

## **Fishery to Colony: A Newfoundland Watershed, 1793-1815**

Shannon Ryan

---

Volume 12, Number 2, Spring 1983

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad12\\_2art02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad12_2art02)

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

**ISSN**

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this article**

Ryan, S. (1983). Fishery to Colony:: A Newfoundland Watershed, 1793-1815. *Acadiensis*, 12(2), 34–52.

SHANNON RYAN

## Fishery to Colony: A Newfoundland Watershed, 1793-1815

ALMOST THREE CENTURIES after the discovery of the Newfoundland cod fish stocks, the British government still conceived of Newfoundland as a fishing station, the "Grand Cod Fishery of the Universe". As late as 1775 an act of parliament stipulated, among other things, ways to avoid the encouragement of a resident fishery in Newfoundland.<sup>1</sup> However, half a century later the condition of Newfoundland had changed. In 1824 the island at last received colonial status within the British Empire, and in 1832 Newfoundland acquired a system of representative government.<sup>2</sup> For Newfoundlanders the era of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars was a time of significant changes. In the years from the 1790s to the 1810s the island's permanent population increased substantially, and by 1815 the island's residents numbered 40,568 people. It was during these decades that the cod fishery was transformed from a migratory European business enterprise to a Newfoundland-based economic activity. As a result, Newfoundland's status as a fishing station could no longer be justified.

The beginning of war in 1793 had its usual immediate effects on the European migratory fisheries in Newfoundland waters. The French ceased all transatlantic fishing activity, not only because they did not have the naval strength to protect it, but also because it had always been French practice to fully mobilize her naval resources in her contests with England. As in earlier periods of war, once more the English West Country fishing fleets suffered from the impressment of large numbers of their fishermen into the Royal Navy and from the fears created by the threat of impressment, which scared many fishermen away from the English fishing ports. Although at first viewed as a temporary setback, such as had been experienced many times during the previous three centuries, this was, in fact, the beginning of the end of the migratory West Country-Newfoundland fishery.

The West Country migratory fishery had been in a remarkably healthy condition in the years since the American Revolution. From 236 ships, 2603 men and 22,535 tons in 1784, it had reached a peak of 389 ships, 4306 men and 28,846 tons in 1788.<sup>3</sup> Production rose steadily and dramatically from 131,650

1 Quoted in D.W. Prowse, *A History of Newfoundland* (London, 1895), p. 344.

2 For political developments in this period see A.H. McLintock, *The Establishment of Constitutional Government in Newfoundland, 1783-1832: A Study of Retarded Colonization* (London, 1941).

3 All statistics for this period, in the text and in the tables, unless otherwise stated are taken from the Annual Reports on the Trade and Inhabitants of Newfoundland in the CO 194 series, Public

## *Newfoundland: Fishery to Colony 35*

cwts in 1784 to 412,590 cwts in 1789. This expansion was more than the market could cope with, and depressed prices caused a sharp decline in the size of the fleet, which numbered 304 vessels in 1789. During the following three years the fleet operated at a reduced but stable level, averaging 260 ships per year.<sup>4</sup> War in 1793 reduced the fleet to 148 ships. In the subsequent decades all three principal branches of the migratory fishery suffered difficulties and declined.

The bank fishery had been the major branch of this migratory fishery since the Seven Years war. In 1789-92<sup>5</sup> the bank fleet averaged 171 vessels annually and made up about two-thirds of all ships enumerated in the Annual Returns as British fishing ships. In 1793 the number dropped to 63 (out of 148) and in that year, for the first time, 19 bank ships were reported to be operating out of Newfoundland. Some of these were probably English bankers which decided to stay in Newfoundland during the winter rather than return to England, for the decline of the bye boat fishery and the business it had generated, combined with the hazards of war, made recrossing the Atlantic less attractive. Also, of course, the longer bank fishing season encouraged crews to remain on the island. In 1794, 201 fishing ships came from England, of which 100 were bankers; the figures for 1795 were 127 and 53 respectively. Meanwhile, the island-based banking fleet increased to 25 and then 62 vessels during these years. When the war was carried to the Grand Banks in 1796 by a French squadron of at least ten men-of-war under Admiral Richery, it appears that the bank fishery ceased altogether.<sup>6</sup> Although it recovered in 1797 and 34 British ships fished there, accompanied by 78 Newfoundland ships, indications are that the migratory fishery in Newfoundland was very weak during the next three years. By 1802 the bank fleet contained 71 Newfoundland ships and 58 British, and in 1803 there were 68 Newfoundland bank ships, while the British fleet numbered 64 ships. The size of the Newfoundland bank fleet remained the same in 1804, but in 1805 dropped to 30 ships and continued to decline until it had disappeared completely by the 1820s. The British bank fleet declined sharply in 1804 when war was resumed with France. In that year there were only 21 ships, and in 1805 only 12 ships, though after the Battle of Trafalgar there were about 20 ships annually. The fleet experienced another sharp decline during the 1812-14 war with the

Record Office [PRO], London. See Shannon Ryan, "Abstract of CO 194 Statistics", unpublished manuscript, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1969. Also, see K. Matthews, "History of the West of England-Newfoundland Fishery", D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1968, for a more complete discussion of the West of England-Newfoundland fishery prior to the 19th century.

4 Figures for the crews in 1790 are incomplete, as are the figures for tonnage in 1792.

5 No figures available for 1787 and 1788. All dates thus expressed are inclusive.

6 Governor James Wallace to Colonial Office, 29 September 1796, CO 194/39, fols. 25-46. English bank ships that stayed in Newfoundland and those that were built there were both referred to as island bank ships. Here they will be referred to as Newfoundland bank ships.

United States, but with the restoration of peace on all fronts in 1815, it again increased to 30 ships, and reached a total of almost 50 ships by 1818. After that year the fleet dwindled gradually but steadily until it had ceased to exist — certainly by the 1840s.

