

## Unit 1: Video 3 Transcript

**Q7: How has your field developed? What are the critical areas of debate or disagreement among historians?**

**A:** So the field of Aboriginal-settler relations has changed dramatically in the last 30 years, I would say. Up until 30 years ago, the dominant motif in the literature was, “Indigenous peoples were uncivilized, and we brought them—‘we’, settlers, Europeans, brought them Christianity. We brought them the rule of law. We brought them government. We broke up the kind of slavery systems that they had in their culture. And they were an inferior people then, and they’re still struggling today, which is explained by the fact that they were inferior people. And we’re doing our best to help them out.” That’s kind of—if you read—picked up a Canadian history book from 1970, that’s more or less what you would see.

Thanks, I think in part to some American land claims that Indigenous peoples started to bring in the States in the 1970s, and then started to ask academics for the help, for the research to prove that they existed, they’d lived there for a long time. That they had traditional practices. Academics started to get more engaged in this field, and I think—they call the literature that’s arisen since then, the “New Indian History.” It’s an American word: New Indian History. And the New Indian History really takes, I guess, Indigenous civilization seriously and as equivalent to European civilization and says two different worlds came together. One of them, in the early days, on this first contact, so we’ll take the Vikings who arrived in 1000. They didn’t survive in North America because they didn’t adapt the Indigenous technology, and they didn’t integrate with the Indigenous population. When Europeans came back again after Columbus in 1500s and 1600s, the ones that survived were the ones that worked with the local Indigenous people until such time as they developed a critical mass and were able to survive on their own. And at that point, when Indigenous peoples, you know, no longer become necessary ally, but become an obstacle to Europeans sort of spreading over the continent, we see a history of conflict.

But the New Indian History takes that perspective. That, in fact rather than bringing civilization to this empty land, this was an act of colonialism and largely, in the big picture, theft. “We’re coming to your land. We say you’re not using it properly. We’re going to take it.” And so the New Ethnohistory, or the New Indian History, I call what’s developed since then the “New Ethnohistory.” Ethnohistory is a merger of historical research, using the documents that are available to us. But they’re not—we don’t have

documents from the Indigenous side. That's a huge problem in the field. So ethnohistory says that we also have to use other methods, which we're going to borrow from ethnology, from anthropology, including oral history and listening—paying attention to the oral legends, oral myths, oral histories from First Nations. And so that's been one of the huge shifts in the field, is that now we actively seek out evidence for what Indigenous people are doing, what they were thinking, how they were responding. And so taking oral history seriously has been a huge shift in the field. Trying to understand how oral history works, because it doesn't work the same way as written history, has been a big feature.

Getting rid of this notion that Indians were at one time kind of “pure Indians” and when Europeans arrived, that there was some—and they borrowed some European technology, that no longer—they're no longer Indians anymore. They're somehow contaminated by that. We've started to appreciate that all cultures are in a process of change and flux. And if Indigenous peoples are no longer “authentic” because they—I don't know, they gave up their furs and are wearing blankets, then Europeans are no longer Europeans because they gave up their heavy longbows and started to use canoes. I mean, cultures are inherently dynamic. Indigenous peoples were borrowing from each other, and we can see archeologically evidence of culture change up and down Aboriginal North America long before Europeans arrived. So Europeans just, in a way, brought an acceleration of cultural change and adaptation. And so the new ethnohistory sees that as not a negative thing, but as an inevitable result of cultures coming together.

And what I think is a really interesting direction in the field now is, we are taking this idea of ethnohistory, this idea of looking at cultures who didn't leave us an oral—or a written record, and which we think are kind of strange and peculiar and their customs are things we have to translate and understand. We're taking that lens and now applying it to the Europeans from the same period and saying, “whoa, geez, those guys were—their Christianity was something that they kind of—you know, it was right front and centre. They saw the world through a spiritual lens too. Everything for many Europeans in the 19th and 18th century was God's will.” Or, and most of us don't think that way now. So to get inside the head of Europeans in that period and through the 19th and early 20th century, I think requires the same kind of skills and techniques that we've been applying, because we thought they were so strange to us, to Indigenous peoples. But there's a realization that Europeans from that era were just as foreign to us, or almost as foreign. And that the records that they left us, which we have—believe to be truthful,

these written letters and diaries and stuff, are no more truthful and no less truthful than the oral histories and stories that are passed down from Indigenous peoples.

So it's an exciting field to be in these days because we're just kind of shifting our views and finding new sources of evidence and rethinking some of the mythologies that surround our nation and our province and even our everyday life.