

# Battle Harbour in Transition: Merchants, Fishermen, and the State in the Struggle for Relief in a Labrador Community during the 1930s

Sean Cadigan

Volume 26, 1990

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt26art05>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Article abstract

The early 1930s witnessed the deterioration of truck relationships between fishermen and merchants in Battle Harbour, a Newfoundland fishing community located on the coast of Labrador. By taking advantage of changes in the fishery, more prosperous fishermen began to deal with other firms, undercutting Baine, Johnston's domination of Battle Harbour. As Baine, Johnston withdrew winter credit, poorer fishermen threatened the firm with direct, violent action which neither the merchant nor the state were able to deal with except by granting relief. Such actions by Battle Harbour fishermen indicate that they were able to step outside the supposed limits of the culture of their kin-based villages, and confront directly the exploitation of merchant capital in the cod fishery.

## Cite this article

Cadigan, S. (1990). Battle Harbour in Transition: Merchants, Fishermen, and the State in the Struggle for Relief in a Labrador Community during the 1930s. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 26, 125–150.

## Battle Harbour in Transition:

### Merchants, Fishermen, and the State in the Struggle for Relief in a Labrador Community during the 1930s

Sean Cadigan

IN NEWFOUNDLAND, the historical experience of capital accumulation did not take place predominantly within the context of industrial capitalist development. The labour of a working class, until the mid-twentieth century, remained confined to services ancillary to the fishery in a few urban areas, the railway, some mining, and the early pulp and paper industry. Most Newfoundlanders depended on the fisheries for their livelihoods, yet the struggle between classes in Newfoundland's fishing communities has received, until recently, only scant attention, the most recent statement about social relations in the Newfoundland fishery being that of Gerald Sider. Sider felt truck to be the great exploitative evil in Newfoundland's history — the social and economic form of merchant capital's hegemony over Newfoundland society. Merchants exploited the fishery by impoverishing fishing families through the use of barter to buy salt cod for resale. Families were never given cash, but held accounts in which supplies were balanced against catches; some families' successes balanced against others' losses so that most families remained in constant debt to merchants. Some merchants also used tal qual, paying an average price for all cures provided by fisher families, but setting those prices themselves.

The final result of this truck system, for Sider, was the inhibition of any capitalist productive relations in the Newfoundland fishery from approximately 1840 through 1960. The Newfoundland fishery remained economically dominated by dependent household production, and socially dominated by an autonomous outport, kin-based village culture among fish producers. This culture, a form of "traditionalism" created by merchant capital's hegemony, ensured that the antagonisms of truck's exploitation were both expressed and obscured in popular customs: telling cuffs, mummering and scoffing.<sup>1</sup> Because the wage, both

<sup>1</sup> Instead of challenging truck's exploitation, Sider suggested that Newfoundland fishing families could only cope with the indignities of merchant capital domination in three main forms. At times, people might tell each other half-true stories about the difficulties they experienced with merchants, embellish-

alienating and solidifying in working-class formation, did not penetrate the greater alienation of outport traditionalism, fish producers could not generate, at the point of production, alternatives to household production dependent on merchant capital. Unable to do without merchant credit, Newfoundland fishing families were powerless to resist exploitation; they could only develop "traditions" to diffuse class antagonisms and thus avoid confrontation.<sup>2</sup>

Historians of truck in other regions of Atlantic Canada, however, already reject such interpretations of truck as a monolithic edifice oppressing the lives of fishermen and their families. Both Rosemary Ommer's and Roch Samson's work on the Gaspé, for example, are sensitive both to the manner in which merchants used truck to profit from the labour of their fishing clients, and also to the manner in which those clients used truck to ensure regular year-round access to credit, even in bad years when either catches or markets were poor. David Macdonald too has found that fishermen on Newfoundland's south coast negotiated the use of merchant credit for their own purposes in the fishery.<sup>3</sup>

By attributing to merchants exclusive agency in the shaping of economy and society in Newfoundland fishing communities, Sider's work continues to homogenize the Newfoundland class experience.<sup>4</sup> In seeing Newfoundland history as the story of how merchant capital, supported by the state, exploited producers who participated in their own victimization by culturally accepting truck through

