

Unit 10: Ruth Sandwell: How has Canada differed from other countries in its energy use since the 1800's?

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A: One of the things that I've discovered in my research on energy is a set of statistics that were just completed two years ago now, that provides a comparative list. It's just a long list of numbers about energy use in Canada, from 1800 to 2010, in petajoules, by kind of energy. It's energy consumption in Canada and by John Thistle and Richard Unger. And it's part of an international series of such calculations. So we're able now to make-- and the categories of energy consumption are divided into the kinds of energy. So the organic energy regime of wood, wind and water and animal power, and on the other hand, the fossil fuels and electricity. So that's coal, oil, gas and electricity and also nuclear. So the book is basically just tables of how much energy is consumed in Canada by that. So this set of statistics is almost the first really comprehensive set of data. What they tell us is what we've known for a long time, but not as early as 1800, that Canadians are distinctive in a number of ways compared to other North American and European countries. And where we're so different is that Canadians are amongst the largest consumers of energy, period. They're just across the board and, of course, that ties in with our cold and dark and vast country. But the other surprising difference is-- surprising for Canadians who have seen our history as becoming a modern industrial nation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is that Canada, in fact, made the switch relatively late to the modern fuels, fossil fuels and electricity. In fact, Britain had gone to a 50 percent modern fuel economy by the mid-19th century, so it was getting more than 50 percent I think by the-- I won't throw around the statistics because I'll get the wrong one. Britain was the first to industrialize, and it was heavily, heavily dependent on fossil fuels by the middle of the 19th century and certainly by the end, it had reached that threshold of around 90-percent dependence on that. For Canada, it was not until the 1970's that we reached that point. And in 1941, Canadians were still getting more of their energy from wood than they were from fossil fuels. Now part of that issue, of course, is just we have had so much wood. We haven't really had a lot of coal. Most of our coal is, in fact, imported, aside from certain studies of Vancouver Island and other parts of B.C. and, of course, Cape Breton where there's lots of coal. But, for the most part, Canadians have relied heavily on wood. But I think that another

part of that story is not simply that Canadians had more wood and so used it. I think part of that story ties in with how rural Canada was really until the mid-20th century. And I won't get into the actual details, but yeah, a lot of people were living in rural areas still in the 20th century. And unlike people in other countries, the rural Canadians had free, I'll just say free, access to their own land and to the energy supplies on their own land, at least the energy supplies on the surface and to food. Canadian rural people drew really heavily on what they could get from the land and from water. They could go hunting. They could go fishing. And they did that on their own and, of course, on other people's lands. It wasn't until towards the middle of the 20th century that poaching laws and game regulations became really, really significant in Canada or at least enforceable because Canada was very big and there aren't a lot of roads, even now across much of it. So I think that it's arguable that the reason that Canada remained dependent on organic forms of fuel and energy so much longer than people in say Europe or the United States was because we had such a relatively large rural population that had relatively free access to the bounty of the land, and that made us distinctive in a number of ways that show up in these energy statistics.