Unit 7: Video 1 Transcript

Q1: Introduction

A: I'm Jack Little. I teach in the History Department at Simon Fraser University where I've been since 1976. I'm primarily a Quebec historian, 19th century, focusing more on rural than urban society. A social historian, I guess; although I'm doing mostly cultural history as well these days.

My past work has been focused a lot on the Eastern Townships, which is a borderland region I'm interested in because it's where the French and English sort of met in the 19th century, and the Americans and the British and so on. So it's an interesting kind of frontier between these different populations and an area that not many people have done any work on. But more recently, I've moved into a more nationwide topic looking at travelers' narratives in Canada. And all of the work I've done, in a way, religion and gender and so on, I've been interested—perhaps the theme that holds it together is this interest I have in the development of a Canadian identity, or whatever that might be. And what pressures were exercised to create an identity that's distinct from the British and distinct from the Americans. Of course, that's an English-Canadian identity I'm talking about. French-Canadians don't have the same issues with identity.

And so that's why I've gone in different directions, to some extent, looking at this from all angles. And the most recent one, as I said, is travellers' narratives because I'm interested in how outsiders defined or at least described Canadians. Again, I'm mostly working in the 19th century, up to the automobile era. I'd say in World War I is where my work kind of peters-out at the moment. So that gives me a chance to look at the Maritimes, look at each region of the country, which is—and now that I'm nearing the end of my career, something that I think would be a good way to sum it up.

Q2: What role did the War of 1812 play in establishing an English-Canadian identity?

A: Well, I come at the war—I published a book a few years ago looking at the War of 1812 and the Rebellions of 1837–1838 in Lower Canada. And I focused on Eastern Townships because it's an area that has not been—no attention has been paid to it, despite the fact that it was right on the American border. One of the reasons is there was no fighting, or nothing significant any way, in that region for various reasons, either during the war or the rebellions.

But to get onto the war and to stick with the townships for a second and then I'll broaden out, but that was an area settled by Americans after the revolution. Not primarily Loyalists but Americans who came up for land. And so they're settling there in the 1790s, after 1800, and then this war breaks out. And one would expect that they would sympathize with their cousins, their relatives, their neighbours, where they came from across the border. But, in fact, that didn't happen. So I was interested in the war from a social/cultural perspective rather than a military, political one.

And I think, again, the townships is a good study area to look at how the impact of—how it impacted identity. If I switch to Upper Canada for a second, a lot of work has been done by an earlier generation historians, like Syd Wise and so on, who argue that the 1812 War created this kind of Tory Conservative Canadian—well, sensibility or ideology or identity, if you want to call it that, because the family compact kind of emerges out of that. And this myth that Canadians played a major role in defeating or pushing back the Americans developed from that period.

And so I thought that it would be useful to switch because nobody had looked, despite all of the hundreds of books that have been written on the 1812 War, mostly from a military perspective, and many of them, of course, focusing on the United States, to look at what happened on the Lower Canadian side. And I argue that it was a test of, I wouldn't exactly call it loyalty, but in a way I think the people in that region, and I think it's the same for Upper Canada, were neither loyal to the United States nor Britain. In the townships, what they did was they resisted American forays across the border because what was happening was livestock from the New England states was being smuggled across the border towards Montreal to feed the British Army. Because in Vermont and those places, they were against the war to start with, right? And, of course, these people are going to—whatever it takes to make money. And so the Americans fed the British Army, which is the irony. And a lot of that livestock went across the border.

The American military then tries to prevent that from happening. And so you have skirmishes along the border. They cross the border and arrest people who are perhaps helping the Americans. And so there are all of those little skirmishes. But what I found was that when there was a kind of a call for the militia to take up arms, they did so enthusiastically. But when what we would call, I suppose, a conscription was introduced in which each militia unit was supposed to choose a couple of men to go off to St. Johns on the Richelieu [Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu] to fight with the British Army, they absolutely refused.

And so I think what was happening is that they were there to defend their homes. In other words, their world view is very local. Neither British nor American, they just want to protect their families, their farms, their communities. And so if they're asked to join the militia for that purpose, they'll do it. If they're asked to join the militia to do anything outside of their immediate area, they're not interested.

So what does that say about Canadian identity? Well, I think, in a way, it shows that at that period, that early settlement period, it certainly hadn't developed yet. And that there wasn't a strong loyalty to the British either. There's a kind of opportunism. George Sheppard, I think, wrote a book a few years ago, a very interesting book on Upper Canada where he showed that when the Americans invaded and took over York and so on, lots and lots of Upper Canadian men went and turned themselves in as prison—well, gave up because the Americans couldn't put them all in a concentration camp or whatever. So what they did was they made them sign an agreement not to fight for another year. And that's what these men wanted because if they signed that agreement, then the British couldn't make them fight, right? So there was no loyalty to the British or maybe—I mean they probably would've helped to resist invasion in their own communities, but certainly not a sense of participating in kind of a war between two nations. That was not what they were interested in doing.

So that's a long rambling answer, but it's the beginning of an answer. I think, in many ways, it helped create this family compact elite in Upper Canada and helped to start the myth of this Canadian conservative nationalism, if you want to call it that. And I would say even in the Eastern Townships, it's the beginning of that because once you've resisted American attacks and so on, then you—and once you participate in what was a larger event, even if it is only at a local level, I suspect that that brought people a little bit outside their comfort zones in their own rural communities. But that's hard to say.

I mean my—another book I wrote, which was looking at missionaries, British missionaries in the region for the Anglican Church and the Wesleyan Methodist Church argues that those missionaries were key to changing that kind of American identity into a—for lack of a better word, a Canadian one because religion was very important to one's identity, of course, in the early 19th century, to one's whole world view. And these Congregationalists, former Puritans come in from New England, and because they didn't have many missionaries, the 1812 War broke those circuits, those religious circuits between New England and Lower Canada. And any missionary that went across the border would be arrested. So the British missionaries filled that

vacuum. And after the war is over, the Americans are more interested in sending their missionaries westward to their own west. They think of Upper and Lower Canada as hostile territory as a result of the war. So there's that vacuum which the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel out of London for the Church of England and the Wesleyan Missionary Society fill.

When you think about it, they establish Sunday schools. They provide religious services. They build churches. They basically convert. By the middle of the 19th century, 80 percent of the population in that region are either Anglican, most of them Anglican, but a lot of them are Wesleyan Methodist. And those were very conservative missionaries, very anti-American. So I argue that Canadian historians have been very slow to look at religious history and contrast with the United States. Probably because we're a much less religious people than the Americans are. But that if you really want to understand the early 19th century, you have to look at religion. And from a broader perspective, religion plays a very important role.