---

ing the wrongs suffered at merchants' hands and mocking their own acceptance of those wrongs. These stories are cuffers. Families redistributed labour among themselves through mummering — a Christmas tradition whereby people invited each other to visit from house to house in disguise, entertaining each other and usually drinking lots of liquor. The invitation and entertainment allowed productive units to be formed and reformed without insult or ever confronting the inequalities among producers which had their origins in merchant capital's domination of marketing. Finally, families coped with the false equality of tal qual by holding scoffs: large feasts in which meals were obtained by some fishing families stealing from each other. In all these traditions, Newfoundland fisher people displayed their own inability to confront merchant capital. They could only develop anthropological blinds to disguise exploitation in the clothing of traditionalism. See Gerald M. Sider, *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration* (New York 1986), 166-9.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, 22-88, 156.

<sup>3</sup>Rosemary E. Ommer, "The Truck System in Gaspé, 1822-77," *Acadiensis*, XIX (Fall 1989), 109; "'All the Fish of the Post': property, resource rights and development in a nineteenth-century inshore fishery," *Acadiensis*, X (Spring 1981), 107-23. (Ommer has begun the study of early 20-century truck in Newfoundland in "Merchant Credit and Household Production: Newfoundland 1918-1928." Paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, Quebec City, June 1989. Roch Samson, *Fishermen and Merchants in 19th Century Gaspé* (Hull 1984), 74-6. David A. Macdonald, "They Cannot Pay Us in Money: Newman and Company and the Supplying System in the Newfoundland Fishery, 1850-1884," *Acadiensis*, XIX (Fall 1989), 145-55.

<sup>4</sup>See J.K. Hiller, Peter Narváez and Daniel Vickers, "Panel Review: Newfoundland's Past as Marxist Illustration," *Newfoundland Studies*, 3, 2 (Fall 1987), 265-9. On the problems of Sider's interpretation see Ian McKay, "Historians, Anthropology, and the Concept of Culture," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8/9 (Autumn/Spring 1981/82), 205-11. McKay discussed Sider's "Christmas Mummering and the New Year in Outport Newfoundland," *Past and Present* 71 (1976) and "The Ties That Bind: culture and agriculture, property and propriety in the Newfoundland village fishery," *Social History*, 5 (1980).

cuffers, mummering and scoffs, Sider portrays them as passive and helpless. Such an overreaching and assertive interpretation of life in outport Newfoundland needs to be studied at the level of the community. A series of case studies would determine whether or not fishing families really were helpless to challenge the exploitation of merchant capital. That is what this paper seeks to begin, by examining the outport community of Battle Harbour during the 1930s. In particular, this study will demonstrate that Battle Harbour fishermen's struggles with the firm of Baine, Johnston contributed to the decline of truck and the rise of government relief in that area from 1929 to 1935.

The District of Battle Harbour comprises a string of typical outports (Henley Harbour to Venison Islands) which are isolated from urban, more capitalist St. John's and Conception Bay, and located on the south-east coast of Labrador [see Figure 1]. These communities take their collective name from the settlement of Battle Harbour, once the area's most important community, a fishing village which grew up around the merchant station located at the tickle between Great Caribou and Battle Islands [see Figure 2]. Lying just north of the Straits of Belle Isle, at the entrance to St. Lewis Inlet, it was, in the mid-18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, an unsurpassed location for Labrador cod, salmon and seal fisheries, as well as fur trapping.

