Unit 1: Video 5 Transcript

Q9: What is Canadian History?

A: In Canadian History, as in any other field, there are areas of debate. There are areas of disagreement, and for much of the late 20th century, the principal area of disagreement was really about, "What is Canadian history?" What's it really about? Is it about the story of the nation-state? The celebration of Confederation in 1867 and all of that. Or is it about the people of Canada? And in the 1960s and '70s, there was a new branch of Canadian history, historical writing or historiography, if you like, that took off, which we call the new social history. And this was happening in the United States. It was happening in Britain. It was happening in all of the English-speaking countries, as well as in other countries.

And the trend there was towards incorporating or illuminating the stories of women, because typically the stories of history had been about men, and people who weren't white, people who didn't have a lot of money, working-class people, poor people and even children, which is a big demographic that we often overlook. And, how do you write the history of children, because they become adults? Well, not all of them do. They don't live that long, some of them, some populations. So what does childhood itself look like? And what is its purpose? So those kinds of things became really important to historians in the '60s and '70s, and principally historians who were part of that early baby-boom generation, and that really changed the study of history in Canada.

Many of those historians are still working in history departments. They came into their careers in the early to mid-70s and many of them are still in—they're very active, very active as historians, as researchers. And their careers have been formed by that division between what was really political history and social history. And this is important because—and it remains important, in fact. I think a lot of us thought, "Well, that one has been put to bed now," about 10 years ago, but clearly history has a certain purpose.

And a wonderful study was made a couple of years ago, which very wittily took the title, *What Is the Use of History?* And history has uses. And clearly when the government says, "We're going to celebrate the Centennial," what they're saying is this event in the past that pertains to the formation of our wonderful country, and

we're going to celebrate that. Well, that carries a lot of values in it, and there's bound to be people in your society saying, "Well, actually, that was a really bad moment for us. It didn't turn out so well for us. We lost all of our land," or, "My family was unemployed for years. They lost the farm." Yada, yada. So the state when we talk about using history as a means of building citizenship, well, that's a really loaded process. So it remains an important part of the equation of what historians do, and what historians debate about.

Since the 1990s, more historians have turned to, not less social-focused histories, but certainly I would say more scientific approaches to history. I mean as a demographic historian, that's where I see myself, doing more social sciences or scientific approaches to the historical record. But the big development, I think, on that front is environmental history. And if you look at the early days of environmental history in the 1970s, it was really about human impact on the environment, on nature. And what it has become is the history of idea of "nature," what constitutes nature.

A wonderful book I read earlier this year on the history of Stanley Park, called *The Invention of Stanley Park*, which points out how after the great windstorm of, what was it, 2007? I've forgotten now. It was such a great storm—I've forgotten it—knocked down a bunch of trees. People said, "We want to restore it to its natural state." A windstorm is a natural state, okay? What you want to restore it to is a kind of manicured environment that is consistent with your view of what nature looks like. So I think that's really telling. That's where the field has gone in terms of environmental history. It's not about human impact on the environment, but how humans perceive the environment and how they perceive nature. And, too, how those two things interact, humans and their environment. So that's been a really exciting development, I think.

Historians generally, I think, are becoming much more—I think they're once again becoming attuned to how important it is to be aware of what you're doing as a historian. The current [Stephen Harper] government, by way of an example, has put a lot of money into the celebration of the War of 1812 as a founding moment in the history of the nation of Canada. And a lot of historians are waving their hands around saying, you know, "Actually, as founding moments go, it's much more complex than that." I mean it represents a terrible setback for Aboriginal people in the region. But more than that, the Upper Canadians really didn't want to get involved in this much. So it's really the British troops and Tecumseh's army. The

Upper Canadians weren't actually that brave and staunch on the battlefield. And things could've gone a lot worse than they did. So, but it's being used, and that history is being used to a particular purpose. And I think historians are more and more aware of the role they have to play, and they do have a role to play, as public scholars and stepping up to the plate and saying, "History's a messy business. Don't misuse it."