

Unit 3: Jack Little: Question 9 - Canadian Forest Conservation Movement

Introduction

A: I'm Jack Little. I teach in the History Department at Simon Fraser University where I've been since 1976. I'm primarily a Quebec historian, 19th century, focusing more on rural than urban society. A social historian, I guess, although I'm doing mostly cultural history as well these days. My past work has been focused a lot on the Eastern Townships, which is a borderland region I'm interested in because it's where the French and English sort of met in the 19th century and the Americans and the British and so on. So it's an interesting kind of frontier between these different populations and an area that not many people have done any work on. But more recently, I've moved into more nationwide topic looking at travelers' narratives in Canada. And all of the work I've done, in a way, religion and gender and so on, I've been interested-- perhaps the theme that holds it together is this interest I have in the development of a Canadian identity or whatever that might be and what pressures were exercised to create an identity that's distinct from the British and distinct from the Americans. Of course, that's an English-Canadian identity I'm talking about. French-Canadians don't have the same issues with identity. And so that's why I've gone in different directions, to some extent, looking at this from all angles. And the most recent one, as I said, is travelers' narratives because I'm interested in how outsiders defined or at least described Canadians. Again, I'm mostly working in the 19th century, up to the automobile era, I'd say in World War I is where my work kind of peters out at the moment. So that gives me a chance to look at the Maritimes, look at each region of the country, which is-- and now that I'm nearing the end of my career, something that I think would be a good way to sum it up.

Q: How did the Canadian forest conservation movement originate?

A: The forest conservation movement, as a movement, starts in the 1880s I would say. And that's when you have American Forestry Association-- I'm sorry, I'm forgetting some of the names of them and their Canadian equivalents are being established. And what's interesting is Canadians are involved with this as early as the Americans are. And that there is a -- it's kind of a joint force. Canadians are going to American meetings and

becoming officials in American Forestry Associations. It's a result of the fact that lumber logs are disappearing, right. I mean the first wave was the square timber industry, until the 1840s, let's say. So all of those big white pines in the Ottawa Valley and so on are kind of cut over. And then you've got a sawmilling industry, which is a result of railway construction, which can support-- the square timber was floated down the river and then loaded onto wooden sailing ships and taken to Liverpool in England. When that industry dies out, the sawmill industry replaces it. So it's much more decentralized. Lumber is created in the colony, in the province, rather than in England where it's sawed up. And so that's a huge boost to the lumber economy. It means that smaller trees can be cut and so on. By the 1880s, those trees were beginning to disappear as well because there's no reforestation. There's no conservation, per se. And so the lumber lords, as we call them, in Ottawa Valley, in particular, were concerned about this. And they start forming these associations to try to preserve lumber. And a lot of it is directed against colonization, which I was talking about earlier. They argue that these colonists moving into inferior land are causing forest fires or they're actually false colonists and trespassing on their timber limits, that sort of thing. Forest fires are big. I mean it's not just about colonists. They're also arguing that hunters and fishermen are being irresponsible and causing these fires and creating a lot of problems. I wouldn't say tree planting has really -- is not seen as possible yet. That doesn't happen until the 20th century. So it's more a question of trying to preserve timber and let it regenerate naturally. And Joly de Lotbiniere, who I wrote my biography of, is a key figure right from the beginning, partly because his father was from France. And they were much more advanced, of course, in forest conservation in Europe, having fewer trees, than we were in North America. So when he becomes a seigneur, he begins to introduce-- he applies these methods, in which he does not clear cut, as we say nowadays, there's limited cutting each year. And I suppose younger trees are left to regenerate and so on. And well, he was very much against hemlock-- cutting hemlock for creating tannic acid, for example, which devastated large areas; would not allow that to happen on his land. So yes, and I think Joly de Lotbiniere when he became lieutenant governor of British Columbia in 1900 was influential here as well because he brings some of those ideas west. And he is very interested, for example, in preventing the

exporting of raw logs to the United States, which Quebec and Ontario and then later British Columbia introduces to keep manufacturing within the provinces themselves. So I argue that he influenced Premier McBride who introduced a lot of these measures and British Columbia profits greatly by the lumber industry as a result of that. Well, partly because the demand was increasing, but also because more jobs were created here. And, of course, we've moved away from that in recent years, our exports of raw logs. But in the early 20th century, that was forbidden most places

Yeah. I mean in many ways, it doesn't have that big an impact because I mean even when I moved here in the 1970s, huge clear cuts taking place, right? So forest conservation is not one of those things that has an overnight success. But it's interesting that the people who were behind forest conservation are not what we would call ecologists today. They were the forest entrepreneurs themselves, in their own economic self-interest. But some of those guys in the Ottawa Valley move out here and they start the lumber industry here, for example, in Port Coquitlam, Fraser Mills. I mean that is an Ottawa Valley mill, and that is the largest mill in the world for some time. And they bring French-Canadians in to work those mills from the Ottawa Valley. So that's also-- this conversation is one response to forest depletion in the east, but shifting your operation to the west coast is another response.