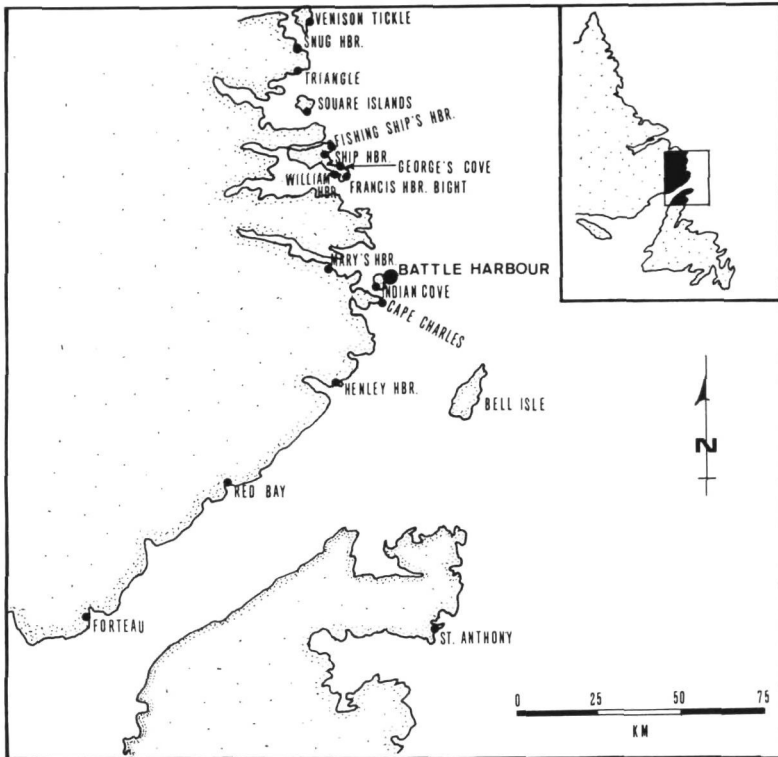
The Slade merchant family of Poole, Fogo and Twillingate were the first to establish a seasonal fishing post there. Like other merchants interested in Labrador's resources, they found it most efficient to deal with year-round resident producers, rather than employ wage labour directly in a seasonal fishery. As a result, over the years the Labrador fishery drew thousands of northeast coast Newfoundlanders to the Labrador coast either as stationers (who caught fish in one place) or as floaters (who lived on ships and moved from one fishing ground to another). Many gathered at Battle Harbour to prepare for a fishing season on the Labrador coast. By the end of the nineteenth century the coast of Labrador had several permanent communities of Newfoundland fishing families.<sup>5</sup> At roughly the

<sup>5</sup>No history has yet been written of Battle Harbour. The preceding two paragraphs are based on W. Gordon Handcock, "An Historical Geography of the Origins of English Settlement in Newfoundland: A Study of the Migration Process," PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1979, 257-305; "Slade, John," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, IV, 1771-1800 (Toronto 1979), 711-3. Handcock demonstrates that merchants played an essential role in the formation of a resident fishery and settlements. For a more extensive discussion of the transition from a wage-based fishing industry to kin-based fishing communities on the Labrador coast see Patricia A. Thornton, "The Demographic and Mercantile Bases of Initial Permanent Settlement in the Strait of Belle Isle," in John J. Mannion, ed., *The Peopling of Newfoundland* (St. John's 1977), 152-83.

Particular material on Battle Harbour stems from my own research on Battle Harbour for the Labrador Institute of Northern Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN). See Lambert de Boillieu, ed. by Thomas F. Bredin, *Recollections of Labrador Life*, 1861 (Toronto 1969), xi-xii, 12-3; *The Carbonear Sentinel*, 24 August 1837, 21 June, 14 July 1838, 15 June, 27 August, 15 October 1839, 25 July 1843; *The Weekly Herald*, Harbour Grace, 16 June 1852, 4 May 1853; Newfoundland, Journal of the House of Assembly, various reports of Labrador fisheries officers and circuit court judges, 1848/9 1870, located in journal appendices; Newfoundland, *Abstract Census and Return of the Population of Newfoundland 1869* (St. John's 1870), "The Labrador," n.p.

same time (the 1870s), the Newfoundland fish merchants began to consolidate their enterprises in St. John's. As part of this structural shift, the Slades sold their Newfoundland operations, including Battle Harbour, to Baine, Johnston & Co. of St. John's.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1  
*The District of Battle Harbour in the 1930s.*

