

Unit 2: Video 2 Transcript

Q: What are the main themes in pre- and post-Confederation history of Atlantic Canada?

A: My main themes don't really relate to the before and after Confederation because of course the shipping industry preceded Confederation and lasted after Confederation. And this is so often true of social and economic history. It doesn't fit neatly within the political temporal framework, does it? The main theme really is, what was the place of that shipping industry in the economy? It used to be argued that the shipping industry was-- and shipbuilding too, take them together, they were really important to the economy of Atlantic Canada. It was a golden age. And then the golden age collapsed and disappeared. The loss of the shipping industry was a critical loss, a disaster for the region. Well, these are old myths, stereotypes. It turns out that the shipping industry was certainly very important to the region, but it wasn't nearly as important as some other historians previous, mainly popular histories, had alleged. And the old idea that the shipping industry declined because it was wooden sailing ships and wooden sailing ships became obsolete, therefore the industry declined, that's just question begging. It's a technological determinism. It doesn't answer the question at all. It simply raises the bigger question, why didn't they build and invest in steel hulled, iron, steel steamships? They did, some of them. So it's a much more complicated and much more interesting question. It turns out that the shipping industry declined because ship owners and merchants in the Maritimes particularly, decided that there were better investments elsewhere, particularly elsewhere in Canada. Railways, factories, cotton mills, woollen mills, sugar refineries, they're a better investment than ships, whether they were wooden or iron hulled. Whether they were sail or steam. So it was a complex series of decisions. It was not a technological inevitability. When I began my research on Atlantic Canada and on the shipping industry, the big issue for historians of the region was, why did the Maritime Provinces and Newfoundland, why did they fare so poorly in the economy, in the 20th century particularly? Lower per capita incomes. Higher unemployment. Slower economic growth. What was the cause of this relative disparity in the

Maritime region and Atlantic Canada as a whole? It was a really tough, tough question. So what we were doing was trying to fit the shipping industry into that bigger story, and so to contribute to perhaps a better explanation for why the region suffered relative economic decline after a very promising start in Confederation, we have to remember that manufacturing industry was present in the Maritime provinces in the 1870's, 1880's. Many thought that it was going to become the workshop of the Dominion. Didn't quite turn out that way. The answers are sometimes that the resource base of the region was too weak. They didn't have enough coal. They didn't have enough iron ore. They didn't have a large enough population. Those answers are a little bit too simplistic. The bigger picture would fit in, for instance, Canada's national policies, and particularly the tariffs and also the various ways of support that the federal government gave to industry. And it's often been argued, and there is some truth to this, that the policies were disadvantageous to the Maritime regions and were more beneficial to Ontario and Quebec particularly. But it's still a very complicated debate, and it's not really been settled in my view.