Berkowitz suggested in a telegram to Daniel McCue (organizer of the 1975 conference and faculty member in English at Boston College) on January 13, 1975 that David Trafford was “our pro forma President and keeper of the mailing list,” despite records indicating that Thomas Kemnitz was president from 1974 to 1976. Trafford submitted his resignation on September 27, 1979 in a letter to Ed Wall, designating him as his successor, although Wall is only listed as president from 1980.

Appendix Two

British Studies Conferences in the Northeast Region

1.	1968	Bowdoin College
2.	1969	University of Connecticut
3.	1970	[Brown University?] ⁷⁵
4.	1971	College of the Holy Cross
5.	1972	Boston University
6.	1973	Dartmouth College
7.	1974	University of New Hampshire
8.	1975	Boston College
9.	1976	??
10.	1977	Northeastern University
11.	1978	Assumption College
12.	1979	University of Massachusetts, Amherst
13.	1980	Worcester State College
14.	1981	University of New Hampshire
15.	1982	Massachusetts Institute of Technology (joint meeting with the NACBS)
16.	1983	College of the Holy Cross
	1984	??
	1985	??
	1986	Boston College (with the New England Hist. Assoc.)
	1987	??
	1988	??
19.	1989 (Apr.)	College of the Holy Cross ⁷⁶
20.	1989 (Nov.)	College of the Holy Cross
	1990	no meeting
21.	1991 (Apr.)	Assumption College
22.	1991 (Oct.)	University of Massachusetts, Boston (with the New England Hist. Assoc.)
23.	1992	Trinity College
24.	1993	Montréal (joint meeting with the NACBS)
25.	1994	Bentley College
26.	1995	Brown University
27.	1996	Wesleyan University
28.	1997	Dartmouth College
29.	1998	Trinity College
30.	1999	Cambridge (joint meeting with the NACBS)
31.	2000	Concordia University
32.	2001	Worcester Polytechnic Institute
33.	2002	Yale University
34.	2003	Tufts University
35.	2004	McGill University
36.	2005	University of Massachusetts, Amherst

⁷⁵ There is no record of, or program for a conference in 1970, although Susan Amussen recalls a May meeting that year, the Saturday before the Kent State shootings, at which Christopher Hill delivered a plenary address. See email, Susan Amussen to Chris Waters, September 11, 2023.

⁷⁶ Programs for the 1983 and 1989 conferences are numbered, respectively, for the sixteenth and the nineteenth annual meetings of the NECBS, suggesting that two additional meetings took place between these years, even if records have only been uncovered for one of them (Boston College, 1986).

37.	2006	Cambridge (joint meeting with the NACBS)
38.	2007	Dalhousie University
39.	2008	Boston College
40.	2009	Brown University
41.	2010	University of Vermont
42.	2011	College of the Holy Cross
43.	2012	Montréal (joint meeting with the NACBS)
44.	2013	University of Connecticut
45.	2014	Bates College
46.	2015	University of Ottawa
47.	2016	St. Michael's College
48.	2017	Endicott College
49.	2018	Providence (joint meeting with the NACBS)
50.	2019	McGill University
51.	2020	virtual graduate and early career workshop, on-line
52.	2021	virtual conference, on-line
53.	2022	Bates College
54.	2023	Dalhousie University
55.	2024	Trinity College
56.	2025	Montréal (joint meeting with the NACBS)

Programs for all of the known NECBS conferences listed above (except for the 1975 meeting) can be viewed and downloaded from the “Conferences” tab on the official NECBS website (<https://www.necbs.org>).