

Unit 7: Video 1 Transcript

Q3: Historically, what was Newfoundland's ethnic and demographic composition?

A: In terms of the ethnic composition, the demography of Newfoundland and Labrador, there are Indigenous groups in the province. There are the Innu and Inuit in Labrador, what today we call Labrador. The Mi'kmaq in the southeast of the island. Sadly, and as I've mentioned before, the Beothuk are no longer with us.

In terms of European presence, the two major groups that came there were the English from the West Country and the Irish from the south of Ireland. The English were English Protestants. The Irish were Irish Catholics. There were very few Irish Protestants in the population of Newfoundland. There was a small French presence on the South Coast and later on the West Coast. And a few people from Wales. Some Scots that came over from Nova Scotia. But primarily, and especially in this big fishery, you've got the West Country fishermen and you've got the Irish fishermen. What would happen is these ships that came over would stop in Ireland for fishing servants. And so they were sort of—the Irish were sort of further down the hierarchy. But really, English servants were no better off either. So you've got a very sort of uncomplicated, I suppose in some respects, class structure. You've got eventually governors and politicians. You've got merchants, and then you've got tradespeople and whatnot. And then you've got fishing—fishing servants and fishing families.

In terms of ethnic tensions, the—obviously England and Ireland were not on the best of terms in much of the period that we're looking at in terms of settlement and the fishery. Some of those tensions did come across the ocean. But ethnicity is not just this—something that you pack up in your trunk when you're an immigrant, and you unpack it when you get there, and you set up shop again. I mean, obviously it's something—it's a way that you negotiate difference with other groups and how you understand your own identity, vis-à-vis other groups. And sometimes that will change in new contexts. It often does. Sometimes it sort of—the whole idea of this ethnic identity will go away altogether. So it's not that sort of thing that just neatly travels. In Newfoundland, because there was so much interdependence in that fishery, you had to get along with people. So you couldn't sort of bring all that political baggage from the home country to Newfoundland. You had to—but it doesn't mean that there weren't stirrings. And there were dust-ups and whatnot. But for the most part people got along. There was even a good deal

of intermarriage in the early days. In the area that I researched, which is the southern Avalon, the English were there first. The Irish came out, and the English were incorporated into this Irish Catholic group through intermarriage and conversion. To the extent that after several generations, those who were of mixed descent didn't realize that they had English ancestors. So that's how extensively they were brought in. But you do still see a demographic pattern there and an ethnic pattern. And in the Southern Avalon, very Irish. St. Johns, predominantly Irish until later in the 19th century. In Conception Bay, which is the next bay up from St. Johns, sort of just to the northwest, that had a mixed population. And then in the Northeast Coast, you had English Protestants. So I mean, that does tell you, I think, a little bit about how people sort of placed themselves and situated themselves. In terms of the Irish, and I have more expertise about the Irish, I can say that early British officials didn't help matters very much. The governors were always sending off all these proclamations and orders saying that the Irish had to be brought back from the island. Don't dare leave any of them on the island after the fishing season is over. That they're treacherous. That they're going to join forces with our enemies at any point in time. And of course the French were on the island for a while. And the Americans. And after they had their Revolution, they were prowling around. And so the British authorities were always, always very nervous. And again, that sort of comes from the relationship between British authorities and Irish Catholics in Ireland. That sense that they're going to be subversive, and they're going to take their chance.

For the most part though, a lot of what you see is more so class tensions than ethnic tensions, especially between the higher-ups and the fishing population. Irish women themselves were not allowed, for a period, one of the governors said that they weren't allowed to come to Newfoundland at all. Boat owners would be fined for bringing Irish women out. And so that's kind of interesting too. You look at that kind of decision and you say, well, what made them so special? They couldn't even come in the summertime according to this person. And so you know that, again, there's this—"Oh, we don't want the Irish ethnic group to sort of get settled here. If you bring women out, they're going to have children, and then they're going to be here." There was much, "Oh, they'll be a drain on the colony"—well, not the colony, but the system. But many of these women were coming out because of the fishery. They weren't going to be a drain on communities. They were hired as fishing servants. They were part of servicing the larger industry, as seamstresses and laundresses and in the hospitality trade and—so they provided a lot. Many of them became mistresses of fishing households. So

that doesn't quite—so you can see that suspicion and that tension is still there.

As time moves forward, I think we see a growing Irish middle class that's very ambitious. Now this is coming into the 19th century. And they're wanting to position themselves, vis-à-vis what they see as an English Protestant oligarchy, is the way they would describe it. You certainly have a couple of bishops, Catholic bishops, who were very, very political and trying to move things along so that the Irish middle class can take their proper place. And also of course, this is part of the Irish Catholic Church's "civilizing mission" around the world. I mean, they want to carve out space for themselves. So these two bishops, a Bishop Fleming and a Bishop Mullock, are face-and-eyes into the politics of Newfoundland. And you do have a predominantly English Protestant hegemonic group. Let's face it. They—and that just comes from generations of privilege. So that power is there. So they're dusting things up, but in terms of people on the ground and actual fishers—I mean, I think we need to think carefully about it. There's a tendency to see them as being under the thumb of their elites. And oh, you know, whatever this bishop told them, they went off and did that. That's not entirely true. I mean, I realize that there's a—that some of this is feeding up and down I think in a sort of circular form. But I also really believe in people's ability to look out for their own self interest. And if there's not something, some reason for them to get out and have a riot, then they're not going to do it. They're not going to do it just because the bishop told them. So that kind of thinking about ethnicity, I think, is a little too superficial maybe for my liking. So I like to dig in and see what in this particular context might have caused this kind of tension to happen. And I suspect that there are different mixtures in all sorts of situations.