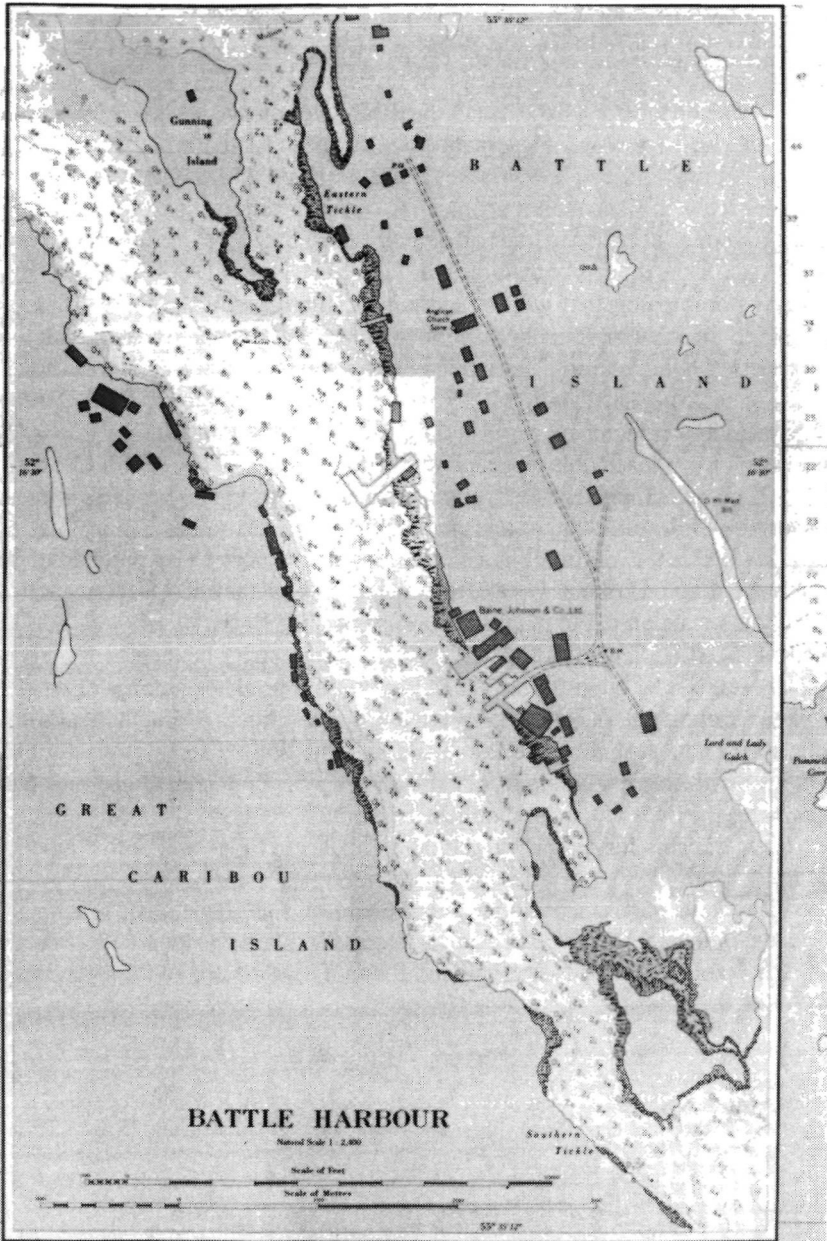


Only fragmentary evidence remains of Battle Harbour District fishing families' experiences with truck. In 1909 a visitor at Battle Harbour reported that residents remembered the Slades as a firm which used very exacting truck charges, inflating the prices of provisions obtained on credit by as much as 100 per cent above cash prices for goods. This same observer asserted that Baine, Johnston was less exploitative, acting as a paternalistic "guide, philosopher and friend of the entire community."<sup>7</sup> This view must be tempered by J.P. Alley's earlier view that Baine, Johnston & Co. kept "nearly all of its three hundred inhabitants in debt to

<sup>6</sup>Shannon Ryan, "The Newfoundland Cod Fishery in the Nineteenth Century," MA thesis, MUN, 1971, 38-58. MUN, Maritime History Archive, Baine Johnston Collection, 27-A-41, conveyance, Slade-Grieve, 1871.

<sup>7</sup>P.W. Brown, *Where the Fishers Go: The Story of Labrador* (New York 1909), 238-41.