Another branch of the migratory fishery from Britain — the migratory ship fishery — was concerned with the inshore fishery, and the fate of this branch was much more swiftly sealed. This had been the original Newfoundland-England fishery but using a ship simply for transportation to and from Newfoundland proved to be uneconomical. Furthermore a shipload of experienced fishermen provided a bonanza for press gangs during war. In addition, good free fishing rooms had become increasingly scarce as settlement had slowly spread to the better harbours. Therefore, the fishing ships of the 1780s and 1790s carried small crews and few fishing boats. They came early, bringing supplies to the fishermen, and then produced what fish they could until a cargo could be acquired for Europe. The fishing ship fishery was a very limited one, and although three or four hundred fishing boats were involved and manpower per tonnage was stronger in the 1780s, by 1797 it had almost ceased to exist. By 1810 these ships were no longer enumerated and it is likely that, beginning in that year, they were included in the sack ship returns.

The third and only other branch of the British migratory fishery was known as the bye boat fishery.<sup>7</sup> This fishery involved individual small boat owners who left their boats in Newfoundland but who themselves migrated between the island and England annually. This too was an inshore fishery. The bye boat fishery reached its peak during the years 1771-1779, when the total number of keepers and servants averaged 525 and 5,691, respectively. The bye boat fishery had one major weakness — it easily became a resident fishery when it was convenient to do so. For example, it almost disappeared during the American Revolution when the bye boat men stayed in Newfoundland. This was necessary in order to retain their fishing rooms, which were increasingly under threat of encroachment by residents, whose numbers generally increased during periods of war. After the American Revolution, it was not able to recover and quickly declined. Bye boat keepers and/or servants were not enumerated after 1788, but there were reports up to 1801 of bye boats being employed in the fishery and reports up to 1803 of the quantities of fish caught by bye boat men. This decline had a significant effect on the viability of the other branches of the British migratory fishery, especially on that of the bank ships, for these ships lost a major source of their income — the annual transportation of the bye boat men and their equipment and supplies to and from Newfoundland. Nevertheless, the decline in the bye boat fishery as well as in the other migratory fisheries had a far greater impact on the economy of the West Country than it did on the fishermen them-

7 See Matthews, "West of England-Newfoundland Fishery", for a more complete discussion of this fishery.

selves, for the fishermen simply took up permanent residence in Newfoundland and the fishery continued.

The decline in the bank, fishing ship and bye boat fisheries was matched by a growth in the resident population and fishery. While it is probable that men were left behind during the last decades of the 16th century to care for equipment and buildings over the winters, the first known Europeans to establish a winter residence on the island since the Viking age were the small group of people brought to Cupids, Conception Bay, by John Guy in 1610. David Kirke's business venture in 1637 was the last in this brief series of organized colonization attempts. By 1660 the English government had become opposed to any colonization of the island and after a brief attempt to discourage settlement, generally ignored the residents' existence. Meanwhile, fishing captains, who had practised a crude "first come, first served" fishery in the 16th century, were granted their own charter in 1634, making their customs legal and giving the first captain to arrive in each harbour the authority to maintain law and order and to settle disputes. Gradually these fishing captains became more concerned with holding onto and improving the fishing premises they had taken the trouble to erect in the various harbours. This was especially so as independent ship owners evolved into companies with bigger investments in buildings, wharves, flakes and stages which, in turn, were getting increasingly expensive to erect as the forests became depleted. (The practice of using tree rinds as waterproof roofing material and for covering fish piles contributed to this depletion). Therefore, caretakers were left in the harbours over winter; they were expected to make certain preparations for the following summer and also to make sure that the fishing room was saved from falling into another's hands. The remnants of the colonization attempts and these caretakers laid the foundation for the growth of a Newfoundland resident population.

Although a steady stream of fishermen continued to settle in Newfoundland from the beginning of the 17th century and although certain family names in Newfoundland can be traced back to the very earliest residents, most fishermen treated Newfoundland as a temporary residence — either moving on to the Atlantic seaboard colonies or retiring to England. In 1650 there were about 1,500 European residents on the island; this figure had increased to about 3,000 by the end of the century, but then several decades of stagnation followed and it was almost mid-18th century before the number of people residing over the winter reached 5,000. The introduction of the potato at about this time provided a local substitute for imported flour and bread and also provided an important source of vitamin C. This assistance in the battle against starvation and malnutrition plus difficulties in the migratory fishery brought about a more rapid growth in population during the following decades. Furthermore, the success of the English colonies in establishing their independence curtailed migration there from Newfoundland after 1775. Moreover the establishment of a Newfound-

land-West Indian fish, molasses and rum trade after the American Revolution gave further impetus to population growth and stability.

By the late 1780s the population had risen to nearly 20,000 but fluctuated until the latter stages of the French Revolutionary War. Furthermore, although the residents' share of the fish produced increased significantly after the American Revolution, well over one-half the dried cod fish was still being produced by the migratory fishermen. However, after the American Embargo Act of 1807 and the opening of the southern European ports by the British invasion of Spain in 1808, there was a stimulation in the Newfoundland dried fish trade which encouraged population growth. This growth intensified after the outbreak of the Anglo-American war in 1812. The number of people classified as residents grew to more than 30,000 by 1812 and to more than 40,000 by 1815. There was a comparative increase in the number of boats owned by inhabitants and in the quantity of fish produced by them. By 1815 residents owned almost all the fishing boats engaged in the fishery and were producing the entire yield of saltfish.

The disappearance of the migratory fishing fleets and the unprecedented growth in the population and their fishery were not simply opposite sides of the same coin. While it is true that the number of residents had always grown during wartime — certainly since Queen Anne's war — there had never been such an element of permanence involved. Although the wars initially caused severe difficulties for the fish export trade, the Newfoundland fishery was able to weather these market problems and to take successful advantage of available opportunities to market their produce.

