

Unit 3: Video 1 Transcript

Q5: What are the key themes in your field of research?

A: One of my fields of research is population history, or what's called historical demography. Sometimes it's called demographic history, just to give it all its names. And that's the study of populations.

And not just where people were, in what numbers, but what are the engines of growth? What are the things that are causing the population to decline? Birth rates go up; mortality rates go down. Are people immigrating? Are they emigrating? Are they coming or going? And what are the forces behind those changes?

So it's very dynamic. It sounds at the outset, I think, a little bit static. Well, how many people were there in 1863? How many were there in 1864? Well, that's not really it. It's about how the change takes place, and how families grow, contract, that sort of thing. And there are a number—in Canadian history, generally, there are a number of important issues there. I'll talk about two of them.

One is the idea of the colony. Europeans arrive in the Americas, and they engage in what we would call very broadly colonization. And colonization can take a number of forms. Some European countries, their representatives show up. They take over. They start administering countries. They don't bring a lot of settlers with them. Perhaps they just bring a lot of military. I'm thinking here of the Spanish in particular, of course. And their colonies look pretty much like a Spanish-led version of the Aztec Empire. Not a lot has changed on the ground, for a couple hundred years anyways. In New France, it's kind of like that as well. Although, not so much in Acadia, but certainly in the St. Lawrence Valley. Not so in places like New England where families arrive, and they begin to generate their own growth. And I think there's a distinction here. It's a subtle one, but I think it's a really important one between settlement and colonization.

Settlement can be a crowd of males, all men, working out of the Hudson's Bay Company post someplace, or at a fort, a naval base, or something like that. And it's not meant to generate growth. It's just a little population on the

ground. They've kind of settled in for a long siege or whatever, but it's not a biological colony. They're not going to generate their own population. And that's the difference. When you think of colonization, think of colonies of ants, think of mold growing on a piece of bread, it's something that can generate its own growth. It doesn't depend on immigration to sustain it. It can start to begin its own population. And that colonial history, how that happens and the different rates of growth and the setbacks incurred, that's really important in Canadian history because it's not even across the board. And we can't assume that it's happening at the same pace across the board.

There's another thing in terms of population history that's of critical importance in Canadian history and that has to do with Aboriginal history. Historians disagree over the scale of Aboriginal population at the time of contact. It's almost certain—I think we can be comfortably certain that there were millions of people living in North America before the arrival of the Europeans and possibly millions living in what's now Canada. We know that there are enormous population collapses about the time of European contact. It's important for a number of reasons to wrestle with this, and the jury is still out on how big the population was at the time of contact or before contact, and how big the population collapse was thereafter. And it's like falling down the stairs. Things just get worse and worse and worse, so that we land someplace in the 1920s with Aboriginal populations at an all-time low. And then they recover somewhat after that. But it goes on for the better part of 400 or 500 years. A number of reasons why this is important. One is because for many, many years, for many generations, people talked about “virgin lands”. They talked about “empty plains” and spaces into which Europeans could move, and settlement could take place, and how the economy could be developed. And, of course, they're not empty lands. They're emptied. It's been emptied out. Instead of virginal lands, historical demographers use the term “widowed lands” to suggest that someone has gone missing and, indeed, some people have. That's a critical part of this.

Had Europeans not introduced smallpox, measles, mumps, influenza, quite possibly tuberculosis, although, that may have been indigenous or at least one form of it may have been indigenous, even simple things like chicken pox, kids' diseases, kids' infections, things that the Europeans, Africans, and

Asians had been brushing off for hundreds of years were absolutely lethal when they arrived here. And they spread through the population at an uncanny rate. And I think it's interesting how when you talk to people about smallpox epidemics, for example, it becomes kind of a tick-box. So we've got warfare; we've got invasion; and we've got smallpox, tick. Smallpox, it's a continuing horror story that runs and runs and runs. It probably predates the arrival of the first Europeans, the first official Europeans on the east coast of North America. Certainly there are fishing fleets coming across the Atlantic before people like Cartier or Cabral show up. It's quite possible smallpox or influenza, something else might've come ashore. It's certain that it comes ashore in 1520, 1521 in Mexico. And, of course, enables the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. It's their biggest and most important ally, and it probably spread throughout the Mississippi thanks to early Spanish visits into that territory, too.

So what we're looking at over the longer term is a suite of civilizations and societies that are constantly reeling from a heightened mortality rate. And almost everything—that's the whole context for a lot of Aboriginal history, not the whole context, but it's an important piece of the context for Aboriginal history. We have to understand that without smallpox, there are no reservations. There are no reserves. Without smallpox, residential schools would not have had a hope. Without smallpox, European settlement would've been a much slower and much more bloody business. So it's a key ingredient in the history of Canada. Something we have to, I think, really—foreground. And we have to wrestle with it. In 1862, '63, the last big smallpox epidemic rolls through and rolls through British Columbia and about 20,000 people die. We can't be absolutely sure about the numbers, but about 20,000. The way I like to think of that—I don't like to think of it, but the way it helps me understand it is to say, "Okay, that's every seat in Rogers Arena with a corpse in it." The remaining population is so traumatized by this that they can't, in many instances, bring themselves to even bury the dead. So if it was—like, to think of it as a tick-box, smallpox; move onto the next thing. Okay. You've got the disease. It's done. Think of that moment when there's every seat in Rogers Arena containing a corpse. They're rotting. People are crying. They're lost. That's what we've got in 1863, '64. The societies that the settler society looks at after the Gold Rush is well on the way, before

Confederation for British Columbia, as we're looking towards reserves and away from treaties. Why do we not pursue treaties? Well, why? There's half the population gone. That's the context. It really matters, and I think people have to spend some time on that one.