Figure 2  
The Settlement of Battle Harbour, showing Baine Johnston & Co.'s Premises



Source: Detail from a navigational map. Canada, Department of Mines and Technical Services. *Labrador: Battle Harbour*. (Ottawa: Department of Mines and Services, 1955).

it."<sup>8</sup> In 1917, acting on complaints about the truck system by the International Grenfell Association, the Newfoundland government appointed a royal commission to investigate the IGA co-operative movement. Baine, Johnston's agent at Battle Harbour, John Croucher, defended the truck system before the commission. In the process, he gave some idea of how this system worked. Croucher stated that Baine, Johnston took on all the risk of the fishing season by giving fishermen credit before the firm knew what international fish prices would be at the end of the season. If prices proved low, Baine, Johnston stood to lose on its investment, through credit, in fishermen's voyages. Croucher believed that this risk obliged Battle Harbour fishermen to trade all of their fish to Baine, Johnston at the season's end.<sup>9</sup> At the same time as he defended the merchants' side of truck, Croucher stated that any competition that worked against the mutual obligations of truck, any leakage in the system whereby fishermen could deal outside of truck with other merchants, would "unfairly" destabilize the supply merchants' economic base.

Aggregate census data for 1935 suggests that the District of Battle Harbour relied heavily on merchant provisioning for most of its subsistence goods. The entire region produced only 8 bushels of potatoes and 1,650 lbs. of cabbage to help feed 802 people. Some livestock, goats, and hens were kept by residents and these produced a little milk, eggs, and perhaps, meat. Every other dietary staple in addition to clothes and the other necessities of life had to be purchased from merchants. Battle Harbour was a community of fishing families: 80 per cent of the households enumerated in manuscript census data (119 out of 149 total) derived most of their income from fishing. Only three merchant or merchants' agents' households existed on the coast. At Battle Harbour proper a number of residents worked as labourers for Baine, Johnston & Co. The Church of England minister, a constable, and a Justice of the Peace added to the limited social diversity of the settlement of Battle Harbour.<sup>10</sup> In the District of Battle Harbour, one factor dominated the lives of fishing families: such families depended almost completely on fish merchants for provisions, clothing, household goods, and fishing equipment.

The 1930s saw the beginning of the end of such dependent relationships between merchants and fishermen at Battle Harbour, as long-term structural problems matured in the Newfoundland economy. At the end of the 19th century,

<sup>8</sup>Jonathan Prince Alley, *Bowdoin Boys in Labrador: An Account of the Bowdoin College Scientific Expedition to Labrador led by Prof. Leslie A. Lee of the Biological Dept.* (Rockland, Maine 1897), 1-16.

<sup>9</sup>Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL), International Grenfell Association Business Office. Copy of the Report of R.T. Squarey, Esq., J.P. Re. IGA Enquiry. Testimony of John Croucher, 27 September 1917. I would like to thank Jessie Chisholm for bringing this document to my attention.

<sup>10</sup>MUN, Maritime History Archive, Baine, Johnston Collection, 27-A-36, Valuation of Sale of Battle Harbour From Slade, 1871; 27-A-93, Summary Inventory transferred to Earles Freighting Service Ltd., Battle Harbour, 14 June 1955. Government of Newfoundland, *Tenth Census of Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's 1931), Vol. I, Table 28, Vol. II, sec. I, Table 4, 55. The published census material incorrectly lists the District of Battle Harbour as having 150 families. The manuscript nominal census lists 149, giving only 18 families at Cape Charles, rather than 19.

St. John's merchants dominated the economy of Newfoundland. Their continued use of tal qual, along with population expansion and capital impoverishment due to truck, all contributed to the declining quality of the Newfoundland fish product at the same time world fish prices were falling and supplies of better-quality Icelandic fish were increasing after 1919. Through the 1930s, little was done to change the situation. Merchants and governments preferred to follow economic diversification policies through agriculture, railways, rural inland settlement, and domestic manufacturing, and use public works programs to absorb the unemployed, while ignoring Newfoundland's economic base in the salt fishery. The results were, at various times, a weakening of the merchant firms in the fisheries; impoverishment of the Labrador fishery; severe decline in the Bank fishery; deterioration in cure in all fisheries; impoverishment of large sectors of the population as a result of the truck system and low prices offered to fishermen for their fish; further lack of cooperative marketing by merchants; and a decline in suitable local shipping to access markets.<sup>11</sup>

