

Unit 1: Video 2 Transcript

Q8: How has the field of Canadian history developed?

A: When I think about how the history of Canada has changed in the course of my career, and I began in Canadian history in the 1970s, it's remarkable how sweeping the changes have been. Perhaps the biggest change, I think, is in the expansion of the horizons, the range of subjects, the diversity of subjects. It's so diverse and so proliferous today that it's very hard, perhaps impossible, for a single historian to keep up with the literature that's coming out with all of the publications in Canadian history.

When I began in this field, if you go back to the 1960s, early 1970s, it was possible for a single historian to have some command of the entire corpus of Canadian historical writing, reasonable command of it. That's certainly not true today. And it reflects a lot of things of course, the expansion of the university system, the increase in the number of historians, the enormous interest in Canadian history not just in universities, but in a wider public as well. Diversity also—not just in subject matter, but also in the way in which we do history, in the kinds of methods and techniques that we apply to the study of history. And also I think theoretical breadth. We now think about history in terms that our predecessors a generation or two didn't think of. They didn't think of history in quite the same way. We have theoretical frames that we apply today. Such as, obviously, gender, race and racialization, ethnicity, other frames that were not thought of by our predecessors.

The diversity of Canadian history is sometimes, has been lamented. There's no single story anymore. There's no story of, for instance, the building of a modern democratic nation. I don't lament this at all, the diversity. I think it reflects richness and a multitude of perspectives that are brought by historians, and also needed by the wider public and students that read what we produce. And so, for instance, the obvious examples are, when I was studying history, when I began studying history in the 1960s, we hardly paid any attention to women in history and their roles. That was about—that was yet to come. Still less would we look at history through the frame of gender and all that that has enabled for us. We knew very little about and did not

discuss in any great length the role of Aboriginal peoples in Canadian history. Canadian history started with Cartier in the 1500s and great European explorers and fur traders. Well that's certainly not where we start today, and we now understand the relationship between European newcomers and Canadian Indigenous peoples in an entirely new way today. That has had a transforming effect on the whole of Canadian history, how it's understood and how we teach it.

I could give you many other examples. The history of race, racialization in Canada, that is so urgent and important in our own time because we are after all a—not just multicultural, but we're even perhaps a plurinational country with people who've come from many different parts of the world, many different cultures. And we still in the present are trying to sort out these relationships.

And so history has a great deal to bring in its understanding of how these relationships were worked out or were not worked out in the past. The history of race, racialization is in the forefront of Canadian history in a way that was certainly not when I began. Just a few examples, then, of the way in which Canadian history has changed fundamentally over the last half century.