Unit 10: Video 1 Transcript

Q1 Introduction

A1: My name's Mark McGowan. I'm a professor of history at the University of Toronto, and I teach both at the university and at St. Michael's College. I specialize in Canadian immigration history, history of religion in Canada, education and communication. Currently, I'm researching a number of projects, one on the intersection of religion and broadcasting in Canada in the 1920's, '30s, right through to the '60s. I'm finishing off a study on Irish Famine migration to Canada, and I've just completed a book on Irish Catholics and the Great War in Canada and their participation or lack thereof.

Q2: What characterized pre-Famine Irish Immigration to Canada?

A: Sure. Yeah, the pre-famine immigration to Canada is probably the most important, and what's not known and because oftentimes the famine migration is seen through the filters or, sorry, migration from Ireland is seen through the filters of the famine, it isn't readily recognized that 450,000 Irish men and women migrated to British North America prior to the first potato ever rotting in the ground in 1845. So as early as the 18th Century, you had Waterford, Wexford fishermen availing themselves of the plenty of cod on the Grand Banks, eventually settling in Newfoundland. And that Newfoundland migration really creates one of the first major Irish communities in British North America, and most of them come from the same southeastern area of Ireland. We have Irish migration to what is now Nova Scotia as they build the fortifications, General Cornwallis in 1749. You have Irish migration to New Brunswick in the Miramichi in the north and in the Bay of Fundy area in the south. And then, of course, you've got tens of thousands of Irish migrants going to Lower and Upper Canada and carving out farmsteads outside of Montreal and the Monteregie region now and in the eastern townships, the Upper Ottawa Valley, so in what would now be Renfrew County and Pontiac County on the Quebec side. And then well into the western peninsula of what is now Ontario. And so by 1845, you have very well established both urban and rural Irish communities. The other thing that's not readily recognized is that about two-thirds of this Irish migration was Protestant and not Roman Catholic. And so you have interesting links between not only Northern Ireland and particularly Upper Canada because of the migration patterns coming out of places like Belfast and Derry or Londonderry, whichever you prefer, and also Protestant migration from the midlands counties, so counties that used to be known as Queens and King, Laois and Offaly, Tipperary, coming to Canada as well. And so the

interesting mix is that most of the Irish migrants to Newfoundland would be Roman Catholic and the same for Nova Scotia, there's actually almost a 50/50 mix of Protestant/Catholic in New Brunswick. Mostly Catholic in Quebec for obvious reasons, because of the presence of the Catholic Church there and a feeling of comfort. But also, then, a lot of Protestant migrants going to the largely Protestant province of Upper Canada. So that's a feature of Irish migration that's not often thought of. First, that they're largely pre-famine. Second, that they're mostly Protestant, and third, they're largely rural. So what's interesting is that the difference between Irish migration to Canada and the United States is that in British North America, in Canada, they're primarily rural. So you'll find Irish people on farms more readily than in the United States where they tend to settle in cities. And so you have the stereotypical Irish inner city dweller, labourer, feckless paddy, as they'd be called, in Boston or Chicago or Philadelphia and all kinds of other cities along the American seaboard. Whereas in Canada, if you were to find an Irish person, yes, you would find them in the cities, but you would more readily find them in places like the counties outside of Toronto, in Western Ontario, in the Huron tract, in the Upper Ottawa Valley. So this is a really significant difference in terms of the way in which we know and perceive Irish migration. Then, of course, the big push in terms of the last mass migration of Irish to British North America is in 1846, '47 and '48 when the famine migrants come to British North America.

Q3: Discuss Clarendon Township.

A: One of the regions where the Irish become one of the majority populations is in the Ottawa Valley. And that's both sides of the Ottawa River. So on the Quebec side, they settled mostly in Ottawa and in Pontiac Counties. On the Ontario side, Renfrew and the tip of Lanark County, which is really, in some ways, still a part of the Ottawa Valley. And, again, they follow the patterns that most pre-famine Irish demonstrated. And that was they were rural. They owned their own property. And for many of them, it was for the first time that they owned freehold, because in Ireland, they would've been tenants. And they worked the land during the spring and summer and fall and then in the winter, the worked the forests of the Upper Ottawa Valley. And so it's not surprising that when you look in a census, you find that an Irish household head might be listed as both farmer and forester. Again, it was a good mix between Protestants and Catholics in the Upper Ottawa Valley. And they bring all of their baggage with them, except in one township on Pontiac County, on the Quebec side, which is settled in the early 19th Century, a man by the name of Prendergast is given the task of surveying

Clarendon Township. He is an Irish-Protestant who served in the British Army against Napoleon. He doesn't want to replicate the Protestant/Catholic problems of Ireland in British North America. And so on his decision, no Catholics are permitted to settle in Clarendon Townships, except for three men. Three who served with him in the Peninsular War and who allegedly saved his life. And those Catholics were allowed to settle in the township, provided they told no other people that they were Catholic. And it was quite successful, but to this day, Clarendon Township, where the principal mercantile center is Shawville, still boasts several Orange lodges, including Lodge 27, which has an orange roof in the middle of Shawville and still flies the Union Jack as kind of a legacy of that Irish-Protestant settlement in the area. And there is no Roman Catholic Church in Clarendon Township. You have to go to neighbouring Bristol Township in order to find a Catholic Church or to Portage-du-Fort, which is in Litchfield Township, where there was also a mix between Irish and French-Canadian population. So this move to the Upper Valley is interesting because you have these great synergies of culture. You have the First Nations people who are there, Algonquins. You also have the Scots who move into the area. You have the Irish-Protestant and Irish-Catholic in the area, French-Canadians and eventually Germans. And by the 1870's, Kashub Poles from the Baltic. So the Ottawa Valley becomes a really interesting ethnic mosaic in Canada, even before most people thought of Canada as more than just British.