This economic crisis, particularly on Newfoundland's northeast coast, moved many fish merchants to withdraw capital from the fishery, particularly with respect to winter relief and the extension of credit to those repeatedly unable to clear most of their debts. By the first decades of the 20th century, a process of social differentiation was well underway among fishing families; even outside the Conception Bay area, the "traditional" household-based fishing villages were nowhere so homogeneous in their structure as Sider suggests. As they tightened credit, merchants increasingly dealt only with fishing families owning capital equipment — like cod traps or motor boats — that could be used as collateral. Families with little or no equipment faced two prospects: pooling resources to buy equipment, or becoming a labour reserve employed by those with equipment. In either case fishing communities produced a number of "trap skippers," linked to their fellow fishermen by family and community ties, but becoming increasingly responsible for the management of production and marketing. These skippers were something more analogous to skilled master craftsmen in relation to journeymen than they were to merchants. Many, in their reaction to mercantile exploitation, provided the Fishermen's Protective Union with its organizational base both on the northeast coast and on the Labrador coast.<sup>12</sup>

The 1935 census of Newfoundland provides evidence of similar differentiation occurring in the District of Battle Harbour. The manuscript census data indicate that 119 families earned their income from the fishery. Most fishing families earned

<sup>11</sup>Rosemary E. Ommer, "What's Wrong With Canadian Fish?" *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 20, 3 (Fall 1985), 125-32. David Alexander, "Development and Dependence in Newfoundland, 1880-1970," in David Alexander, compiled by Eric Sager, Lewis R. Fischer, and Stuart O. Pierson, *Atlantic Canada and Confederation: Essays in Canadian Political Economy* (Toronto 1983), 3-31; and *The Decay of Trade: An Economical History of the Newfoundland Saltfish Trade, 1935-1965* (St. John's 1977), 1-37.

<sup>12</sup>Barbara Neis, "A Sociological Analysis of the Factors Responsible for the Regional Distribution of the Fishermen's Protective Union of Newfoundland," MA thesis, MUN, 1980, 40-2.



between \$200-400 (Can.) in the year from 1 June 1934 to 30 May 1935 (81 out of 119). Only fifteen households earned less than \$200, while 20 made between \$500-800. The number of families making more than \$800 drops sharply to only three out of 119 families. It would not be wise to accept alone differences in income levels for one year as an indication of social differentiation. Earnings in the fishery remain extremely vulnerable to seasonal fluctuations in fish stocks and international market prices.

As the work of Barbara Neis suggests, the early 1900s saw increased differentiation among fishing families arise from increased differences in families' ownership of fishing equipment. While only five fishing families registered no income in 1934-35, 24 indicated that they owned no equipment. The 1935 census lists the heads of all these families as independent fishermen who did not work for wages. In the Battle Harbour District, then, fishing families with little or no equipment must have engaged in some sort of shares arrangement, bearing part of the fishing voyage's expenses and gaining a property right in the catch, with those who did have equipment.<sup>13</sup> Thirty-four families owned small amounts of equipment, valued at less than \$500. Twenty-three families owned between \$500-1,000 worth of equipment, while twenty-one owned between \$1,000-1,500. These numbers drop sharply to only six families owning between \$1,500-2,000; and five each owning \$2,000-2,500, and \$2,500-3,000. Only one fishing family possessed \$3,000 worth of equipment — that of Gus Bradley at Indian Cove. Bradley was fortunate enough to own, among other equipment, two motor boats, two cod traps, and ten salmon nets.

Unwilling to risk their capital by extending credit to all fishing families, merchants in the northeast coast and Labrador fisheries by the 1930s gave credit only to those with motor boats and cod traps. Yet such equipment was labour-intensive in operation. In the District of Battle Harbour, only 46 out of the 119 fishing families owned cod traps, 65 families owned motor boats, and 73 owned salmon nets [see Table]. In the District's four largest communities — Henley Harbour, Cape Charles, Battle Harbour and George's Cove — only 22-25 per cent of the fishing families owned cod traps. This data suggests that social differentiation among fishermen was important. Yet such differentiation did not become class differentiation; the fishing families of Battle Harbour District stood together as family-based communities of domestic commodity producers.<sup>14</sup>

The fishing families of Battle Harbour had to cope with a merchant firm which was experiencing profound structural change within Newfoundland's economy. Like other Newfoundland fish exporters, Baine, Johnston found waning international markets for Newfoundland's fish cure, especially the Labrador product.

