

Unit 8: Video 1 Transcript

Q3: What animals were introduced to Canada, and how did that effect colonization?

A: So there are some parts of North America where European domestic livestock did very well. And like certain plants and certain diseases, they were novel species to the North American environment.

What's interesting and unique about North America prior to European colonization is that there were actually very few domestic animals, some birds, like turkeys, and dogs. There were no cows. There were no domesticated horses. There were no chickens. There were no pigs. These are animals that are quite ordinary today, but in the 1600s and in the 1700s in some parts of North America, they were completely unknown. It would be like introducing a space alien into this environment. So in certain parts of North America, these animals thrived. The ecological conditions are highly conducive to opportunist animals, like pigs, for example. They can populate in huge numbers and spread and thrive and, again, provide a kind of food foundation for human colonists to then spread and thrive in North American environments.

Canada was a little bit different. There were some parts of Canada where this happened quite well, like in Southern Ontario, in the more agriculturally productive parts of the Southern Ontario peninsula. And then in other parts of Canada, animals didn't do so well. In the St. Lawrence Valley in Quebec, for example, French colonists were able to establish small populations of domestic livestock, but not the very large herds that would later be established in parts of the eastern seaboard of the United States. And this makes Canada's colonial experience, I think, a little bit different. The agricultural economies of what becomes Quebec and Ontario develop in different ways from American colonies because of some of these ecological limits to the spread of livestock, I think. And then as we look out West, European livestock don't begin to thrive in substantial numbers until the railway is built, because the transfer of those animals was incredibly difficult before the railway was built. And so you have a kind of confluence of technology and biology transforming the ecosystems of Western Canada in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century in ways that weren't possible before those technologies compressed time and space by making it easier to ship hundreds of cattle into the West via rail, rather than having to walk them there in large herds.

Q4: Describe the Red River cattle population.

A: It's some stuff that's come out of my new research on Red River. I had anticipated seeing something very similar to like Chesapeake or New England where colonists introduced cattle, horses, and pigs and they just flourish out of control. But this doesn't happen in Red River, in part because of climatic limitations on the ability for free-range livestock husbandry. Cattle that go astray tend to not come back. Tend to kind of disappear and die. Either they're preyed upon by predators, or they freeze to death over the winters. And so the colonists at Red River had an incredibly difficult time establishing a cattle population. The colony first established in 1812, or the first colonists arrive in 1812. There's a war between the Northwest Company and the Hudson's Bay Company that obviously makes it a little bit difficult to establish an agricultural colony, but they don't have a reproducing herd of cattle until the 1830s. There's several attempts to bring cattle up from Missouri that fail because they freeze on the way up. And the sustaining population, even by the 1840s, is so small and miniscule, it's not until the railway's completed later in the 19th century that you start to see the kind of cattle explosion across the prairies. It's really interesting. I thought I'd find the opposite.

Q5: Is there anything else you want to tell us about the biota transfer from Europe to North America?

A: Thinking about the transfer of biota from Europe to North America helps tie together different regions of Canada, because it's an experience that's common across the areas of Canada that Europeans and their descendants settled. So whether we're talking about Acadia, or we're talking about the St. Lawrence Valley, or we're talking about the northwest coast in Vancouver Island, similar processes occurred at different times. So if we're looking at the St. Lawrence Valley, we're talking about the 17th century. If we're looking at Vancouver Island, we're talking mainly about the 19th century. But that process of introducing novel plants, and animals, and diseases occurred in very similar fashions. And so I think it ties the experiences of colonialism across Canada in ways that we could think about the experience of the Nuu-chah-nulth in Vancouver Island being common, to some extent, to the experience of the Wendat in southern Ontario.