

## Unit 1: Video 2 Transcript

**Q5: What are the strengths, limitations, and challenges of your research sources?**

**A:** Students of Indigenous–settler relations in the pre-Confederation period typically rely on three sets of sources. On the one hand, we have the documentary record left, for the most part, by Europeans themselves. And these could be explorers’ journals. These could be the reports of a missionary. These could be the account books of a trader. This could be the correspondence of a colonial official. So we have all these records preserved in archives in Europe and also in North America.

We also have the archaeological record, which is interpreted, for historians at least, by the specialist, the archaeologists. And so this gives us great insight into things like settlement patterns of both Indigenous groups and Europeans. Population change and material culture. The trick is, of course, that the archaeological record is in many ways mute about what people were thinking or feeling, what their plans were, what their hopes were. So we have to infer those sometimes or try to infer those from the material remains that people have left behind. And that’s an immense challenge for archaeologists and for historians. Interpreting archaeological analyses, it’s even more difficult.

And then a final set of sources that we can rely on are oral traditions and oral histories. For the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries these are few in number. And for many First Nations today, those eras are not foregrounded in the present day oral tradition. Or at least the specific events of those eras are not prominent in the oral traditions. Nevertheless, those sources are very valuable because they give us a sense of an Indigenous perspective on early contact. So one great example of those are 19th century Anishinaabeg traditions, oral traditions, about the arrival of French and English traders in the Great Lakes region. And whereas French and English documentary records really highlight the action of the Europeans in exploring and pushing further into undiscovered areas and mapping new territories and encountering new peoples, the Anishinaabeg oral tradition reverses the situation. And instead, in different traditions, Anishinaabe shamans or Elders foresee the arrival of Europeans, that is. And in some cases go out to find them and bring them to their villages, to their homelands. In other words, it’s—in many ways it’s the Anishinaabe who discover the French and the English rather than the reverse. And the same oral traditions also give us a sense of how those early encounters were remembered afterwards.

Sometimes there's an element of humour in them. Humour, perhaps the appearance of the Europeans themselves who look strange, and dressed oddly, and had hair on their faces, and things like that. Sometimes humour directed at Indigenous tellers of these traditions themselves. In other words, listeners of these stories would be encouraged to see the humour in their ancestors seeing a gun for the first time and being astonished at the rapport. Or not knowing what to do with an axe head, and instead of putting it on a— instead of hafting it and using to cut down a tree, they would wear it around their neck as a necklace. Things like that. Those elements of misunderstanding, early misunderstanding, which were recorded as being humorous moments.

And sometimes these oral traditions also include cautionary elements. They might point—and again, these are—because traditions are—oral traditions are kept alive because they are useful in the present. Some of these traditions encode information about the potential duplicity of Europeans, asking for a little bit of land, for example, but then taking a much larger piece of land. And so these oral traditions preserved for First Nations a sense of caution in dealing with the newcomers.

So those are three sets of sources. So they're all important, equally important. Certainly the strength of the documentary record is its specificity. Documents can put specific people in specific places at exact times. And so they allow us to construct a chronology of encounters, and we can understand how relationships developed over time. How they broke down. When conflict began. How conflict was ended, and so on and so forth. The limitation of course of the documentary record is that it's completely one-sided. It's partial in both senses of the word. It's only part of the story, and it's also partial because it's—it embraces all the biases and the prejudices of the European observers. Some of whom, as we know, saw Indigenous peoples as primitive, as lacking culture, lacking religion, lacking civilization. So that's a severe limitation of that source. Already mentioned some of the limitations of the archaeological record. And as far as the oral tradition goes, its principal limitation is just that it's—there are so few that relate to early periods of contact.