

Unit 10: Video 2 Transcript

Q6: Why were women's status and authority under assault from the clergy and judiciary? Were women able to resist?

A: Yeah, so in terms of the response of the judiciary and the Catholic Church to these Irish-Newfoundland women, I think that it would be remiss to try to pretend that there were no pressures coming from these areas. Obviously these women were living their lives on the ground in fishing communities, but that stuff is out there. And it does make its way along through comments or through perhaps the increasing incursions of the judiciary and the church into the area.

But having said that, the magistrates who were on the ground—okay, now when you've got the crowd in St. John's, which is the capital city, and they're doing their thing. But the face of the law in all these communities for the most part would be the magistrates. And they're dealing with a lot of this stuff on-the-fly. On the ground they're not pushing these women into private space. As I've mentioned, they're very sort of—the women are treated like men in the local legal system. They are—they're welcome to be petitioners. They are—you can see a quite lively presence in terms of the wills that are on the books. They—you can almost hear a "heavy eye roll" occasionally when something comes up before the magistrate in terms of some of the local women who may be repeat offenders. But really, you know, you're looking at no jail sentences, small fines if anything, "go on."

And in terms of matrimonial matters, as I've mentioned, you don't see them—you don't see the magistrates pushing women back into abusive situations. They let them go. They recognized the reality of a separation, and they give the children to the woman. They ask for maintenance from the menfolk, and they track them down too. When husbands disappear, the magistrates would send off the deputy sheriff to track them down and seize their wages from fishing employers. So they were serious about it.

So why? Why this discrepancy then? Because, I mean, obviously their own womenfolk they are trying to get into the house and have them respectable. And I think it's because, as I say most of these magistrates were merchants or they were members of merchant families. And the merchants were very reliant on the fish and the fish oil that fishing households produced for them. That was—it was the only game in town, as I've said before. So this is the primary industry. It's important to have women in public spaces doing the work that is required to maintain this fishing household that's functioning

very well. So I think that the magistrates are very reluctant to impose, to try to impose this sort of middle class ideal of respectability on these women, because it doesn't make sense for them to do that. They know how desperately the households need these women in that public space.

So—but the Catholic Church, now that's different. Catholic Church is late getting to Newfoundland. Newfoundland had a penal regime that was similar to that in Ireland except that it wasn't steadily enforced. But every time a governor was sent out, the governor was told to enforce the penal code as he saw fit. So some did and some didn't. Some of them were quite insistent. There was one in the mid 1750s that was burning houses and sending Irish back to Newfoundland—to Ireland rather. But others just sort of mostly just sort of let things tick-along. But the Catholic Church couldn't actually operate fully in Newfoundland until the late 18th century. So that's when you really see the priests starting to arrive and operate in full daylight. I mean, they've been around, and they're being shepherded under cover from one house to another and that kind of thing. But now they're able to operate fully. And the first priest who comes to the Southern Avalon, his name was Father Yore. And he was absolutely shocked to see that women were living there who had four husbands, all of them alive. And this was just—when I did my research, I discovered that there were all these very informal family arrangements. And you moved in with somebody, and if you got along, that was fine. And if you didn't, well, that's fine. You just parted ways. Women did some of the marriages, and fishing captains did some of the marriages. The priests hadn't been allowed to marry people. And so—and if it worked out, fine. If it didn't, everybody—but as long as everybody was okay, as long as children of the relationship were looked after and moved into some other family arrangement, people didn't mind. So you'll see women with children with four and five surnames. And you can just sort of speculate that this—[laughs] this was her sort of moving—and not surprising too because, again, that initial transience of the male population. I mean, they were coming and going. So the priests was quite shocked by this, as you can imagine. There was, I would say, the notion that woman was either temptress Eve, she was a seductress, or she was the Virgin Mary. Those were the two options for women, and there wasn't any grey area in between. So any woman who sort of moved outside of that ideal, was really spoken out against from the altar and ostracized by the priest, cut off from the sacraments. Although the community was, like, "What business has he got to do that?" And the community would be very accepting of illegitimate births, and I hate that term but for want of a better one—and would take any of the kids into the

family. So—but you can see the church trying to bring them into respectability.

They're also—you can see various letters and sermons in which bishops are saying, "Now, we've got to keep our womenfolk safe. And there was a riot down in St. Mary's. Oh, we can't have the women involved in that now, and just think about—you know, my goodness, the leaders are still out in the woods. And they could come in, and your women are not safe while they're out." These women would take on anybody, I can assure you. But that whole sort of discourse of the frail, dependent woman. "Women should be like the little Irish mother, by the hearth spinning and knitting the socks." And they did lots of that too. But that was her role in life, and to be that sort of spiritual compass for her family. And so you do see the pressure from the priests and the bishops. But it doesn't mesh with the reality of women's lives at all. So they continue to press on.

They continue with their informal belief system as well. And I think that really was a thorn in the side of the Catholic Church, because that's sort of competition in terms of mediating between the natural and the supernatural world. So that was quite an issue. But I'll tell you now, when I was growing up, way, way back, way long time ago, but when I was growing up, wasn't that long ago, there were still kids that I hung around with who had, like, blessed bread in their pockets whenever they went out of their gardens or lanes to protect them from the fairies. So that sort of influence continued because women's place in the fishery continued.

That very strong contribution that they were making continued until after Confederation in 1949, when the Canadian government decided that they needed to modernize the industry. And suddenly there was no place for women anymore. Men would go off in these offshore vessels, chasing the fish, another mistake for—a story for another day. And women were permitted low paying jobs in plants. But really that sort of very powerful place that they had had was gone. And yeah, that makes a huge difference.