

## Unit 11: Video 1 Transcript

**Q6 Discuss your earlier work on rebellion and state formation.**

A: My first book was about the society of—about habitant society, about settlers in early Quebec. And the unfinished business when I'd finished that was the Rebellion of 1837/38 which—in which they had played a central part. And so this was my attempt to, you know, do political history like a social historian. It used to be, it's no longer the case, that there was a sort of a sense of this great divide in Canadian history between those who did political history and those who did social history. I think it was always a bit of a bogus distinction. But I particularly wanted to bring those together. So you have a quintessentially political event, this—call it a rebellion or a failed revolution or just a revolutionary crisis, that's, you know, a pretty important punctuation point between the conquest and confederation, I suppose. And I wanted to know what the involvement was of—the majority of the people involved were agricultural farming people or peasants as they would be called in Lower Canada. So contrary to the assumptions of English Canadian historiography, it's way more—it's a much bigger deal in Québec than it is in what becomes Ontario, so in Lower Canada. And it's fundamentally a conflict that takes place in the countryside. There's an important urban dimension that I don't get into because my focus was, you know, what's it about with the farming people. And historiographically where we were when I started was, yes, there's a whole lot of peasants who were involved and they're all stupid and their economy isn't working and they're hungry and they get bamboozled by fast-talking politicians. And that's the whole story, because they happen to be the ones who take up arms, okay. So I started looking at the records that were closest to the ground, which is essentially written records of the interrogation of political prisoners. So if someone is arrested and there were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people arrested, a statement would be taken by a magistrate. So there's that, and then there are their counterpart, which is people accusing other people. So people—against the Patriotes, the rebels of the Patriotes, making statements denouncing a neighbour or acquaintance or someone who had performed an action that

seemed seditious or treasonable. So I went right to the kind of the ground level of the Rebellion in the rural communities and tried to find out what was going on. And in the end when I put things together it did not look to me like some kind of irrational outburst by people who didn't know anything. It looked, instead, like the sort of defensive actions of rural communities threatened by external attack, in this case by units of the British Army who are falling back on a kind of, I suppose you might call it, folk culture. But the culture that had developed over generations in these rural communities, things to do with the organization of the militia, the organization of local parishes, you know, the development of leadership styles, rituals that had been used, for example, the charivari ritual which had been deployed against people who married someone the community disapproved of, basically when there was a mismatch in age or marital status. It gets politicized and it gets deployed against political enemies. So local magistrates or militia officers that are loyal to the Crown get subjected to this ritual that involved people coming in the dark of night in costumes and disguises with their faces blackened so that you can't see them, with pots and pans and drums and horns and noisemaking instruments and just creating havoc around your house so you can't sleep. So this had been a kind of, you know, Bacchanalian celebration that had occurred traditionally when, for example, some old widower marries a young girl in the past. So this is used for political purposes. So instead of dismissing this all as, you know, kind of irrational activities, I tried to find the reason that underlay these activities and the cultural traditions that sustained them and allowed basically law-biding peaceful, normally peaceful, country folk to mount a quite serious insurrection and opposition to government. It failed. But it was by no means trivial.