

Unit 10: Video 2 Transcript

Q11: What is the connection between travel narratives and the Canadian identity?

A: Well, I got interested in travel narratives partly because I think Canadians always have this elusive notion of identity. We're always trying to figure out what our identity is. And one way of exploring that is to explore how others see us.

And travel narratives, there was a great many written in the early 19th century by British travellers. Came over here and saw Canada, of course as a land of opportunity in many ways, and wrote extensively about their experiences. Partly, you could see these as kind of immigration promotional books or brochures, and partly it's about just what you will discover: Niagara Falls, Quebec City, all that sort of thing. They hit all of the sort of main scenic highlights. But what I ended up sort of arguing is that they transport kind of a British way of seeing it. And this is not my own idea. Many historians have written about this in other parts of the British Empire. They describe things as either picturesque or sometimes sublime. And so they see the landscape, and it's mostly the landscape I'm interested in, not the urban areas, as kind of a transplanted England.

And one of my first studies on this theme was looking at the travel narratives, if you want to call them that, or the memoirs, letters written by young men coming to the Fraser Gold Rush in 1858 and the following years. And I was surprised to learn how many of these there were, and very well-written because these are very well-educated young men. And they're partly here as adventurers. Very few of them, none of the ones I saw, struck it rich. They're mostly like fish out of water. They're not prepared for the hardships that they're going to face. But what fascinated me was their descriptions of the mountains and the dry country, and so on when they get into the Kamloops area and so on, it was very picturesque. It was not seen as a rugged, hostile land. And using those colourful images that you would not think applied here at all, and the argument that so-called postcolonial historians use is that this is a form of colonialism in itself. It's looking at a landscape, at a colony, let's say, as if it was British. And, of course, they really liked Victoria because of the Natives. Fire ecology was park like. It wasn't densely forested. You just had large open spaces with trees here and there. And so to them, this was the ideal landscape. Surprised me, though, that even in areas that are very unlike that, they still saw it that way.

And on the Eastern Townships as well, I mean I've looked at land company promotional brochures in the 1820s and '30s, and they had testimonials at the end of these brochures. All tended to be written by what I would call gentility, landed gentlemen and younger sons, let's say, writing letters home. And, again, talking about it as kind of a pastoral paradise. The Townships as rolling hills, lots of lakes and rivers. To them, this was ideal. They advised people not to go to Upper Canada because it's flat. It's swampy. It's malaria-ridden. And so it was a good "gentleman's country" in a way, right? It was a place where you didn't have to grow wheat and work hard. You could have cattle. You could have livestock, which meant nothing much to do in the winter and so on. So I see that kind of vision—various places across Canada. The Prairies would be more of a challenge for that, for sure, because many of them see the Prairies as kind of hostile. But I've also seen descriptions of the Prairies, the waving grass and the colours and so on as being quite picturesque as well. So that's the British vision.

And I think I wouldn't say it's part of the Canadian identity, but it's part of the identity of Canada as a country. And, in fact, they are more interested in many ways in the landscape than they are in the people. They're interested in the Natives, but they usually are very pejorative about the Natives. So today, Canada's image, if you see how it's promoted by tourism projects or particularly in British Columbia, it's like it's an empty land. Canada's seen as a big empty land, and the wilderness is very much romanticized and so on. And I guess I'm arguing that that goes back a long way. I don't necessarily think that we're using picturesque images anymore. We're more emphasizing the sublime, right? Particularly in British Columbia. But one would not realize that most Canadians live in cities if you were looking at it from the perspective of an outsider. So it goes back a long way.

I'm also interested in looking at Americans and how they wrote about Canada. And very few historians have done that. There's quite a lot of work done on British. For example, if you take Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill, Anna Brownell Jameson, and so on, I mean their books, they're not so much travel narratives as settler narratives. But their books are a part of the cannon, right, of Canadian literature, every first-year Canadian literature course. And so we know a lot about what these early British gentry settlers thought about Canada and how they experienced Canada; not very much about what the Americans, who were a large part of the population, thought. They didn't write as much. That's part of the reason. They weren't of that sort of genteel class. But I was interested in American travellers, and that's a project I'm just involved in right now. I haven't gotten that far in it, but

having done a bit of reading, it's surprising to me—well, for Lower Canada, Quebec, let's say, much the same view as the British. The French-Canadians are seen as backward peasants, friendly, but because they're Catholic, because they're seen as having outdated farming techniques, they're colourful. So they're part of kind of a tourist attraction.

But when you move westward, Americans are as interested in this wide open land as the British are. And the British, particularly after 1880, they write a lot about—when the CPR comes across the country, a lot of British travelers write travel narratives because they see—after all, they write them to sell. And a lot of British are interested in coming here and becoming settlers. And they depict the land as fertile and ready for exploitation. I mean, in terms of farming and wheat growing, it's kind of romanticized and the difficulties are downplayed.

What that has to do with Canadian identity, I'm not so sure. But I think what I'm looking at more is the identity of Canada as a country, as a country that is wide open for immigration, which has lots of opportunities for making good, in a way. And the Americans describe it the same way, which is what I found a little bit surprising. Because when you look at Canadians, like Principal Grant who wrote a couple of narratives about going across Canada, the Principal of Queen's University, George Grant, but many others as well, they depict the western United States, particularly south of the border, as a desert. They argue that magically at the 49th parallel, rainfall begins to increase and the land is of better quality. And, of course, Palliser's Triangle incorporates a lot of Southern Saskatchewan, Alberta, but by the 1880s and 90s that becomes minimized. And so more and more settlers move into a land that was too marginal, really, to farm.