

## Unit 4: Video 1 Transcript

**Q2: How were Aboriginal peoples depicted in early English and French travel writing?**

**A:** The focus of my work on depiction of Indigenous peoples, First Nations, in early English and French travel writing has been on the ways in which early explorers and colonizers saw Indigenous leaders, and how they understood the way that native societies were organized politically.

And one of the things that I found fascinating was that in the 16th century, in the wake of Spanish colonization in the Caribbean and in Mesoamerica, Mexico, and in parts of South America, the Andes region, French and English colonizers appropriated some of the vocabulary that these earlier Spanish colonizers had used to describe Indigenous societies. And in principle—or in particular, they saw First Nations as being monarchies under the rule of kings. And since tendency was widespread—it wasn't a—it wasn't universal. But in many different places where English and French explorers and colonizers went, and this is everywhere from the Arctic, Frobishers' voyages in search of the Northwest Passage, in Virginia, the French in Brazil, and to some degree also in Eastern Canada in the St. Lawrence Valley, French and English observers saw Indigenous societies as monarchies. And they labelled their leaders as kings. And this was significant, because if you understood a society as being organized in this way, it meant you had certain assumptions about how that society worked, how politics worked. It meant in particular that colonizers wanted to deal with the person they saw as "the king." That's obviously the most important person in a monarchy, and making the deal with the king, or an arrangement with the king, was an excellent way to sort of establish political relationship. It also was a mechanism for establishing colonial control.

One way to absorb new lands within an expanding empire was to create vassal kings out of existing monarchs. So, for example, the Spanish colonizer Cortez wanted to make the Aztec king or emperor a vassal of Cortez's Prince Charles V. Similarly in the St. Lawrence Valley, French explorers are tempted to make the Indigenous leaders of the villages up and down the St. Lawrence Valley between Quebec and Montreal, between what are now Quebec and Montreal, vassals of the French king, Francis I. In Virginia, the Jamestown settlers also wanted to make the local Indigenous leader, Powhatan, a vassal of their king, James I. So this was a common reflex to understand First Nations as monarchies and their leaders as kings.

One of the problems with this classification was that it didn't correspond very well with the reality of Indigenous politics throughout much of the Americas. There certainly were leaders, but there were often multiple leaders. Many—in many of these societies, leaders were not, sort of, born into that role. They acquired that position through a combination of persuasion, good oratory, setting a good example. They weren't really monarchs. And leadership tended to be somewhat decentralized, and certainly the sons or children of these leaders did not automatically succeed to their parents. So in practice, the classification of First Nations as monarchies and their leaders as kings by Europeans, it created a superficial rapport. It allowed for a superficial rapport. But in some ways it also undermined good relations, especially when Europeans tried to meddle in monarchical politics.

In my view, studying the relationship between Indigenous peoples and settlers and colonizers in the—from the earliest contact, is really studying the foundations of Canada itself. So much of what Canada is today is built on the legacy of those early relationships. Sometimes we don't always acknowledge this in our collective memory. But important alliances, treaties, relationships between various First Nations groups and the French and the English, really made modern Canada what it is today. And this is very clear if we step back a bit and look at a continental perspective and we compare Indigenous—and contrast, Indigenous-settler relationships in Canada with those in the United States, those in Mexico in the same period. We can see that the colonial era shaped in many ways the three nation states that would ultimately emerge on the North American continent, Canada, the US, and Mexico. And the types of societies that live within those three—within the borders of those three nations are in many ways the result of encounters or patterns set up from the earliest times.