

Lord Durham Teacher's Guide

Audience: High school history classes
Running time: 28:11

Historical Context

A man of influence, Lord Durham was known for his liberal ideas as well as for his skill in resolving complex political problems. In 1838, London appointed him Governor General of the North American colonies, and charged him with preparing a report on the 1837-1838 rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada. In face of the rebellions, London had suspended the constitution of Lower Canada in February 1838 and dissolved the House of Assembly.

Durham's appointment was a sign that Britain wanted to solve the problems plaguing the colonies once and for all. To that end, Durham was given extraordinary powers. He was, however, to exceed them with a directive to exile several political prisoners to Bermuda. Britain refused to sanction the illegal directive, and Durham resigned. He returned to England in November 1838, and it was there that he complete his famous report — which recommended the union of the Canadas, laid the groundwork for responsible government, and called for the assimilation of French Canadians.

Synopsis

This film outlines Lord Durham's five-month stay, in 1838, as Governor General of the two Canadas. The film opens with Durham's struggle to decide whether or not he should resign. In choosing to exile eight ringleaders of the 1837 rebellion to Bermuda, he has overstepped his authority — and London has disallowed the order. As Durham's chief secretary, Charles Buller, and economic adviser, Gibbon Wakefield, await Durham's decision, the film uses flashbacks to reveal the highlights of his tenure in the Canadas.

Fresh off the boat in Quebec City, Durham implements major changes in Lower Canada. He dismisses the Executive Council, frees 153 political prisoners, and exiles eight rebellion leaders to Bermuda. With these actions, he earns the support of Francophones.

Durham's next move is a series of hearings, held throughout Upper and Lower Canada. He travels relentlessly across the colonies, determined to discover the fundamental causes of the rebellions — and his genuine interest in people's problems earns him high praise. When Upper Canadian Reformer Robert Baldwin insists on the creation of a responsible government, Durham replies that he will give the matter his deepest consideration.

During his brief stay in Canada, Durham wins the confidence of the Canadian people, skillfully resolves several major problems and brings about necessary reforms. Nevertheless, Durham's enemies in England pounce on the illegal exile of the eight leaders of the rebellion, and disallow it. In the face of this rebuke, Durham is shocked and humiliated. He is also a sick and exhausted man. In early November, 1838, he tenders his resignation. Following his return, he writes the Durham Report, completed in 1839, which outlines the situation in the two Canadas, along with solutions to the problems of the two colonies.

Pre-Viewing

This film can be used as an introduction to Durham the man, prior to the study of the Durham report. It also outlines some of the chief events in Canada's struggle toward responsible government. To maximize the effectiveness of the film, students should be familiar with the governmental structure of the Canadas, as set forth in the Constitutional Act of 1791.

Post-Viewing

Research, Discussion and Writing Topics

- Sketch out a social pyramid of Canada in the 1830s. What are the major groups? To which does Durham belong?
- Describe the elements in the film that evoke Durham's social class.
- Research the three most important colonial problems identified by Durham in his report. Which of these problems is dealt with in the film?
- If you were in Durham's position, would you have resigned? Why or why not?
- Imagine that you are Durham. Draft a letter of resignation to your superiors in London.
- Briefly describe the contents of the Durham Report. To whom was the report addressed?
- Debate the following proposition: "Durham acted as a dictator."
- Discuss Durham's most important achievement during his five months as Governor General.

Questions

- Why was Durham appointed Governor General of the Canada? With what mandate was he entrusted, and what powers had the British government given him?
- When Durham first arrived in Quebec, what gesture won him the sympathy of Francophones?
- What ideas did Robert Baldwin present to Durham? How did Durham receive them?
- Why did Durham resign?