The British-Newfoundland saltfish industry had entered a very healthy era after the American Revolution, and by 1788 nearly 950,000 cwts were produced, with southern Europe being the major market. In a report on the Newfoundland fishery written in 1781 but describing the period just prior to the American Revolution, John Cutter, a merchant in the fishery, summarized the trade and estimated the amount of fish produced in Newfoundland waters and its destinations.<sup>8</sup> Although his estimates of the quantity produced by British fishermen are probably too high, the report establishes the importance of Alicante as a market for British fish, followed by Leghorn, Lisbon, Naples/Oporto/Bilbao/the West Indies, and Barcelona. The size of the American fish trade in Bilbao and the extent to which it exceeded the British is also interesting because the British-Newfoundland saltfish trade experienced great difficulties in Bilbao after 1814 and was eventually displaced by Norway's. Cutter also pointed out that the French had a habit of sending saltfish that was surplus to home consumption to Genoa, Leghorn, and some Spanish ports; this was a practice which was also evident in the 19th century. The size of the American trade in the West Indies is certainly supported by other evidence and this presence also continued, with

8 "Remarks of a Merchant in the Newfoundland Fishery 1781 by John Cutter", CO 194/37, fols. 125-33.

*Newfoundland: Fishery to Colony 39*

Table I: Population of Newfoundland,  
1796-1820

Year	Population
1796	-
1797	11,382
1798	-
1799	-
1800	-
1801 <sup>1</sup>	14,902
1802	-
1803	19,029
1804	20,380
1805	21,975
1806	-
1807	25,234
1808	24,625
1809	25,157
1810 <sup>2</sup>	12,553
1811	25,985
1812	30,772
1813	32,749
1814 <sup>3</sup>	25,952
1815	40,568
1816	41,898
1817	43,409
1818	40,854
1819	40,937
1820	42,535

1 No figures for Bonavista, Trepassey and St. John's Island.

2 No figures for Bonavista, Conception Bay, Fortune Bay, Burin and Bay of Bulls.

3 Should no doubt read 35,952.

variations, during the 19th century. Certain ports were to be closed to foreign imports after 1814, but throughout the 19th century, the fate of the Newfoundland saltfish trade remained closely tied to developments in Spain, Portugal and the Italian ports.

High production up to 1789 caused a glut in the markets and a decline in prices. In 1790 and 1791 the fishery had retreated to a more reduced position with exports of 756,528 cwts and 772,121 cwts respectively; prices also recovered to 14s. per quintal. Part of the reason for the rapid growth in demand during the last part of the 1780s was the decline in the French fishery. In the six years ending in 1774, the French produced on an average 333,586 cwts of dried cod in Newfoundland waters, while in the three-year period ending in 1789, only 128,590 cwts, 241,262 cwts and 239,000 cwts were produced. Information is missing regarding 1790, but in 1791 and 1792 only 40,580 and 94,000 cwts, respectively, were produced. Meanwhile, the British fishery itself had declined to only 529,655 cwts in 1792; this triggered a stream of protests from the West Country merchants and a parliamentary committee was established early in 1793 to examine the situation.

Several of the witnesses called before the committee blamed Norway for taking over the market of Barcelona and also pointed out that the French and Americans were proving to be strong competitors in Spain. William Newman of Dartmouth complained as well about French and American competition. William Knox, also involved in the Newfoundland fish trade, claimed that American bank fish was competing too successfully with the British-Newfoundland product. When asked to name ports in Europe which had been markets for Newfoundland fish but which had recently been lost, he replied, "All the Spanish ports in the Bay of Biscay, particularly Bilbao, St. Sebastians and St. Andero which are now primarily supplied with American Fish". He also explained that the Danes, or Norwegians, were selling their stock fish — cod fish dried without salt — in both Italy and Spain. In addition, all the older firms joined in accusing those who had become established after 1763 or after 1783 as "adventurers and hucksters" who had, by their cut-throat competition, caused a trade crisis. For the most part, they joined in placing much of the blame on the British government, which was impeding their enterprise by collecting customs duties and entering and clearance charges in Newfoundland — a charge that was vigorously refuted by Richard Routh, the customs collector appointed to Newfoundland.<sup>9</sup> In retrospect, it seems that the limited success of the cod fishery in 1792 was mainly due to a catch failure, for the price in St. John's that autumn was a very healthy 15s. to 16s. per cwt.<sup>10</sup> In addition, of course, investment must have declined after the glut caused by overproduction in 1788.

9 Sheila Lambert, ed., *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century* (Delaware, 1976), Vol. 90, pp. 230, 139-40, 133, 289-96.

10 "Exports", BT 6/92, fol. 164, PRO.



## *Newfoundland: Fishery to Colony 41*

The outbreak of war between France and Great Britain in 1793 was the beginning of a period of major disruptions in the Newfoundland fishery. British exports of saltfish from Newfoundland declined to 458,111 cwts in 1793 and the price for best quality fish went down to 13s. per cwt in St. John's.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the southern European markets remained open and the following year there was a slight recovery, followed by another decline in 1795 which continued into 1796. It is impossible to explain satisfactorily the low productivity of these early years of the war, but no doubt there was a certain reluctance on the part of merchants to invest capital during these years, and the migratory fishery had been, as we have seen, substantially reduced. In 1796 a French squadron of ten men-of-war destroyed some fishing stations on the Labrador coast,<sup>12</sup> and this squadron also carried out raids against British-Newfoundland fishing ships south of St. John's, burning and sinking bankers and inshore shallows. Nevertheless, as Governor Sir Richard Wallace remarked, "The fishery this year [1796] has been interrupted but the injury done to it is by no means equal to what might have been expected when we consider the Force of the enemy that came to destroy it".<sup>13</sup> However, in 1796 Spain joined the French coalition, thus closing their markets to British fish, while at the same time cutting off a major source of salt. This latter factor, combined with unusually wet weather during the summer of 1797, resulted in the production of poor quality fish in 1797. Governor William Waldegrave wrote in August 1797: "Vast quantities of fish have been already brought into the different Ports of this Island, but the scarcity of salt and the unfavourable season for drying, has caused some part of it to be injured, and I fear some has entirely rotted".<sup>14</sup> The closure of the Spanish market and the lack of salt combined with wet weather to make the 1797 fishery the most disastrous since the American Revolution. Production declined to 374,940 cwts; it was also reported that 368,817 cwts were exported with a top price of 13s. 6d. per cwt.

