

Unit 13: Video 2 Transcript

Q5: What is the value of history in our society?

A: Well, the value of history in society today—as one who teaches undergraduates at the university level, I’m always shocked at how little they know. They’ve come out of Grade 12 Social Studies, and some have had really progressive teachers who really happen to be into the province in some way. But a lot of—I’m not—I haven’t really dug into the British Columbia high-school curriculum, but I often find they’re quite surprised. Oh, and some naturally don’t know because they come from Ontario, or elsewhere, or the United States. But I’m always surprised at how little they know about our amazing province. And so I really like to feel that when they’ve come away from this, and I—

One comment left just last week, I really liked—she was a—come from—I teach environmental studies as well, and they all have a double major. So many aren’t history students. They’re biology, and geography, and political science. And one is in her fourth year and she came away sort of thinking, “Oh, I missed the boat. I really wish that I had become a history major.” I thought, “Well, we missed the boat by missing you.” Because I think we really do, in this department, feel the value of how can you understand the one percent and the ninety-nine percent argument in British Columbia, which is being floated here in North America, if you don’t understand people complaining about that in 1910. The hope in 1910 that there’d be a revolution because too much wealth was in the hands of too few people. And that we are built on a working class, pretty gendered, male-gendered population, with resource extraction at the forefront leading the way, from the fur trade to the gold rush, to the building of railroads and improving travel infrastructure, so we could then get at the minerals and all the rest of it. With Indigenous people being trashed along the way. I love Cole Harris’s—you know, we have this idea that we have to see this province as—in terms of settlement and resettlement. It’s dispossession and repossession. It’s those two terms. If we can leave students really walking away thinking, “I’m going to walk through my province, feeling that I am—” there’s a settler component and there’s an Indigenous component. We have to understand how those two components were worked and reworked through the last two centuries.

And it bothers me even when I wander through the community, in an office not long ago where somebody saw me reading something related to what I do. And “Oh, you do British Columbia history.” “Oh, yes.” And this was an elderly woman who’d lived here for quite a long time. “What an interesting

topic," she said. And I said, "Yeah, it is really." "Can you suggest a book that I might read to learn more about it?" And she's living in my neighbourhood in Central Saanich and I'm thinking, "Gosh, where do I start?" Isn't this sad? Why aren't we all sort of consuming this good literature? It's not all—maybe because it's published by academic presses. But I think that many of us write—I would think that John Lutz's *Makuk*, for example, should be a book that people can read. That he certainly aims at for and does public talks around it. I know he wants to draw in the local public readership. But I certainly write with that in view. Anything I've published, I like to think that it's not going to be just aimed at a little collection of specialized readers. It bothers me that it's not more out there. And I came away thinking, maybe Cole Harris's *Making Native Space*, which is the history of reserve making in our province. That's what I suggested to her. And another book that he wrote prior to that called, *The Resettlement of British Columbia*. I thought that kind of covers some important chapters of our history in a way that the average reader could embrace. But I was just mentioning Chad Reimer's new book on the historiography of this province. Just how does the history get written and told? And when you go to the library and you see these—collection after collection after collection dealing with Canadian history, how do we read them? How do—I think read them with a critical eye. See what the Victorians and the Edwardians were thinking when they were first settling our region. How were they thinking about it? And how were they thinking about presenting its history at that time? That's, to me, really quite fascinating. And how has it changed over the decades? So when you dip into what our young historians, newer historians are writing now, I just hope that it's exciting. Adele Perry, *On The Edge of Empire*, really important way to think of British Columbia as settled by these collections of mostly 20-year-olds coming from all over the world and landing in little communities like Spences Bridge where none of them—they were Japanese. They were Italian. They were Shetlanders who could hardly speak English in a way that it was—in a dialect that could be understood. They were some Americans, some French, all with—they were—these were their first languages. All huddled together there, trying to sort of figure out where they were and where they were going to go, and how this was going to serve them or not. It's a fascinating story.