

Unit 3: Video 1 Transcript

Q2: What distinguishes Newfoundland's history before 1867?

A: Newfoundland has a history that is in some respects, I think, similar to Canada's, but in some respects quite different as well. Even the date, 1867, really is not that significant to Newfoundlanders. It doesn't have the same kind of meaning that it does for Canadians. Eighteen sixty-seven, obviously the big year of Confederation for four provinces and others falling into Confederation shortly after that. But Newfoundland was outside of that until 1949. Not to say, now, that there weren't some overtures and in the 1860s a couple of representatives from Newfoundland did go up with the Canadians and have discussions. Frederick Carter and Anne Brochet. It was a really difficult time in Newfoundland, though. There was an economic recession, and Newfoundland had the same kinds of suspicions, I think, about becoming part of this federation that could be very sort of oriented towards the centre, as perhaps other Maritime areas did at that period.

And so yeah, they came back to Newfoundland all gung-ho about joining Confederation, but the anti-Confederates won the day. And there's a rhyme that we used to say actually, when we were kids, and that will tell you how long this sort of sense of these two guys being somewhat—they were trying to betray Newfoundland. It goes, "Remember the day when Carter and Shea went over the way to barter away the rights of Terra Nova." So that's in my memory, my cultural memory. So yeah, that hung around for a long time.

But as I say, 1949 probably our Confederation date, very late in the game. So we did a lot of sort of moving along on our own speed, I'd say. We actually—in terms of I think differences in our history, well, we do have a past with Indigenous peoples that is complicated, just as in other parts of North America. We, sadly, are the only place though that actually had an Indigenous group actually be erased from the face of the earth, and that was the Beothuks. So I mean, we have Innu and Inuit, Mi'kmaq in the Southwest, and the Beothuk who were in—mostly in the northeast coast. And what happened to them is debated. Some people say they were deliberately exterminated by Europeans, particularly English settlers. There were some skirmishes between them and English settlers, especially trappers, over trap lines and whatnot. So that certainly did happen. But I think primarily what you're looking at is them moving away from European activity, and therefore moving away from the coastline where the Europeans were. And that cut them off from their coastal resources. And they really, essentially, virtually starved to death in the interior, and this made them susceptible to disease.

There was no, you know, campaign to exterminate them. No deliberate policy. And actually as they were sort of reducing to final numbers, they— colonial authorities actually tried to help in the way the colonial authorities helped in those days, by bringing them in and trying to nurse and educate. But it was too late. So that's a very, very sort of sad and tragic moment, I think, in Newfoundland's history.

But European presence, again, there was a—for Newfoundland, the big game in town and really the only game in town for a long, long time was the fishery. So you have an international fishery taking place off the island. You've got Portuguese, Basques from Spain, France. You've got England. All of them wanting to take advantage of the wonderful opportunities in terms of fishing for cod in particular off Newfoundland. The English were the only ones who actually needed a ground base. The other countries did a lot of heavy salting and brought the fish back to Europe "green", as we'd say, not dried at all. But the English did a different kind of cure. So they had less salt. So they lightly salted and dried the fish on the shore. So that's how the English got their foothold in there.

They also would pick up Irish fishing servants and cheap provisions for the fishery. So you've got this big industry coming out from the west of England, or the West Country, as it was called, coming out to Newfoundland in the spring of the year. There would be big fishing boats with smaller boats on board for people to fish from. There'd be big set boats that would take provisions, and they would bring the fish to market at the end of the season. And they all came out, and eventually a naval escort came with them. So it was quite a scene. They would arrive at the end of the spring and set up their premises. Build their shorefront premises. Do their fishing, dry it on shore, and then later in the fall it would all go back to market. And the fishers would go home.

What happened, of course, there was no real sort of property rights. There were no property rights. There were no sort of legal trappings in Newfoundland at the time. So you went off in the fall, when you came back in the spring, somebody else might be set up where you had been the year before. So people started leaving winter crews behind. Eventually some people started to stay, and a resident fishery began to sort of form. And for a while the resident fishery and the migratory fishery went hand in hand. There's a sense that the West Country merchants didn't like the settlers and wanted to get them off the island. That did happen for a while, and they were a very strong lobby in England and successfully in the late 17th century, lobbied the English government to keep them away. But eventually the West

Country merchants themselves thought, well, “This is great. They do stay and protect the premises. We can provision them, and take their fish back to market. This will all work out fine.” So they were on board, but the English government and soon-to-be British government, really, didn’t want the centre of that big fishery to move out of the west of England.

So they were much slower to allow settlement to happen or to even encourage it. But it trickled along anyway, and as the migratory fishery ran into difficulties in the 18th century, because there was constantly warfare. Anybody who has studied North American history will know this. It was usually European warfare that played out on this side of the ocean as well. But migratory ships coming back and forth—very vulnerable to enemy attack and whatnot. So the resident fishery grew stronger and stronger as the migratory declined. So then you have this population that are there. What are you going to do with them? So they did start to allow different forms of sort of courts and governance. But it wasn’t until 1825 that Newfoundland was declared an official colony of Britain. So for the longest, longest time, Britain, or England and then Britain, thought of Newfoundland as just this big fishing station where people came and went. There’s a lovely quote about it being a giant ship moored off the Great—the Grand Banks. The Grand Banks being the big, big fishing ground off Newfoundland, off the south coast. So you can imagine, then, how differently things evolved there in terms of settlement and demographic patterns, the economy, the political life of the place. Very much—not keeping apace of the mainland colonies at all.