In 1798 the situation improved somewhat, but not a great deal. In the absence of Spanish markets Portugal was being swamped with fish, and this kept the price low. In 1798 the top prices for fish in St. John's were only 10s. to 11s. per cwt,<sup>15</sup> while the price of provisions had risen considerably, with pork selling for nine to ten guineas per barrel.<sup>16</sup> The condition of the residents had worsened con-

11 *Ibid.* (In the CO 194 report it was stated that total exports amounted to 427,460 cwts.)

12 Report from Admiral Crofton, Commander of the HMS *Pluto*, to Admiral Waldegrave, CO 194/40, fols. 17-34. Information was collected in the summer of 1797 and the report is dated 10 January 1798.

13 Governor Sir James Wallace to the Duke of Portland, 24 November 1796, CO 194/39, fols. 27-45.

14 Governor Waldegrave to Colonial Office, 14 August 1797, *ibid.*, fols. 86-88.

15 BT 6/92, fol. 164; and Governor Waldegrave to the Duke of Portland, 30 October 1798, CO 194/40, fols. 135-37.

16 Frederick Warren, R.N., to Governor Waldegrave, 24 March 1798, CO 194/40, fol. 65.

siderably by the fall of 1789 and Governor Waldegrave reported that there was a serious threat of starvation.<sup>17</sup> To add to the misery, there was a partial potato failure in 1798. In one effort to relieve this distress, Waldegrave requested £1000 worth of copper coin from the British Treasury; this was provided and put into circulation. Almost immediately, loaves of bread went on the market at one and two pence each instead of at the minimum six pence (silver) which had been the former price.<sup>18</sup> This importation of copper coin from the British Treasury became a common practice during the following years. The British government had already given Waldegrave permission to allow imports of bread, flour and other food from the United States in order to keep prices down and prevent famine. (This permission was renewed annually until the Americans imposed an embargo in 1807, but by then the European scene had changed). In response to complaints from the merchants that crimes were being committed against their property during the winter by impoverished fishermen, the British government ordered in 1798 that the chief justice remain in Newfoundland on a fulltime basis.<sup>19</sup>

Conditions continued to be poor in the next four seasons. In 1799 exports exceeded 450,000 cwts but there was much poor quality fish. During this year, there were a large number of bankruptcies and a number of forced property sales by fairly well-established names in the fishery, including Harris and Roope, Thomas Stokes, and William Henley.<sup>20</sup> In 1800 and 1802 exports of salt-fish amounted to 517,348 and 461,144 cwts, respectively, and prices rose steadily from a high of 15s. to 27s. per cwt for the top quality product in St. John's.<sup>21</sup> For

17 Governor Waldegrave to the Colonial Office, 30 October 1798, *ibid.*, fols. 135-37. He computed the expenses of an average planter with four fishermen and two shoremen as follows:

four (4) fishermen's wages	@ £21 - £84
provisions for above	@ £10 - £40
two (2) shoremen's wages	@ £19 - £38
provisions for above	@ £10 - £20
bait for the boat	@ £11 - £11
boat, lines, hooks, and all her craft	@ £20 - £20

£213

He went on to point out that in 1798 the average catch for this crew was about 280 cwts at an average price of 9s. per cwt. This would mean that the voyage was worth only £126, leaving the planter with a loss of £87. Salt was not included in the cost of the outfit for, as Waldegrave explained, the train oil produced generally covered the price of the salt. However, he added that the price of salt was rising while the price of oil remained the same.

18 Governor Waldegrave to the Colonial Office, 18 October 1798, *ibid.*, fol. 105.

19 Governor Waldegrave to the Colonial Office, 11 June 1798, *ibid.*, fol. 83. Another 20 years were to pass before the British government decided Newfoundland needed a fulltime governor. In the meantime, his annual tour in Newfoundland was confined to the fishing season and sometimes only a brief part of that.

20 Report of St. John's Magistrates to Waldegrave, 24 October 1799, CO 194/42, fol. 148.

21 BT 6/92. No information was available on 1801.

the most part, the fishery had suffered from the war but had made some adjustments, especially in becoming more sedentary. As Lieutenant Governor Robert Barton wrote in January 1802: "During the War the Fishery of the Island has been in a great degree sedentary, very few passengers have arrived from His Majesty's European Dominions during the period but it may be expected that great numbers will come out next year".<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, American fishing interests had not been idle. During the 1790s they employed 4,000 to 5,000 men annually, and during the ten-year period ending in 1800 they exported an annual average of 396,781 cwts of saltfish.<sup>23</sup> For the three-year period from 1798 to 1800, their exports to the West Indies averaged 175,897 cwts,<sup>24</sup> with the bulk of the remainder going to southern Europe. Much of this fish was produced on the Labrador coast, with as many as 1,500 American vessels being involved (as in 1805), each carrying 12 to 14 men.<sup>25</sup> One report in 1804 described the American fishery more fully. In that year about 1,360 American ships fished at Labrador and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and employed about 10,600 men. The report went on to point out that the Americans sold their wet-salted cod to France and in the American home market, and their dry-salted product to the Mediterranean, with the worst of the latter being sent to the West Indies.<sup>26</sup> It was also reported that the United States was exporting 150,000 cwts of saltfish annually to the British West Indies by 1804, while Newfoundland sold only 50,000 cwts there.<sup>27</sup>

When war resumed in 1803, the Newfoundland fishery was much better able to deal with this interruption than it had been ten years earlier. Gibraltar began importing large quantities of saltfish for re-export; some of this was no doubt smuggled into southern Spain. Gibraltar took about 75,000 cwts in 1804 and about 100,000 in 1805.<sup>28</sup> Almost immediately after the outbreak of the war, the British government granted permission for Newfoundland to import provisions from the United States in an effort to depress food prices, wages, and fish prices.<sup>29</sup> However, the demand for servants increased as the number of passengers from the British Isles continued to decline: more than 6,000 came annually in 1787-88; 3,588 in 1800; 1,892 in 1802; a rise to 2,732 in 1803 because of the

22 Barton to Lord Hobart, 2 January 1802, CO 194/43, fols. 24-28.

23 Report laid before the House of Representatives by the Secretary of the Treasury respecting the fishermen of the United States on the 29th of January, BT 6/91, fol. 3.