<sup>13</sup> This type of arrangement is very well examined in Peter Sinclair, *From Traps to Druggers: Domestic Commodity Production in Northwest Newfoundland, 1850-1982* (St. John's 1985), 43-51.

<sup>14</sup> The census data for the preceding discussion, as well as Table 1, is drawn from PANL, GN2/39/B, Manuscript Census, Labrador, District of Battle Harbour, 1935, Table 7, F-3; Manuscript Nominal Census, 1935, Labrador, District of Battle Harbour, vol. 36, 22-31, 43-63, Reel A-7-4.



Fishermen hauling a cod trap at Battle Harbour, 1901. It took at least five men to haul this trap. While this picture was taken 30 years before the events discussed here, such sights are still common today in Newfoundland's inshore fishery, wherever cod traps are still used. The man standing in the stern appears to be the boat's skipper, overseeing the work at hand. (*Labrador Institute of Northern Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland.*)

Table 1

District of Battle Harbour: Fishing Families and Equipment, 1934-35

Settlement	Total # Families	# Fishing Families	# Fishing Families with cod traps	# Fishing Families with motor boats	# Fishing Families with salmon nets
Henley Hr.	10	10	5	6	7
C. Charles	18	14	11	11	12
Battle Hr.	43	27	6	13	10
Indian Cove	8	7	4	4	6
Mary's Hr.	4	-	-	-	-
Fox Hr.	18	17	3	8	15
D.W. Creek	3	3	2	2	0
Seal Bight	2	2	2	2	2
Murray's Hr.	2	2	2	2	2
Wm.'s Hr.	6	6	2	4	6
Francis Hr.					
Bight	6	5	2	3	3
Fishing					
Ship Hr.	1	-	-	-	-
Square I.	4	4	0	1	4
Snug Hr.	1	1	0	0	1
Triangle	2	2	1	1	2
Venison I.	7	5	1	1	1
Total	149	119	46	65	73

Baine, Johnston did try to improve quality in the production of cod. The company insisted on higher standards in drying and handling fish. Besides refusing sun-burnt fish, Baine, Johnston's agent, S. Loveridge, instructed his collectors to make sure that fishermen properly cleaned fish. Yet by the early 1930s, the problems of selling fish were out of any one firm's hands. The best markets for Labrador fish — Spain, Italy and Greece — either were disrupted by workers' strikes or undercut by better-quality Icelandic fish. In 1930, a revolution in Brazil closed Pernambuco to Baine, Johnston's ships; and Malaga, Spain, the firm's principal market, was closed by strikes. These market conditions forced Baine, Johnston to instruct Loveridge that "Any dealer who is in the habit of making poor fish, it might be advisable to withhold supplies altogether." By 1931, due to worsening markets, the company decided only to give credit to those who could "square up their accounts."<sup>15</sup>

Baine, Johnston responded to such market problems by reducing fishing families' supply of credit. In part, controlling "leakage" lay behind this strategy. The simple fact is that, on the Labrador coast, immense competition existed between merchants for the produce of fishing families. In 1927 Baine, Johnston faced the Hudson Bay Company's attempt to take over Battle Harbour's salmon fishery by introducing fresh fishery technology. All Loveridge could do was to "be

<sup>15</sup>PANL, Baine, Johnston & Co., P7/A/2, Battle Harbour Letters, Box 22B, 1927-32, Correspondence between S. Loveridge and Baine, Johnston & Co., Battle Harbour and St. John's, 14, 16 June 1927; 4 July 1929; 17 June, 11, 15, 21 July, 26 August 1930; 20 August 1931; 14 September 1932.

