

Unit 4: Video 3 Transcript

Q3 What should a student of pre-Confederation history know about New France?

A: What's interesting about New France, why should anyone care, in Quebec it seems obvious. It feels like this is ancestral in Western Canada, in Nova Scotia it might not feel the same sense of—people may not feel the same sense of personal connection. And I think whether you feel ancestrally connected to it or not, I think it's intrinsically fascinating and important. So it's one of the—it's one of the most important sites of European empire building in America. There's the Cortez conquest in Mexico. There's the Spanish domination of Peru and there's the English coming into Virginia and later New England. And there's New France which is, you know, a very significant phenomenon. It's of interest particularly, and I think this is the part of New France that historians are most preoccupied with today, as one version of an imperial encounter between Europeans and Indigenous people. And it works differently than is the case when the English, for example, encounter Indigenous people in Chesapeake Bay. Or the Spanish in Mexico or Florida. It's hard to express this briefly while still giving enough qualifications. But the short answer to the questions or what's special about it is we have comparatively small numbers of Natives, comparatively small numbers of Europeans. So spatially there's, in a sense, in most places there's room for everybody. So there's not the same intense conflict over actual space. There is some of that but not nearly as much. There's more economic basis for cooperation, you know, the classic Canadian fur trade which is not as totally benign as we've been taught in the past. But it does sort of foster a certain degree of mutual respect. So—and there's way more to the connections between Indigenous and French.

There's the stuff I was talking about a minute ago, the religious encounter and, you know, attempts to convert, and it's not clear who's converting whom to what. So complicated interactions at the level of religion and ideology and outlook and that sort of thing. Lots of exchange of technology

and it's very much a two-way operation. The French pick up canoes and snowshoes and all kinds of things to do with travel which, you know, it's not just that they need it. They can see this as a technological wonder. They describe it in those terms, you know, it's not—they don't take it for granted. And the Natives are eager to get access to material objects that the French can supply. So perhaps more so than in many other parts of the Americas there is some basis for cohabitation and cooperation. So there's that.

And then you have to qualify that by looking at the other side of the coin, which is you know what, it's still imperialism. It's still one people coming uninvited to someone else's country and attempting to take over. They attempt to take over in more subtle ways, perhaps, than, you know, a kind of all-out military conquest onslaught. But it's still very much about taking over. So there's these two sides that I think both have to be kept into account. But anyway, and I say—I think it's interesting in the context of this great world historical phenomenon which is the European invasion of America, of the Americas. And it's very significant in that context. You have all kinds of things. You have all kinds of, you know, evolution of Indigenous cultures and ways of life in proximity to European settlements. But then you also have the European settlements themselves and they're fascinating and interesting. So we have an offshoot of Ancien Régime France here for, you know, 150 years developing in its way and has all kinds of special qualities and characteristics that are, I think, intrinsically fascinating. Whether you feel this is somehow or other your ancestors or not, is a bit beside the point. Which is why lots of people are studying the history of New France who are not Canadian and not in the context of Canadian history. It's just part of the human story over the centuries. So you have this Ancien Régime society that has seigneurs and habitants who are subject to seigneurial tenure, which is a lot more interesting a phenomenon than the so-called seigneurial system that students are forced to memorize in schoolbooks.

It's actually way more complicated and more interesting than I think most people realize. You have an Ancien Régime state that is, you know, quite bureaucratic. It is not in theory the least bit democratic. It nevertheless is shaped by the people in all kinds of important ways. It's a long way from

being totalitarian. There's all kinds of experiments with different things. Just to take one example that one of my colleagues works on. The claim is made, it's a slightly exaggerated claim, but the claim is made that paper money is invented in New France. The first state-backed currency using paper rather than precious metals is in 1685 when the Intendant of New France uses playing cards and writes on them, you know, leave and signs it and that sort of thing. And it circulates as money. And you have to put a whole lot of qualifications on this, but just to simplify the story a little bit, that's pretty much the first time outside China that paper is used as monetary currency. So I throw that in. That's someone else's research. It's actually my wife's research that I'm referring to. Just as, you know, one of hundreds of phenomena that are characteristic of New France and that are of interest, not just in the context of Canadian history, but in the history of the world.