24 Account of U.S. fish exports to the West Indies, *ibid.*, fol. 1.

25 Report from Captain James Murray, R.N., of H.M. Sloop *Curlew* on the Labrador coast, 23 July 1805, *ibid.*, fol. 116.

26 Lieutenant Morrison, R.N., Commander, HMS *Charlotte* to Governor Gower, September 1804, CO 194/44, fols. 24-25.

27 Gower to Lord Camden, 24 December 1804, *ibid.*, fols. 50-61.

28 BT 6/92, fol. 164. Computed by deducting 30,000 cwts for British and Irish consumption.

29 Order-in-Council, 2 March 1803, CO 194/43, fols. 284-89.

## 44 *Acadiensis*

peace; down to 646 in 1804; 755 in 1805; and 600 in 1806.<sup>30</sup>

In 1804 Governor Sir Erasmus Gower reported that the fishery was carried out almost exclusively by the residents.<sup>31</sup> He also reported that fishermen were still in the habit of using Newfoundland as a stepping stone to the North American continent and, consequently, without a large annual influx of servants, wages would rise too high and profits would remain low. Of St. John's, Gower wrote in July 1805:

...this Harbour is no longer a mere fishing station, built round with temporary Flakes, Stages, and Huts of trifling value, but...it is a port of extensive Commerce...importing near two thirds of the supplies for the whole Island, and furnished with extensive Store-Houses and Wharfs for trade, containing a quantity of Provisions, Stores for the Fishery, British Manufacturers and West Indian Produce, as well as Fish and Oil ready for exportation, which together with the Buildings is computed to be worth more than a half a million Sterling.<sup>32</sup>

By 1806 Gower was explaining to the Colonial Office that the fishery was wholly sedentary and yet supplied all the available markets.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, local shipbuilding was becoming firmly established as well as a resident seal fishery. In this connection, Gower reported that 149 ships, all built in Newfoundland, prosecuted the seal fishery in 1804.<sup>34</sup>

The extensive exports of saltfish to Portugal glutted that country's markets repeatedly during this period so that much merchantable fish could not be sold in 1805 and had to remain in the island over the winter. To compensate to some degree, Great Britain prohibited Barbados, St. Vincent, and Grenada from purchasing fish from the United States, and Newfoundland's exports to the Caribbean rose from about 50,000 cwts annually before 1805 to 81,000 in that year and 101,000 in 1806. However, Jamaica and Demerara continued to purchase the American product. In addition, American traders had been buying some of Newfoundland's top quality fish for export to Spain and the amount thus purchased rose to 100,000 cwts in 1806.<sup>35</sup> In that year exports of saltfish totalled over 770,000 cwts, with top prices at 14s. per cwt. In 1807 about 675,000 cwts were exported and 13s. 6d. was the top price. Once again, there is a tone of comfort in the records and reports for 1807. The fishery was moderately successful and prices and wages were moderately high. Rapid changes were in the offing.

30 BT 6/92, fol. 164. These figures vary slightly from those reported in CO 194. See Ryan, "Abstract".

31 Gower to Colonial Office, 28 March 1804, CO 194/44, fols. 40-43.

32 Gower to Colonial Office, 18 July 1805, *ibid.*, fols. 115-17.

33 Gower to Colonial Office, 29 April 1806, CO 194/45, fols. 61-69.

34 Gower to Colonial Office, n.d. 1805, *ibid.*, fols. 46-47.

35 Gower to Colonial Office, 9 November 1806, *ibid.*, fols. 155-59. See also Gower to Colonial Office, 9 November 1806, CO 195/14, fols. 50-54.

## *Newfoundland: Fishery to Colony 45*

**Table II: Codfish Caught By Inhabitants of Newfoundland,  
1771-1791, 1796-1820  
(quintals)**

Year	Inhabitants	Total	Year	Inhabitants	Total
1771	261,240	639,919	1799	-	466,332
1772	298,605	759,843	1800	-	517,348
1773	366,446	780,328	1801 <sup>1</sup>	195,400	255,740
1774	312,426	695,866	1802	-	461,144
1775	230,540	658,315	1803	410,188 <sup>2</sup>	536,188
1776	205,448	549,903	1804	531,084	609,684
1777	-	-	1805	662,800	706,314
1778	205,840	501,140	1806	-	772,809
1779	262,500	409,670	1807	462,250	520,552
1780	-	-	1808	468,185	478,735
1781	168,150	255,150	1809	625,941	677,761
1782	-	-	1810 <sup>3</sup>	299,515	317,415
1783	-	-	1811	601,894	618,494
1784	212,616	437,316	1812	674,611	709,163
1785	262,576	544,942	1813	819,250 <sup>4</sup>	869,750
1786	257,547	569,142	1814	797,762 <sup>4</sup>	865,132
1787	341,620	732,015	1815	802,668 <sup>5</sup>	866,580
1788	457,105	948,970	1816	739,977	819,200
1789	339,260	771,569	1817	712,487	778,227
1790	302,974	649,092	1818	559,183	606,733
1791	229,770	536,287	1819	588,149 <sup>6</sup>	717,909
1796	-	445,471	1820	736,524 <sup>7</sup>	810,074
1797	261,570	374,940			
1798	-	485,764			

