

## Unit 5: Video 2 Transcript

**Q5: What have you found out about the early communication between Aboriginal people and the explorers?**

**A:** I'm really interested in the first contact between Europeans and Indigenous peoples. That moment of first contact strikes me as a moment of—well, it's almost a—it is a mythological kind of moment. People who have never seen each other before, encounter each other, sometimes it's a bit of a surprise. Sometimes it's anticipated. But they don't have a common language. They're strange to each other. They're afraid of each other. They're excited about the encounter. So I study these moments of encounter between native people and Europeans to try and find out, well, lots of things.

But I guess the theme that I'm most interested in is communication. How did they communicate with each other? What kind of miscommunications happened? And I guess I have this belief that in those early years of contact, there were a lot of miscommunication, and some of those miscommunications sort of become sedimented into our relationship between each other. And I think in some ways still affect our relationship today. So when Europeans first encountered Indigenous peoples, they brought with them some stereotypes already—because they had encountered Indigenous peoples around the globe—that they brought with them. But every group was different. So it was—every group had some surprises. But they saw Indigenous peoples through a lens of the enlightenment. This is the late 18th century, so Captain Cook arrives here in 1786—1776, and the Spanish are here a few years before. So they have this kind of enlightenment notion that—it's a Christian notion. "God has created the world. He's created all kinds of marvels, and he's created Indigenous people." But it's—there is a couple of theories going on about whether Indigenous peoples were created in the same creation as Adam and Eve, or some kind of separate and inferior creation. But in any case, these European explorers were—had this ethos that these were souls that could potentially be Christianized. And they had to be—they should be treated, if not respectfully, at least paternalistically. Indigenous peoples hadn't encountered Europeans before, and they lived in a world of spirit and where they didn't see a huge difference between the spiritual world and the physical world. They understood those two things much more as integrated than we do now. And so when these strange ships with strange coloured men wearing strange clothes arrived, they first interpreted them through a spirit world and thought these might be dead ancestors returning. Or they might be just incarnations of some other spiritual

creatures that they're familiar with in their world. And so those interesting moments of kind of terror, and excitement, enthusiasm, I can see them happening in different encounters up and down the coast, are really quite interesting because it allows us to see how profoundly different these two worlds were.

And the potential for violence and collision was certainly there. But in general, that didn't happen. In general these were peaceful encounters of people trying to feel each other out. Trying to understand each other. Trying to communicate across no common language. And then they often used the language of trade as a way of kind of establishing relationships. So I've written a book on this sort of period which I call, *Makuk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations*. And "makuk" is a word from the West Coast of Vancouver Island, from the Nuu-chah-nulth people, which means—well, it means lots of things actually. But it meant "let's trade" and that was the first word that Captain Cook heard or recorded in his diary: "makuk". And it becomes sedimented into this relationship because native people and Europeans developed a kind of a common pidgin language. A kind of a trade language, a really simplistic language. We call it now, we call it "Chinook jargon." But it incorporated these words they first learned at Friendly Cove, including makuk, which in their language means to trade, to buy, to sell, to exchange. Any kind of interaction is makuk. So that seemed to be a kind of a theme, and that's why I called my book *Makuk*.

So Europeans and Indigenous peoples are trading over the side of the ship. They're trying to figure each other out. It doesn't take Indigenous peoples too long to figure out that these Europeans aren't exactly spiritual creatures. But in their world, everybody has some kind of spirit power. And these Europeans must have had some kind of heavy duty spirit power that allowed them to bring all this iron, and copper, and guns and—by the 18th century the Europeans had quite sophisticated metallurgy. So the Indigenous peoples, I think—and this is something we don't understand about those early years sufficiently, they knew Europeans weren't gods. They knew Europeans weren't—after a short encounter at least, weren't spirits themselves. But they knew Europeans, like everybody, had spirit power and they wanted to get some of that spirit power. They wanted to know where it came from. They wanted to benefit from it. And so hence when missionaries arrived and said, "Hey, we're going to teach you about our spirit power," Indigenous peoples were open to that. They wanted to— "Hey, these guys—." In the Indigenous world, the spirit power was tightly guarded, and you didn't talk about it. You might perform it in a dance at special occasions or

whatever, but you just—it was sort of—you would, in a way you'd jinx it if you spoke about it out loud. So these Europeans were willing to share that spirit power, teach their power of songs, the Christian songs. And so—but, you know, for a century after contact, I believe, and this puts me out kind a bit of on a limb in my—among my colleagues, Indigenous peoples still tried to figure out what that spirit power Europeans had. And so that whole period of communication and then the misunderstandings that were built in, partly that spirit power misunderstanding.

But partly I think this profound misunderstanding on the part of Europeans about this idea of superiority in race. Those things get built—almost hard wired into our relationships, and it's taken us two centuries to start to kind of crack away at that sediment and open that up.