

Unit 5: Video 1 Transcript

Q3: What role did Aboriginal people have in the economy of the West?

A: I think the most interesting discovery I've made in my research about the history of First Nations and settlers is when Europeans first arrived—well, a couple of things.

First of all, they needed the First Nations to survive. When Europeans arrived, we think they had superior technology, and they did have all kinds of really cool technology that the First Nations really thought was cool and wanted to have. But I don't think we appreciate so much that the First Nations had sophisticated technology which allowed them to live comfortably in all parts of North and South America, including the high Arctic. Europeans couldn't survive without that technology and that knowledge. So I like to think of this as two, if you like, sophisticated civilizations that come together and start to borrow from each other.

So that allows Europeans to establish a foothold in the territory. And what did the Europeans come for? Well, they came for many reasons. To avoid persecution in Europe and start a new life. But to start a new life really means to make a living, right, to make an income. And oftentimes they're hoping to get rich. How do you do that? Well, new land, new resources. And how do you get that resources out? Well, let's just say the fur trade, for example. You need Aboriginal labour. So the history of the settlement of mostly North America, South America is a little different, is the history of Indigenous peoples coming into an engagement with Europe and saying, "We're going to exchange with these Europeans because they have something useful for us that we want to bring into our society."

And so I think the big discovery that I've made, if it is a discovery, as historians, it's hard to say we make discoveries, but in fact we do. We find things that have been lost in the past. Is that Indigenous peoples largely welcomed Europeans into the New World. They welcomed them here, not as superior or not as replacements for themselves, but as people who they could interact with and benefit from. And so there's a way in which the whole economy of Canada, United States too, depended on Indigenous labour in the early days. The fur trade is the most obvious example of that. But my own particular focus is British Columbia. And you take British Columbia—Europeans arrived here relatively late, 18th or late 18th century. They started establishing fur trade posts in the early 20th century—or sorry, early 19th century. And they depended on Aboriginal labour, first for the fur trade,

but then all of the other industries. Whether it was mining, Aboriginal people were the first coal miners. Whether it was fishing, they were the first fisher people and people to work in the fish canneries. Agriculture, they were the agricultural labour force. They helped build the railway. We think of Europeans importing Chinese to build the railway. Well, they did when they ran out of Aboriginal labourers. When they deployed all the native people, they started to hire—bring people in from outside. So there's this pervasive myth in our culture of the "lazy Indian", and that myth of the "lazy Indian" comes from what I was talking about a little bit earlier. We needed these "inferior races" to be "lazy" in order to justify taking their land. But if you look at the historical facts, Indigenous peoples went to work like crazy for the Europeans.

And in the British Columbia case, and all Indigenous groups are different, I think that's one of the kind of realizations of the last few decades, is how diverse Aboriginal North America was. Here Indigenous peoples had this huge incentive to acquire wealth because they—that was how they established status in their own culture. And periodically here on the West Coast they would hold these big feasts we call potlatches now, and they would accumulate enormous amounts of wealth. Staggering amounts of wealth really. For an example, in the 1870s when people earned a few hundred dollars a year, they would give away ten thousand, twenty thousand dollars at these—worth of goods—at these feasts. So they accumulated vast amounts of wealth from these new resource economies, from working and trading in them, and gave it away. Because in their culture, that's how you established your status. Not hoarding wealth, but redistributing wealth. So they had an enormous incentive to go out and work for, with, trade with, the Europeans.

And the kind of social dysfunction and the kind of high levels of unemployment, high levels of welfare dependency that we now associate with First Nations in Canada, is really a phenomenon that doesn't really come into being until the end of the Second War, after the Second World War. So that, if you like, is a kind of area that I research. And I suppose if I have a mission as a scholar, it's to blow up that myth of the "lazy Indian."