1 No figures for Bonavista, Trepassey and St. John's Island.

2 Also there were 25,720 quintals caught on North Shore by residents.

3 No figures for Bonavista, Conception Bay, Fortune Bay, Burin and Bay of Bulls.

4 In addition, caught on French Shore and Labrador by residents: 1813: 29,500 quintals, 1814: 44,050 quintals.

5 Includes amount caught by Labrador and French Shore residents.

6 In addition, caught on Labrador by residents: 76,000 quintals.

7 Includes amount caught by North Shore and Labrador residents.

The markets had finally been adjusted to compensate for the closure of the Spanish and Mediterranean ports. Gibraltar's imports had reached 130,000 cwts by 1807, while the British West Indies imported more than 100,000 cwts and the United States more than 155,000 cwts. The Americans exported their Newfoundland-purchased saltfish directly to southern Spain while the saltfish re-exported from Gibraltar took clandestine routes. The American Embargo Act of 1807 reduced that country's imports of Newfoundland saltfish to about one-third its 1807 figure, and the French invasion temporarily closed the Portuguese ports to English commerce. These events and the beginning of the Peninsular War encouraged exporters to send more than 208,000 cwts to Gibraltar. However, there was a general hesitation in the industry during 1808 which was reflected in a lower catch and lower prices. Governor Holloway wrote that the number employed in the fisheries was down owing to the ports of Portugal being closed and the uncertainty of affairs with the United States.<sup>36</sup> The trade was discouraging, but at least Trafalgar (1805) had removed most of the maritime dangers and merchants were now sending their ships to market singly rather than in convoy so as not to create more gluts.<sup>37</sup> However, the closure of the American ports soon raised the price of provisions as the British West Indies were also forced to turn to British North America for supplies.<sup>38</sup>

In 1809 the ports of Spain and Portugal were being re-opened as a British army began to aid the Spanish and Portuguese in the Peninsular War. Portugal and Gibraltar bought almost 620,000 cwts of Newfoundland saltfish in all and the West Indies more than 133,000, but the Americans bought very little. Also, the price of the best fish did not rise above 13s. 6d per cwt, and the importation of supplies became a major problem. Governor Holloway wrote that a lack of supplies from the United States, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island had left the island "totally destitute of Beef for the Supply of His Majesty's Ships and the Inhabitants are deprived of it; I may therefore be under the necessity of allowing the Importation of Livestock, Grain and Fruit from the Azores or Western Islands, which I trust will meet your Lordship's approbation".<sup>39</sup> Similarly, in September Holloway complained about the lack of salt and stated that fish had to be thrown away for that reason. He also pointed out that 1808-09 had been a severe winter due to the great shortage of provisions because of the U.S. embargo. He also reported that the huge American fishery on the Labrador coast had ceased.<sup>40</sup> But, despite the unsettled market conditions and the scarcity of provisions, the saltfish exports exceeded 810,000 cwts.

By 1810, when the island produced 884,470 cwts for export, mainly to

36 Holloway to Colonial Office, 20 July 1808, CO 194/47, fol. 47.

37 *Ibid.*, fols. 52-53.

38 Holloway to Colonial Office, 18 November 1808, *ibid.*, fols. 61-68.

39 Holloway to Castlereagh, 19 July 1809, CO 194/48, fol. 23.

40 *Ibid.*

Table III: Markets for Newfoundland Codfish Exports, 1796-1820 (quintals)

Year	Spain, Portugal & Italy	British Europe	British West Indies	British America	United States	Brazil	Total
1796	-	-	-	-	-	-	445,471
1797	209,755	73,858	35,008	-	-	-	318,621
1798	-	-	-	-	-	-	485,764
1799	-	-	-	-	-	-	466,332
1800	-	-	-	-	-	-	517,348
1801 <sup>1</sup>	107,037	45,002	162,878 <sup>2</sup>	-	-	-	314,917
1802	-	-	-	-	-	-	461,144
1803	381,519	102,638	64,248	3,082	31,362	-	582,849
1804	425,446	41,480	41,590	15,757	35,169	-	559,442 <sup>3</sup>
1805	377,293	65,979	81,488	22,776	77,983	-	625,519
1806	438,918	84,241	100,936	32,555	116,159	-	772,809
1807	262,366 <sup>3</sup>	130,400	103,418	23,541	155,085	-	674,810
1808	154,669 <sup>3</sup>	208,254	115,677	40,874	56,658	-	576,132
1809	326,781 <sup>4</sup>	292,068	133,359	41,894	16,117	-	810,219
1810 <sup>5</sup>	373,635	136,243	151,869	35,327	1,274	6,170	705,058
1811	611,960	139,561	152,184	18,621	1,214	-	923,540
1812	545,451	67,020	91,864	4,121	-	2,600	711,056
1813 <sup>6</sup>	727,739	50,701	119,354	14,389	-	-	912,183
1814	768,010	55,791	97,249	24,712	-	2,049	947,811
1815	952,116	46,116	159,233	24,608	588	-	1,182,661
1816	770,693½	59,341½	176,603	37,443	2,545	-	1,046,626
1817	681,559	79,746	150,827	20,656	2,848	-	935,636
1818	560,632	57,258	116,716	-	-	-	751,818
1819	606,689	57,737	126,995	3,762	-	13,067	808,250
1820	626,644	81,014	139,484	19,741	-	7,723	874,606

1 No figures for Bonavista, Trepassey and St. John's Island.

2 Includes exports to the United States.

3 Amount exported to Portugal and Italy only.

4 Amount exported to Portugal only.

5 No figures for Bonavista, Conception Bay, Fortune Bay, Burin and Bay of Bulls.

6 Beginning in 1813, the name West Indies is used instead of British West Indies.

Portugal and Gibraltar, the island's exporters had adjusted to the new trade pattern. They had increased their exports to the British West Indies, displaced much of the American trade in southern Spain and continued to dominate the substantial trade to Portugal. Meanwhile, both wages and prices had risen since 1804.<sup>41</sup> In 1811 Spain and Portugal imported the enormous quantity of 611,960 cwts of Newfoundland saltfish,<sup>42</sup> while 140,000 cwts went to Gibraltar and more than 152,000 to the British West Indies, for a grand total of 923,540 cwts. By this time, moreover, the large British banking fleet had completely disappeared and the Newfoundland residents were producing the entire catch.

