

## Unit 11: Video 1 Transcript

**Q3: What were the main causes of the Lower Canada Rebellion? Does your view differ from other historians?**

**A:** Well, that's a big subject, and I guess we'd have to talk about the big debates that took place. When I was a student or a graduate student that was a very hot topic. Well, it still is, to a certain extent.

And in those days, Quebec historians were very much doing socioeconomic history. And just to start with Fernand Ouellet, who is kind of the first post-nationalist historian, he argued that it was—the rebellions were a result largely of social economic changes. And he really focused on the economic, largely because he said that—well, let's start with the social. He argued that the liberal professionals were being educated by the classical colleges and moving—and became quite overcrowded by, you know, after the turn of the 19th century because they weren't moving into business. And he argued because they're being trained by priests; they're being trained in the church, for the church, but they would tend to—if they didn't become priests, they became doctors, lawyers or notaries. And many of them, because of the overcrowdedness of the professions, move into politics, move into journalism. Their standard of living, of course, is a little lower than they expect. So they tend to—especially when they form a political party and decide that through the lower—the elected Legislative Assembly, they can gain power. They want more power for the elected body, and they will represent the people of Quebec, right? Or of Lower Canada, sorry. And so it's in their own class self-interest, he argues, that French-Canadian nationalism starts.

And why do the habitants, the average person listen to them? Ouellet argues it's because it was an agricultural crisis that starts taking place as early as 1800, 1805. French-Canadians have always grown wheat, like they did in France. The soil is becoming exhausted. Wheat-crop yields is going down. The population is growing very fast. High birth rates. Well, everybody had high birth rates in those days. So the land is becoming overcrowded. And by the 1830s, you're having major crop failures. But he argues that that sense of grievance, of nationalism—well, of preparedness to listen to scapegoats, if you want to call them, the British governing system. So Ouellet is a strong anti-nationalist, and he set up a really strong backlash on the part of the nationalist story. And this became a battle of numbers. How can you prove that French Canadian crop—or their standard of living was going down? And I don't want to get into a whole lot of detail on that, but it was fascinating, really, because the other side would look at postmortem

inventories. Which in the French notarial system, it's much more legalistic and, let's say, bureaucratic than the English-Canadian system. So when someone died, their estate was very carefully assessed. The value was put on it. Well, we were moving into the computer age, and we were able to analyze large sets of documents. And so hundreds, thousands of these postmortem inventories are examined, and they show that the material standard of living from 1800 to 1830s was not going down that significantly, right? So this is sort of the nature of the debate for many, many years, which has kind of fizzled out now as Ouellet and his generation have retired.

I would say a major turning point, although an outlier, was Allan Greer's book which looks at it more—the rebellions more from the perspective of the people, the habitants themselves, rather than the nationalists, the elites, the professionals, and so on. And he argues that there was a genuine radical impetus there against the taxation by the church, compulsory ties, against seigneurial exploitation and so on, which the mainstream Patriotes leaders were not behind, necessarily. Louis-Joseph Papineau was a seigneur, so he wanted to continue the seigneurial system. He was an atheist, but he still wanted to keep the Catholic Church as an official church, because as a nationalist he felt these were important features of the French-Canadian identity. So Greer looked at it more as a peasant rebellion, inspired by some of the French literature and so on. Which took us outside that nationalist/antinationalist debate that had been going on a long time. That doesn't mean to say that that debate has died or is over, because there are still strong nationalists in Quebec who argue that this was an incipient popular revolution and so on. And what they call a normal part of the revolutionary wave that was taking place in Europe for emancipation from colonial rule. So the arguments continue. It's still a very—well, a lot of work being done in political ideology and so on, even today.

My own work, that book that I wrote, which was partly on the rebellions, again looked at the Townships. I didn't—I don't think I was trying to contribute or resolve the debate so much, because I was looking at English Canadians. But I think it was a useful contribution in the sense that I showed that it wasn't just French-English, the way Lord Durham argued, you know: "Two nations warring in the bosom of a single state," a famous quote. And the way the nationalist historians tend to depict it: that the Anglos are all kind of pro-British reactionaries, identify them with the British, the merchant class in Montreal and Quebec City. In the Townships, which was a significant population, there were more people living there than there were in Montreal at this time. These people were, again, of American origin. And even though

I've argued that the 1812 War and the missionaries had a big impact in making them more conservative, they still voted up until towards the last few years, before the rebellion, for the Patriotes. And they still had some Patriote sympathizers. And even during the rebellions, there were some skirmishes on the border. So I would argue that most of the people in the Townships were reformers, some of them were radicals, but certainly most of them were on the liberal side. They very much resented the British officials who were imposed on the region and who accumulated a lot of land and so on. No American or American-descended person could get any patronage in the Townships. So there was a lot of—and so there was a potential there for kind of a joining of sides, which went on for a little while. But once the Patriote movement became more radical, and they started talking about independence and revolution or rebellion, then the people in the Townships would not go there, because they would be a small minority in a largely French-Canadian, Catholic. So it was easy to stir up their fears about what would happen if Papineau became king of Lower Canada or whatever. And so in the end, they were willing to join militias. Well, actually, the militias weren't trusted at that time. So most of the fighting was done by British officers. But I would say most people in the Townships were against the rebellion. That does not mean that they weren't part of a larger reform movement or reform impetus in the early 19th century. So I think that moves us away from thinking of the rebellions as a French-English thing exclusively and into one which is more about reform versus stability or status quo.