

Unit 13: Video 1 Transcript

Q4: What is James Teit's importance in the history of British Columbia?

A: James Teit entered my life—again, as a graduate student when I was wandering through these communities, listening to songs and stories. I actually think way back when to when I started to investigate the landscape of others who had maybe done some similar work, and I actually landed on a treasure trove. This young Shetlander who arrived at Spences Bridge in 1884 and spent, until he died in 1922, just immersed in that culture. Not just as an outside researcher, but as a—as one who hunted and one who married into the local Indigenous community. One who just had this infinite curiosity for how do they use their plants? What are—when I hunt with them, what are they doing? What are things like the sweathouse traditions? Where do their beliefs lie? What are their stories? What is their connection to this—long-term connection to this place? He recorded hundreds of songs. And I was initially interested in songs with masses of field notes, and all the local people at Spences Bridge involved in this song project named—it was a treasure trove for me. But he also worked with an anthropologist who was based in New York who became what they call the “Father of American Anthropology,” Franz Boas. So there's sort of this really neat connection to New York City, as this big larger-than-life figure, who gains a larger-than-life reputation, really draws heavily on this little local Shetlander, who ended up in British Columbia. Big-game hunting, travelling, working with the Native people. Always really socialist consciousness. Who, from 1908 until he died in 1922, took on political advocacy work. Taking Chiefs off to Victoria and Ottawa because the land issue was really, really heated then. They had no one to trans—they were all monolingual in their own languages. They didn't speak English. He was one of the only ones who could not only translate, but knew the messages that they wanted to convey and could really get those across. So one of our major political activists for that time.

So I'm arguing, I have been arguing and will argue in this book, which is almost finished, that really we have one of the most outstanding, most progressive, most ahead of his times, ethnographer anthropologists in North America who has been almost completely overlooked. You won't find him in the indices of major histories of anthropology. Just doesn't exist. So that's a very nice hook, a very nice lede for me. And just the depth of all of this ethnography is so—I've been fortunate because in addition to these contemporary voices and perspectives, I have this layer of voices and perspectives from the 19—from 1895, from 1900, from 1912. Named sources,

recorded sources, hundreds of stories, place names, the right political head space. You know, he rejected traditional organized Western religion. He just came in with the right head space, right political consciousness. So what he recorded fits so well with how I like to sort of see things. So for me, I have the perfect backdrop. So he informs a lot of what I write about, what I have written about and what I do in my courses. It's just wonderful to have that.

So much of the turn-of-the-century anthropology was written sometimes by people with a progressive understanding of things, but not with the contemporary understanding and the passion for just the hardship and the—just how the colonization process had affected these people and how their rightful situation—. For most of the anthropologists this was all dead. They were dying. They were gone. So you reach back to this pre-contact sanitized, so-called “past” and retrieve what you can. That's never been my approach. What I love about Harry Robinson in the contemporary times is he speaks to the present so beautifully. When you're looking for his reach into 500 years ago, you'll sort of find that. But much more. It's 19th and 20th century and 21st century connection. And for Teit, it really was connected with his present, and the hard times of the present, and the injustices of the present. So his ethnography has that all through it. We don't have anthropology for North America, for the turn of the 20th century, that mirrors that or matches that in any way. So in that sense, I've been so fortunate to land on an archival source that's unlike any of its kind for my region and also for all these contemporary voices.

And I haven't even mentioned the wonderful layer of published historians of British Columbia that have also aided this project. Wonderful work by Cole Harris. Wonderful work by John Lutz, my colleague. Adele Perry, the list goes on and on. For the region that I work in, Keith Smith, who works on the politics of the region. Just really, really great, I would say, new work in British Columbia that I can also draw on that's—Daniel Clayton, who's done work on post-colonial theory as applied to our region. Just really, really important historical sources, secondary sources. Historians, my own colleagues, who have really helped me also with just the right approach to what I'm looking at. And then this great archival base and these Indigenous voices. It makes for almost a completely perfect package for somebody like myself.