The year 1812 brought another war, and this time closer to home, as the Anglo-American war broke out. Security, not trade, became the top priority for both government and business. Of the fishery in 1812, Governor Sir John Thomas Duckworth wrote that it was "moderately successful and in some instances remarkably so". However, he also noted that merchants appeared unwilling to risk their vessels in the export trade: "There has been a want of shipping to export the produce of the season and a great proportion of it remains of necessity in the Stores of the Merchants. This circumstance has been the more regretted as the European Markets have been particularly advantageous, and the demand for fish unusually great".<sup>43</sup> In the meantime, a large cargo of bread and flour arrived from Quebec and, although prices were high, there was no scarcity of these items in the fall of 1812.<sup>44</sup> Total exports of saltfish amounted to 711,256 cwts in 1812, of which 545,451 went to Spain and Portugal (and possibly a little to Italy). Prices were abnormally high, reaching 22s. per cwt for top quality fish in 1811 and 22s. 6d. in 1812. Thus one can appreciate Governor Duckworth's lament in the fall of 1812 when he complained about the lack of sufficient ships. Nevertheless, while the war did discourage shipping to Newfoundland, the withdrawal of the Americans from the European saltfish trade helped create the unusual demand for the Newfoundland product. Indeed one traditional market, the British West Indies, was left short of supplies in 1812 as Newfoundland's exports there amounted to only 91,864 cwts. Similarly, exports to Gibraltar were reduced substantially as shipments there amounted to only 67,000 cwts. The growing importance of the resident fishery was becoming more obvious. Governor Duckworth, after consulting leading figures in the Newfoundland trade and in Newfoundland society, wrote in 1812 that "the Fisheries of Newfoundland are now decidedly sedentary, and that the war has been protracted so long as to make it very uncertain whether any change of system would be produced by the return of peace".<sup>45</sup>

41 Duckworth to Liverpool, 25 November 1810, CO 194/48, fol. 51-129.

42 This figure probably includes a little that was imported into Italy.

43 Duckworth to Earl Bathurst, 1 November 1812, CO 194/52, fols. 86-109.

44 *Ibid.*

45 Duckworth to Bathurst, 2 November 1812, CO 194/53, fols. 3-8.



## *Newfoundland: Fishery to Colony 49*

In 1813 the fishery was again unusually productive, and 912,183 cwts of fish were exported. However, the weather for drying the fish was poor and, consequently, there was a lower proportion of merchantable fish.<sup>46</sup> This, no doubt, helps to explain why the best fish sold for 32s. to 42s. per cwt, which were unheard-of prices.<sup>47</sup> It was also reported that servants were being paid an average of £70 per season.<sup>48</sup> Again, supplies were plentiful in the fall of 1813 and were brought mostly from Great Britain.<sup>49</sup> Governor Sir Richmond Godwin Keats continued the practice begun by Governor James Gambier in 1803<sup>50</sup> of granting small plots of land to fishermen to enable them to better support themselves and their families.<sup>51</sup> Gower commented on the changes occurring in Newfoundland, especially in St. John's:

St. John's became the Emporium of the Island in consequence of this extended war, with a population of nearly 10,000 inhabitants, seems to have grown out of its character from a Fishery to a large Commercial Town, and for a considerable time past has offered such advantages to the Farmer and Gardener as to surmount in a great degree all the restraints which Nature or the Policy of Government has laid on the Cultivation of a Soil, certainly less sterile than has generally been considered. But this character which it has latterly assumed, it is very doubtful if it will be able to support on the return of Peace.<sup>52</sup>

Like Duckworth, Keats recognized that the Newfoundland fishery had changed but, unlike Duckworth, he was not perceptive enough to conclude that the changes were becoming irreversible.

Peace was concluded in both Europe and North America in 1814 and, once again, exports of saltfish rose, this time to 947,811 cwts, of which 768,010 went to Spain, Portugal and into the Mediterranean. At the same time, the prices declined to 24s. 6d. per cwt for the merchantable quality. This was probably the most pleasant year of the whole period, with plenty of supplies from Great Britain and more about to arrive from the United States once peace was concluded. There was no danger from privateers and no signs yet of the violent loot-

46 Keats to Bathurst, 18 November 1813, CO 194/54, fols. 159-74.

47 See Edward Chapell, *Voyage of H.M.S. Rosamund to Newfoundland and the Southern Coast of Labrador* (London, 1818), pp. 245-247, and Ryan, "Abstract".

48 Society of Merchants, St. John's, to Keats, 23 June 1813, CO 194/54, fols. 55-56. According to Charles Pedley, *The History of Newfoundland* (London, 1863), p. 284, fish splitters received £90 - £140 in 1814.

49 Keats to Bathurst, 19 December 1813, *ibid.*, fols. 159-74.

50 Gambier to Hobart, 12 December 1803, CO 194/42, fols. 175-78.

51 Keats to Bathurst, 18 December 1813, CO 194/54, fols. 159-74.

52 *Ibid.*

ings and other troubles which were to mar the immediate post-war, depressed years. The island enjoyed full employment, high wages, a large catch, and almost insatiable markets. Only Chief Justice Caesar Colclough saw, or imagined he saw, a very gloomy picture. Writing to Keats in March 1814, he pointed out that the high wages had encouraged greater dissipation among the inhabitants than usual. Then, foreseeing unemployment as a result of peace in Europe, he added rather gloomily that if low wages and unemployment ever returned, the ignorant people would find consolation or at least refuge in the bottle.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, by December the first cracks had begun to appear in the economic edifice as fish prices began to decline and information was received that the French fishery was recovering at St. Pierre and Miquelon and also on the Grand Banks, though not as yet on the "French Shore".<sup>54</sup>

Newfoundland had changed rapidly during the preceding decades. In 1795 Governor Wallace had complained that the merchants were staying and encouraging their men to do likewise.<sup>55</sup> This was a normal occurrence in wartime and had been observed and reported on numerous occasions during the 18th century. Just one year later, it was noted that "the population has so rapidly increased that in a few years an extensive fishery may be carried on there by the Inhabitants alone without receiving annual supply's [sic] of Men from England and Ireland as heretofore".<sup>56</sup> In 1804 Gower reported that the fishery in Newfoundland was carried out "almost wholly" by residents.<sup>57</sup> Again, this was not unusual because it had occurred during previous wars. In 1805 Gower reported that St. John's was "no longer a mere fishing station. . .but a port of extensive Commerce".<sup>58</sup> However, since St. John's had been the centre for the British bank fishery and since that had been disrupted because of the war, one can see why the port could not remain a fishing station and still prosper. Furthermore, St. John's was the most secure port on the island and had always been the naval governors' headquarters. In 1806 Gower reported again that the fishery was "almost wholly sedentary".<sup>59</sup> A few months later, he pointed out that the increase in the sedentary fishery and in the population was "likely to create a necessity for a resident Governor".<sup>60</sup> Governor Holloway's time was spent dealing with the American

53 Colclough to Keats, 21 March 1814, CO 194/55, fols. 233-41. Colclough also took a personal part in breaking up personal and faction fights, which he seemed to think were seditious in nature. It is not surprising that he was forced to take early retirement back to England with nervous problems and stomach disorders.

