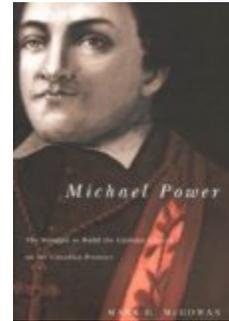


Mark G. McGowan. *Michael Power: The Struggle to Build the Catholic Church on the Canadian Frontier*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. xvii + 382 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-2914-4.

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## The Times and Life of a Pioneer Canadian Churchman

Aloysius Cardinal Ambrozic, the current archbishop of Toronto could not have chosen better than Mark McGowan to tackle the formidable task of delving and understanding the life and impact of his diocese's first and little known Roman Catholic bishop. This is a work of admirable probity and remarkable imagination. A few years ago McGowan analyzed the Toronto Irish and their experience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[1] Such research contributed to his sensitivity to issues relating to Catholics and the nature of their contribution to Canada and has prepared him for this excursion into the earlier period in which Michael Power lived, priested, and ultimately served as bishop. The author's appointment as principal of St. Michael's College, English-speaking Canada's largest Catholic post-secondary institution and a federated university within the University of Toronto, is an illustration of the esteem and respect accorded by his own co-religionists and the wider academic community

Reviewing this book did present me with a certain sense of irony. When it landed on my desk I was engaged in a comprehensive reading of the American essayist Paul Blanshard. Sometimes considered the mid-twentieth-century's intellectual successor and exponent of the previous one's hostility towards Catholics and Catholicism in the United States, he argued that the country's Roman Catholic hierarchy was in a life and death struggle with American democracy. Subservience to a foreign potentate, the pope, was inimical to loyalty to

America. One could not be Catholic, much less a bishop, and a loyal American.[2] What a surprise then to read that in Mark McGowan's opinion the three forces that gave sense and meaning to Michael Power's life was his faithfulness to Catholicism, his loyalty to the British Crown, and his desire to organize an effective religious life for Roman Catholics in a frontier Canadian diocese (p. 13). Apparently, a mid-nineteenth-century Catholic bishop in a British North American colony could serve his church while remaining faithful to the civil authority, one which differed significantly from his own religious point of view. It is curious to think that north of the border Michael Power could be true to both while his hierarchical counterparts to the south could not. Is this yet another difference which distinguishes Canada from the United States?

McGowan faced enormous challenges to produce this biography. Memory of Power is very vague. He merits neither notice nor even mention in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Along with St. Joseph, the bishop graces the name of a Toronto high school, but apart from that shared honor there is little trace of his life and contribution. In a most succinct phrase, McGowan writes of Power that "the most memorable action of his life was his death" (p. 6). His final act as a pastor was to minister to the typhus-ridden Irish immigrants in the Toronto waterfront sheds which received them in the terrible famine year of 1847. Providing solace and undoubtedly the sacrament of the dying to those desperately ill, Power

became infected in late September and died after considerable suffering on October 1, 1847. This heroic sacrifice is the one great gesture for which Power is remembered. McGowan quite rightly wonders what else ought to be discovered? Where did he come from? How did he live? What were his values and character? Surely there was much more to be known.

McGowan notes the scarcity of documents related to Power in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Toronto. Some personal letters, official correspondence, a few receipts, and two letter books containing drafts of a couple hundred outgoing missives are all that remain. Hardly enough to build a biography! A less intrepid historian might have left it at that. Fortunately, this book based upon exhaustive reading and research is as much the history of the times as of the life of Michael Power. From the scant personal papers, McGowan moves on to a thorough and impressive investigation of diocesan archives throughout eastern Canada and even those of Detroit and New Orleans. He also mined the collections of various religious communities such as the Jesuits, the Sulpicians, and the Loretto Sisters. His search took him to Ireland and England and to collections in Rome, Paris and Lyons. As a bishop in Canada West where Catholics were in a minority Power knew and worked with churchmen of other denominations. Consequently, the author even consulted the archives of the United Church of Canada. Travel to national and provincial archives and the culling of census figures, newspapers and any source that might offer insight all provided grist for the mill. Already familiar and attuned to the value of the historical literature on Catholicism in Canada, McGowan's examination of primary sources is enriched and completed by a thorough reading of the secondary literature which might touch any aspect of Power's life. Among others, histories of Nova Scotia, the rebellions of Upper and Lower Canada, agriculture, education, even courtship and marriage figure in his reading. Despite the obvious density of the research, the book is written in a crisp and accessible language with hardly even a spelling error. A rather curious one is "The Chateau d'Iff" (sic) (p. 122).