Q4: What characterized pre-Famine Irish immigration to Canada.

A: So the most famous phase of Irish migration to North America generally was the Great Irish Famine, the Potato Famine from 1845 to 1851. But really, in terms of British North American migration, it really is the last short phase of Irish migration to British North America. So in 1846, about 30,000 Irish migrated, mostly Roman Catholic. In 1847 or Black '47, when there had been repeated crop failures in '45 and '46, we saw over 100,000 Irish leave either British ports or Irish ports, headed for British North America. Now the bulk of that migration came to Quebec. So somewhere around 90,000 Irish were funneled through the quarantine station at Grosse Isle and about 17,000 went through Partridge Island quarantine station outside of St. John, New Brunswick. A handful of ships, maybe five, went to Halifax; two to Newfoundland; one to Prince Edward Island. Those colonies were not affected greatly. It was New Brunswick where the Irish landed and many of them moved on to what they call the Boston states, that is New England, that felt some immediate impact of poor people arriving on their shore in dreadful conditions. But the worst was felt at Quebec. When you understand that the

trip across the Atlantic in 1847 was by sail in ships that had been previously used for regular cargo, whether it be timber or grain, this was human ballast. People boarded ships at Limerick, Cork, Dublin, Liverpool, where the bulk came from, and these people essentially replaced the rocks that would be used as ballast as these empty ships would go back across the Atlantic. The trip could take up to six weeks, sometimes eight if the winds were against you, which they normally were. And, of course, the Atlantic currents are flowing in the opposite direction. And then, of course, if you were weak and suffering when you got onboard because of the various diseases related to malnutrition, then onboard ship, in close confines with over 300 or 400 people, crammed below decks in bunks three high and probably three persons deep, disease carries. And typhus was the principal killer or ship's fever. It's a Rickettsia bacteria that is in the feces of lice. The lice essentially lay their feces on your arm. You get itchy because they've bitten you at the same time, and you, effectively, infect yourself. And so the Rickettsia bacteria gets into the open cut and for about a week, it remains dormant. And then you get essentially all of the visible symptoms, the sense of dizziness and fogginess, ergo, the name typhus, some internal damage is done. Oftentimes blistering and rashes on the skin. And there was no treatment. I mean in those days, we have antibiotics, they didn't. They used wine. They used poultices. They used milk, but about 50 percent of the people who contract typhus die. And so we have horrendous tales. A ship, for example, called *The Virginius*, which sailed from Liverpool containing all of the assisted immigrants from Denis Mahon's estate in Roscommon. Close to 40 percent of the people onboard that ship died or were infected with typhus and later died, either at Grosse Isle the quarantine station or later on because their symptoms weren't detected when they weren't through quarantine. And that was the danger. So, for example, 1,490 people emigrated from Mahon's estate at Strokestown in 1847 and we calculate now that probably only 70 percent survived the first part of their journey to British North America. So what we have are Irish, both Catholic now in the majority and Protestants in the minority, coming to British North America in 1847. After the horrendous year, the shipping rates to British North America go up. The shipping standards change and now it becomes cheaper to go to the United States. And that's why the famine migration is short, it's intensive and it essentially dissipates by 1850. But what it does is that it now provides new Irish migrants to the Canada's who actually seek out communities of Irish who have already been there or simply move on through Montreal or Niagara to the United States. But it is a tragedy. I'll give you the story of the Willis family, Irish-Protestant family, likely from Tipperary. There were seven of

them in 1847. They board a ship at Limerick, but the youngest child is detected as having the early signs of typhus by medical authorities at the dock and the parents have to leave him behind, which means mother, father and four Willis children get onboard ship to sail for Quebec. By the time the voyage reaches Grosse Isle, two of the children have already died. There are four out of the seven left. Another dies at Gross Isle. There are now three out of the seven left. By the time Mr. and Ms. Willis and one child reach Toronto, Mr. Willis and the son have been infected by typhus. And by the time we find out the story, only Mary Willis is left, living in Branford, the sole survivor of this Protestant-Irish family who migrated during the famine. Is this a typical story? No, but it is symptomatic of a lot of the suffering that was experienced by those refugees from Ireland in 1847. And it's no wonder that when you hear stories like this, that the Irish experience then is seen through the lenses of the famine and what is completely ignored is the fact that 450,000 Irish were already migrants to British North America before 1845.