54 Keats to Bathurst, 29 December 1814, *ibid.*, fols. 95-104.

55 Wallace to Portland, 25 November 1795, CO 194/41, fol. 105.

56 Captain Ambrose Crofton, R.N., to Waldegrave concerning his observations during the summer of 1796, 10 January 1798, CO 194/40, fols. 17-34.

57 Gower to Camden, 28 November 1804, CO 194/44, fols. 40-43.

58 Gower to Camden, 18 July 1805, *ibid.*, fols. 119-22.

59 Gower to Windham, 29 April 1806, CO 194/45, fols. 61-99.

60 Gower to Stephen Cottrell, 9 June 1806, *ibid.*, fols. 253-61.

## *Newfoundland: Fishery to Colony 51*

embargo and with the prosperity which followed the opening of the Spanish markets after 1808, but in 1812 Governor Duckworth made it clear that "the Fisheries of Newfoundland are now decidedly sedentary"<sup>61</sup> and would remain so. In the meantime, Dr. William Carson, a Scotsman living in St. John's, attacked the system of naval government prevailing in Newfoundland, and advocated a system of representative government and the encouragement of agriculture.<sup>62</sup>

Since the migratory British fishery was bound to suffer in any major war, there was no real excitement generated by its decline immediately after 1793. Similarly, the usual growth in population at the same time elicited the usual perfunctory statements from the naval governors. During the course of the war period, however, this situation changed, and finally it became generally accepted, if not always appreciated, that Newfoundland's status as a fishing station had become inappropriate. The general evolution of the migratory cod fishery into a resident one was an important factor in this process. The length of the war, however, and the general prosperity that it created had encouraged the influx of large numbers of Irish.<sup>63</sup> Rapid population growth combined with the growth of a new industry — the spring seal fishery — were to make the migratory fishery redundant and ensure the survival of the colony with a broader economic base.

The settlement pattern of the Irish who arrived during the Napoleonic war period was different from those who came earlier because of the speed with which immigration took place. The Passenger Act of 1803 set stringent regulations on the transportation of British emigrants to North America. These regulations covered food, water, medical aid and sleeping accommodations, and stipulated the number of passengers per ton of burthen. Fishing ships proceeding to the Newfoundland fishery were excluded from the act, and this enabled Irish emigrants to travel to North America via Newfoundland at a lower price. Moreover, the demands for labour increased in Newfoundland as the market prospects improved and wages became attractive. Both these factors encouraged Irish emigrants to travel to the island under inhuman (but inexpensive) condi-

61 Duckworth to Bathurst, 2 November 1812, CO 194/53, fols. 3-8.

62 Dr. William Carson was one of the most influential promoters of representative government. See Prowse, *A History of Newfoundland*, and Frederick W. Rowe, *A History of Newfoundland and Labrador* (Toronto, 1980).

63 Irish Roman Catholics had had some connections with Newfoundland ever since Lord Falkland's settlement attempts in the early 17th century. They continued to come out to Newfoundland in limited numbers, on English fishing ships which called at Waterford and other Irish ports on their spring voyages for supplies of beef, pork, butter, cheese, and porter for the fishery. Immediately after the Treaty of Utrecht, relatively large numbers of Irish settled in Placentia Bay and St. Mary's Bay — areas which became vacant due to the expulsion of the French. Others settled in St. John's and its vicinity. For the most part, these Irish became integrated into the primitive resident fishing society that existed.

tions, sleeping on deck or on top of the bales of cargo.<sup>64</sup> With no fishing experience and very little, if any, capital, these Irish were fortunate to find that there was plenty of employment on the island. They consequently became servants for the established ship owners.

Ship owners, planter-fishermen, and new local entrepreneurs invested heavily in the fishery during these years of prosperity. They even began sending ships and crews to the northern part of the island where the French had fished, in relative peace, before the wars. Furthermore, they discovered that seals could be harvested by the thousands in early spring, and fishing vessels were sent to seek out cargoes of these sea mammals on the ice floes. This seal fishery, which involved activity during the months of February to May, provided a welcome supplement to the summer cod fishery. The seal fishery could be prosecuted only by residents and a comment by Lord Bathurst to the Newfoundland governor in 1812 neatly summed up the situation: "There can be no question that the present situation of that [Newfoundland cod] fishery from the long continuation of the War, and the great change which the recent introduction of the Seal Fishery must necessarily have occasioned, even if the War were now to terminate, will require a revision of the Laws and Instructions at present in existence".<sup>65</sup>

The movement towards a resident fishery was accelerated enormously during the war period by the extraordinary demand for Newfoundland's saltfish. The resulting near-monopoly situation encouraged local investment in the fishery and in the necessary infrastructure, especially shipbuilding. The expansion of the St. John's and Conception Bay fishing industry to the northern part of the island<sup>66</sup> resulted in the creation of a fishing fleet which was also able to participate in the harvest of the extensive seal herds. By the time the war had ended in 1815, Newfoundland's history as a British migratory fishery had come to a close and it was about to be recognized as another, albeit unique, British colony. Thus Newfoundland, which had always been a fishery based around an island, would finally become a colony based on a fishery.

64 Keats to Bathurst, 1 October 1815, CO 194/56, fols. 63-64.

65 Bathurst to Duckworth, 13 June 1812, CO 195/16, fols. 323-26.

66 This migratory vessel fishery to the island's north coast developed into a migratory fishery on the coast of Labrador after 1815. This was the origin of Newfoundland's "Labrador" cod fishery.