

Unit 5: Video 2 Transcript

Q6: What is the most important thing a first year student can take away from history courses?

A: If I were teaching a course on Indigenous–settler relations in the pre-Confederation period, one of the first points I would make to students is that even while we’re using terms or categories like “Indigenous” and “settler” for convenience, those categories of course conceal and in some ways obscure the vast diversity within both of those groups. So Indigenous nations across Canada represent a great deal of cultural diversity, different beliefs, different religions, and different patterns of social organization. Of course different languages. Different ways of viewing the world and ways of relating to it. So—and to each other. So it’s important to, even as we look at Indigenous–settler relations generally, to understand in each case the specificity of the First Nations culture involved. And the same thing holds true for the category settlers. It’s—there’s no one “settler”. There are many different sort of types: military officers, explorers, scientists, missionaries, merchants, or traders. And so each of these types, I guess, relates to—might relate to Indigenous peoples in a different way.

And another point I would stress is that for the studying encounters in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, I think it’s worthwhile reflecting that both the various Indigenous groups involved and the various incoming settlers or colonizers, both these groups are very remote from us. Even if we might be tempted to see affinities with one or the other group based on our own place in Canadian society, people of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, whether they were Mohawk, or Spanish, or Ojibwe, or French, are very distant from us. Times—a lot has changed over 300 years. And so it—part of what we have to do to understand those early encounters is to reconstruct, to kind of appreciate, the backgrounds from which people came, the things they took for granted. The things they believed in. The way they saw the world. And so that—so I guess one point would be to be wary of easy assumptions about people who on one level might look similar to us. Might seem to share some of our values. But at other levels can be remarkably, even radically different. And that difference is something that we want to understand, that we want to respect, not judge. And as historians, it’s one of the marvellous things we can do, is to understand the very different ways people had of being human in the past. Ways which may not exist today or may exist in revised or new ways.