In these pages the author illustrates that Michael Power was a remarkable and unusual Canadian. His was pre-industrial Canada, prior to railways and modern communications. In terms of travel time, Halifax was psychologically and actually closer to the imperial capital, London, than to the Canadian backwoods. In Canada there was very little interchange of persons or ideas. Unlike the three hours drive now, in those days of poor and dangerous roads or of travel by steamship in the

navigational season, Kingston was an arduous two days' journey from Montreal. Toronto was back of beyond or, as the author entitles chapter 6, "At the Edge of Civilization." Few in Canada would have had such a variety of experiences or travels as did Power. Born of Catholic parents in the Nova Scotian capital, his parish priest noted his talents. At hardly fourteen years of age he went to Quebec with preparation for the priesthood in mind. In the process he was not only educated and ordained a priest in 1827, Power also was thoroughly Frenchified. Serving in outlying parishes both in the eastern townships and the Ottawa valley he tasted the rude and challenging life of the undeveloped countryside. Interestingly, he was the parish priest at Montebello, the seigneurial domain of Louis-Joseph Papineau, the famous freethinker and leader of the radical and rebellious "parti patriote." In 1838 he was the pastor at Ste. Martine in the seigneurie of Beauharnois, one of the hottest of the hot spots in the renewed violence of that year.

In 1839 appointment to the parish at La Prairie just across the St. Lawrence River from Montreal was a sign of the growing importance and respect in which Power was held by his superiors. In 1841 he accompanied Ignace Bourget, the bishop of Montreal, to Europe. In the quest for the spiritual renewal and better organization of the Catholic Church in Canada, they enlisted religious orders of men and women to participate in its work—spiritual, pastoral, and educational. The last few years of a unique, brief, and interesting life Power spent as the first bishop of the new diocese of Toronto. Given the paucity of personal sources, it is unsurprising how skeletal is McGowan's sense of the personal character of his subject. Refracted by way of vast reading he has determined that Power was a scrupulous and devoted priest, a stickler for form in liturgy and clerical dress, a personable but private man who experienced the usual frustrations of a figure of authority in a colonial frontier setting. McGowan does discuss the nature of Power's commitment to separate Catholic schools, a subject which he has investigated elsewhere.[3] The bishop's apparent openness to a shared publicly funded system may be explained by the relative sectarian calm of the 1840s as in contrast to the more complex and troublous decade after his death, years marked by considerable denominational strife and competition.

Finally, as a corrective to the perception of Power as a priest and bishop who made the singular sacrifice of his own life, McGowan underlines other enduring contributions. One was the achievement of episcopal corporation which assured the status of Catholic bishops and their

temporal control of church property. This allowed the developing church in English-speaking Canada to avoid the pain of the conflict experienced by clergy and bishops with lay trustees both in the United States and Lower Canada. Another was his effective spiritual ministrations and evangelization of the vast territory he shepherded. In pursuit of that goal and having learned by his association and travels with Ignace Bourget, Power too continued to encourage the support of religious communities of men and women in his own diocese. His pursuit and defense of publicly funded Catholic schools, whether in cooperation with the wider system or as a separate establishment is also part of a legacy which exists to the present. Finally, the energy of his own personal spirituality assisted him in his energetic but short life and continues as a source of inspiration for those who follow.

In discussing the nature and quality of these other contributions, in no way does McGowan wish to diminish the personal sacrifice of a churchman who risked and lost his life ministering to the most abandoned of his flock. Indeed, this biography, by its depth and its wisdom, more fully elucidates why that final episode was

thoroughly consistent and the natural consequence of the deeply consecrated life of a devoted priest. John, the Evangelist, did claim there was no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.[4] In this superb examination of a whole life Mark McGowan has managed to explain why Michael Power did just that.

#### Notes

[1]. Mark McGowan, *The Waning of the Green: Catholics, the Irish and Identity in Toronto, 1887-1922* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999).

[2]. Paul Blanshard, *American Freedom and Catholic Power* (Boston: the Beacon Press, 1949).

[3]. Mark McGowan, "What did Michael Power Really Want? : Questions Regarding the Origins of Catholic Separate Schools in Canada West," *Historical Studies: Canadian Catholic Historical Association* 68 (2002): pp. 85-104.

[4]. Jn 15:13

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