

Unit 1: Video 1 Transcript

Q1: Introduction

A: I'm John Belshaw. I'm a professor of history at Thompson Rivers University in the Open Learning division, so I teach Canadian history online, Canadian and British Columbian history. I've been a faculty member at TRU off-and-on since 1989, and my field of expertise is 19th century British Columbia, labour history, population history, and lately I've been writing about the history of Vancouver in the mid-20th century.

Q2: Describe the challenges of studying Canadian history in general.

A: I think one of the challenges of studying Canadian history is getting a sense of its boundaries. You start from the Canada you know. So we might say the shape of modern day Canada, this is the history of what becomes Canada, and there's two challenges there. One is it doesn't necessarily have to turn out in the shape that it has right now. What happens in 50 years' time if half of it drops off into the sea, or we annex Montana, or something like that? Do we then annex Montana's history as well, or do we just shave off that bit that no longer is part of Canada? And I think that's a real challenge.

I've been looking recently at the history of New France, and the way in which New France is portrayed in textbooks very often it's New France is shorthand for the St. Lawrence Valley, Canada, and Acadia. But there was also Louisiana. These were the three main parts of it, but the whole Mississippi Valley part and the Gulf part tends to get forgotten about in Canadian history because it doesn't wind up in Canada. And yet, it's a really important part of the story of New France. The French were all over the southwest at one point. They were into New Mexico. They were right up against New Spain and were very aggressive traders and were involved in all kinds of interesting stuff and had a lot of influence. For a small number of people on the ground, they had a lot of influence in the territory.

So it's important to keep in mind that there are bits of the story that go off in other directions. And rather than writing or thinking about the history of Canada as this nice, neat unit which has a red bar, a white bar, a red bar and a maple leaf in the middle splashed out across it. But that, in fact, Canada is

the history of the people who make up that society or those societies, and they're very different. By way of another example, in British Columbia, in the 19th century, before it was called British Columbia, the trading district that was claimed by the Hudson's Bay Company went as far south as the mouth of the Columbia River. So pretty much all of Washington State, what we now think of as Washington State, was part of this larger contiguous trading zone and area of influence where British and Canadian Iroquoian traders had a fair bit of authority, influence, certainly impact.

And then that shifts as the border is drawn at the 49th parallel. And that has two effects. I think one is that when we think of British Columbian history from that point on, we're thinking about Fort Victoria. Well, Fort Victoria doesn't just spring out of some place. It springs out of the fact that Fort Vancouver got closed, and we lost that chunk of land to the Americans. "We," like it's mine. And the other part of it is, of course, Aboriginal peoples. This 49th parallel thing makes—is nonsense. So the Stó:lō Nation, their people, are all across that border. And the 49th parallel, it's a really artificial line. And in their history, it becomes a partition. It becomes a Berlin Wall, where you've got economic activities, political activity, political identity cut right down the middle, very different on either side, different laws apply to them. Their ability to move back and forth is really impacted.

So if we're going to think about Canadian history, we can go, I think, in a couple of directions. We can think about it in terms of the country called Canada now, how that comes to be, which is a very political history then. It's just really about constitutions. Or we could think about the history of Canadians defined very broadly so as to include the whole of Aboriginal society. I think that becomes a much greater challenge.