

Unit 6: Mark McGowan: What was the role of Canada's Irish community in the First World War? Where was their loyalty?

A: The question of Irish loyalty often comes up because the models of what we see of Irish loyalty, either are based on observations in Ireland itself or in the United States where there was a massive Irish community, Irish-Catholic community particularly, after the famine. And Canada, once again, provides, I think, a twist on some of our preconceived notions about the Irish. For example, the Irish in Canada, Irish-Catholics, in particular, were quite active in the militias and that militia culture. We know this because when we start taking a look at the files of Irish-Catholic service personnel from the Boer War, so 1899, 1901, we find that there are a large number of Irish-Catholics, particularly from Nova Scotia, Halifax area and Ontario who are enlisting. Many of them have previous service in militia units. So in the most imperial of wars, and that is Britain asking for volunteers to assist it to fight the Dutch Boers in the Veldts of South Africa, there are Irish-Catholics here who are quite willing to go and go in great numbers. And the Catholic press supports it, to a degree. As soon as the troops are there and on the ground, there's no question, any questions about Joseph Chamberlain and jingoism and the actual whether parliament decided this appropriately, those questions are put away. Because now the troops are there and interestingly, nothing seems to change, even 100 years later, the support-our-troops mantra sort of resonates, but in this case, the Irish are there. They demobilize and become part of, I think, an imperial sentiment, seeing themselves as Canadian, as part of a large global empire. And so when Britain declares war in 1914, the bishops are on side in English Canada and in French Canada, for that matter, in fact, the bishops of French Canada actually sign a joint pastoral letter that's published in the fall of that year supporting Britain and supporting the war effort. We see support from the Catholic press. There are at least six English-speaking Catholic weeklies across the country: one out of Winnipeg; several out of Ontario and two in the Maritimes that support the war unequivocally. And troops by merit of just having examined the hard evidence of their attestation papers, Irish-Catholics recruit and they recruit in heavy numbers, particularly in places like Halifax and Toronto, in Ottawa. And they recruit not to Irish battalions by necessity, but to the local battalions. They go with their friends. They go -- if they're from Ottawa, they go with the 38th Battalion from Ottawa or the 77th Battalion. If they're from the Ottawa Valley, they join the 138th. And they enlist in high numbers. By the middle of

the war, by 1916, there are problems. First of all, the problem of lack of strong French Catholic recruitment in Quebec. And then on the other hand, of course, the Easter Rising in Dublin, where some of the volunteers, the Irish volunteers who stayed behind, this is the nationalist group that formed before the war, they stayed behind because, in a sense, Britain's anxiety is Ireland's opportunity. But interestingly enough, most of those volunteers actually joined the British Army. So this is a tiny minority. And, of course, they stage the Easter Rebellion at a time when Britain is in dire need of support at the front. And now they're fighting a second front in Ireland against these rebels. It's quickly contained. Interestingly enough, now trapped between French-Canadian coreligionists and Irish coreligionists, what did the Irish-Catholic community, most of whom are born here, what did they do? John Jay O'Gorman who is a pastor in the parish of the Blessed Sacrament in Ottawa. He founds it. He is one of the most dynamic individuals of his day, young priest with Ottawa Valley roots. He founds the Ottawa Boys and Girls Club. He founds high schools, elementary schools. He joins the military as a chaplain, and from his perch, amidst all of this turmoil, he says, "You know, we have double-duty." And he said, "Our first duty is to Canada and our first duty is to win this war. But we also have a duty to keep our eye on what's going on in Ireland because essentially the principles for which we are fighting are the ones that must necessarily be applied in Ireland and that is self-government." So it's not an abandonment of Ireland by Irish-Catholics in Canada, it's a knowledge that in fighting this war, for many of the leaders and winning this war, it's absolutely essential that then those principles of self-government for small nations be applied to Ireland. And slowly, although English-speaking Catholics desperately try to keep the visible appearance of unity between all Catholics in Canada, it becomes increasingly harder as Henri Bourassa marshals essentially the nationalists of Quebec to resist the war effort, particularly conscription. What's particularly poignant during the war is that in that desperate election, the union election of December 1917, most of the English-speaking Catholic bishops are either passively supportive of Borden's initiative to unite the remnants of the liberals with his own people and impose conscription as a way of ending the war. But Michael Francis Fallon of London, the bishop of London is overt and a week before the election, he writes publically that Catholics should support the Union government as the best way to secure victory in the war. Now, this type of step puts him completely at loggerheads with the Quebec bishops, and they would say, "Suspensions confirmed." Because it was Fallon who was certainly the chief instigator against our schools in Ontario. And it really confirms what a French-Canadian politician said in the early stages of the

war, “Why are we fighting the Germans when the Prussians are next door in Ontario?” So the English-speaking Catholic Church is really caught between a rock and a hard place. And most of the end game of the war after 1917 is trying to, first of all, rebuild the bridges after the conscription controversy and Archbishop Neil McNeil of Toronto, who’s both Irish and Scottish in background, fluently bilingual, actually speaks eight languages, writes in Quebec newspapers. And he becomes part of the Bonne Entente movement that’s trying to unite cultural leadership and political leadership in English Canada and French Canada to create national unity. So I mean the Catholic Church then tries to soothe things out, although the war is a traumatic experience for the church because it thrusts part of the church, essentially, into a British imperial model with modifications because papers are critical of what’s going on in Ireland. And at the same time, it jettisons out French-Canadians who feel now very much outside of the mainstream of Canadian political life because, I mean, Borden does win the election. But he does so at a cost of only a handful of seats in Quebec, including, of course, Charles Doherty, who is an Irish-Canadian Catholic who lives in Montreal and is minister of justice and actually one of the architects of the Military Service Act. So Irish-Catholics can be found on both sides of the political fence, but if it came to Canada first, that’s where they would park themselves.