

Unit 10: Video 2 Transcript

Q5: Who was Bishop Michael Power?

A: Michael Power was an unsung individual by most Canadian historians. Rather forgotten. And oddly enough, everywhere Michael Power's life went, something happened.

I mean—he's a descendant. His parents were actually from southeastern Ireland. His father was a ship's captain who eventually settled in Halifax, where Michael Power was born in 1804. Power was a typical Irish-Catholic boy growing up in a province of the British Empire that didn't permit very many rights for Catholics. They didn't have the right to vote. They didn't have the right to sit in the Assembly. They were restricted in terms of their educational opportunities. And so Michael Power becomes a story of, essentially, Irish—not victimization, but dispossession of certain rights in the new world.

He eventually goes to Montreal as a 12-year-old boy to study in the schools there, because they have robust Catholic schools in Quebec. He eventually studies for the priesthood and becomes part of a movement known as the ultramontane movement that revitalizes the church not only in Lower Canada, which is now Quebec, but right across the country. Curiously, he becomes a pioneer priest, what I would call a "saddlebag priest," working the Eastern Townships as migrants pour into this underdeveloped part of Lower Canada. And becomes the story of itineracy along rivers and meeting fellow—well, in this case, Irishmen, but those born in Ireland—and helping to establish early Irish communities in the Eastern Townships. He ends up in the Ottawa Valley by the early 1830s, on an estate owned by the famous, of course, Canadian rebel Louis-Joseph Papineau at Montebello. And has a "tête-à-tête", a head-to-head, with Papineau's seigniorial employees as to the role of the church on that particular estate. Everywhere Michael Power seems to go in his early career, news is happening.

When the Bishop of Montreal eventually transfers him to Saint-Martin, which is in Beauharnois, south of Montreal, he's at the heart of the 1837-1838 Rebellions. And is actually placed under house arrest by the Patriotes when they try to take over the seigneurie at Beauharnois. Interestingly enough, he, of course, escapes. But when asked by civil authorities as the Patriotes are rounded up, he actually sorts out those from his own parish who were innocent and were taken along by the Patriotes and those who he

pinpointed as Patriote leaders. So, once again, Michael Power is right in the heart of the action of Canadian history.

He becomes very valuable to the Archbishop or the Bishop, rather, of Montreal, Ignace Bourget, makes a trip to Rome as they're sorting out what the Canadian church is going to look like. He doesn't know, but at the time, Bourget wants a new diocesan presence in what is now Ontario. There's one diocese, but he wants more. And he makes a pitch, quite to Michael Power's horror, that Michael Power should be the new Bishop of Western Upper Canada. And so in 1840, he's appointed to that position, and he chooses Toronto as his diocese. And Michael Power arrives in 1842 to be the first Bishop of Toronto. Which is a territory that stretches from the midpoint of Lake Ontario at Oshawa, right through to Windsor and the frontier of Detroit, and then across the Great Lakes, as far away as what would now be Thunder Bay, but in those days the fur trading post of Fort William. An absolutely enormous diocese. And Michael Power tries to visit, within his first two years, every part of this diocese, by lake boat, by canoe. He attends the gift giving to the First Nations people on Manitoulin Island. He becomes completely engaged. He builds an infrastructure where none had been on the frontier. He creates what he considers "order" out of disorder.

But probably he's most remembered because the Irish Famine migrants arrive in his diocese in 1847. He's already been in Ireland. He's seen the Famine firsthand. He has sent out the warnings. He has gathered, in a sense, the community of Toronto to help the refugees he knows are going to arrive. And they do arrive. A city of 20,000 people in 1847, welcomes, and I use the term loosely, 38,000 refugees. So almost twice its population. His priests become sick with typhus, which many of the migrants are carrying. So he tends to the fever sheds. There's 16 of them erected next to the fever hospital, which was the first Toronto General Hospital at the corner of King and John. And he, by himself, daily, is visiting the sheds, tending to the sick, giving the extreme unction or last rites to the dying. And then he, in September of 1847, contracts typhus himself and dies on October the 2nd, 1847, just a few days shy of his 43rd birthday.

So a man who has a very short tenure as Bishop but makes an enormous impact in terms of his presence for the church, and his presence to the Irish, of whom of course he's ethnically a part of, and also a profound impact on the local community. He could count among his closest friends the Anglican Bishop of the city, John Strachan. He could also count Egerton Ryerson as one of his closest confidants. In fact, Ryerson is so impressed with Power and his skills as an educator that he makes him the First Chair of the Board of

Education for the Province of Upper Canada. So he's a man of enormous talent. He's a man with great ecumenical sensibilities in a time when those words are rarely used. And, of course, he dies, as Catholics would say, a martyr of charity. So an inauspicious beginning in a colony like Nova Scotia that's under the Test Acts of Great Britain, pre-emancipation for Catholics, and yet dying in conditions that make him remembered locally but not remembered very much beyond the Toronto area.