tactful with the dealers and please the fishermen" so that they would not abandon Baine, Johnston for HBC.<sup>16</sup> Other merchants, like W.A. Munn at Gunning Island and Harvey & Co.'s dealer Morgan, tried to cut in on Baine, Johnston's Battle Harbour fishery; they proved to be consistent thorns in the company's side throughout the 1930s.<sup>17</sup> Occasionally, independent traders appeared on the coast trying to undercut Baine, Johnston's prices in a particular season. For example, Stone at Cape Charles in 1929 and Baggs & Co., Ltd. of Curling in 1930 offered groceries for codfish and herring, but "Needless to mention they are not providing salt nor any supplies on credit for fishery." Baine, Johnston dealt forthrightly with fishermen who went to the competition. The Company instructed Loveridge to "keep an eye ... and any dealer who plays double you can tell him to look to Mr. Stone for supplies." In the Baggs & Co. case "... should any of the dealers, whom we have helped out, ship their fish to Baggs' Coy., we leave you to deal with them in the best way you think fit, pointing out that we do not intend to be made a convenience of."<sup>18</sup>

In trying to deal with the problem of leakage, Baine, Johnston had to face one basic fact: some of the better-off fishing households, those of people like Gus Bradley, actively challenged Baine, Johnston's desire to maintain its control of Battle Harbour's fish business. The Company had to tread carefully because it did not want to lose its best fish producers. When Bradley decided to produce salmon for a competitor, Allen's at Cape Charles, in 1933, Loveridge reported that Bradley owed Baine, Johnston \$391 (for credit towards his purchase of equipment) and that he would have a "reliable fishermen" watch over Bradley because he might start buying other Baine, Johnston and Co. fishermen's produce for Allen's. When questioned about this, Bradley stated that he was fed up with Baine, Johnston's new, tighter, credit policies and that in Croucher's day the company was more "forgiving" about fishermen's debts. Baine, Johnston, when Loveridge advised them that he tried to force Bradley to stop dealing with Allen's, quickly cautioned him not to antagonize Bradley because "He is the sort of chap that if you make an enemy of, could do the Firm a lot of harm, use diplomacy, and you might convince him that what he did was not after all to his benefit."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co., Battle Harbour, 24 January May 1927, 5 October 1929, 9 October 1929, 10 July 1930.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co., 24 June, 11 August 1927; 20 August 1931.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co., Battle Harbour, 8 August 1930; Baine, Johnston & Co. to S. Loveridge, St. John's, 3 June 1929; 14 August 1930.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, Box 23B, 1933-39, S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co., 10, 12 July 1933; Baine, Johnston to S. Loveridge, St. John's, 18 July 1933. In Sider's account, trading activity like Bradley's is merely an abstract economic concept: "leakage." Fish merchants, as did Baine, Johnston in the early 1930s, restricted winter credit to families they felt could not make good on their accounts in times of bad prices for fish. This, in turn, forced fishing families to try to escape the obligations of previous debts to merchants by dealing with competitors in the hope, given Newfoundland's lack of alternative subsistence resources in agriculture, of obtaining enough supplies to survive the winter. "Leakage" further eroded merchants' abilities to profit in world fish markets because it deprived them of supplies of fish. In Sider's account merchants alone overcame this block to capital accumulation by dictating to the state

Caution ruled Baine, Johnston's treatment of Bradley because they feared he would attract good fishermen from Baine, Johnston. It galled the Company to restrain itself with regard to Bradley because "we look on this as an unfriendly act."<sup>20</sup> In fact, Bradley kept on dealing with Allen's and, by 1934, had other fishermen, including James Pye, dealing with Allen's as well. Baine, Johnston was aghast, and helpless, because it did not want to lose the more successful fishermen's business:

We are surprised to learn that he [Pye] should play a double part. We thought he would at least be loyal to the firm. All you can do is watch the dealers that sold salmon to Allen, and if they do not square up with you in the Fall, tell them we will not stand for it another year. You will have to be *tactful* [emphasis mine] in how you handle them. We presume if we do not supply them, some one else will, we mean for the codfishery.<sup>21</sup>

When Loveridge questioned Pye about his loyalty to the firm, Pye replied that he gave Baine, Johnston half of his catch, the other to Allen's because of their better prices, "and said if we got half we ought to be satisfied."<sup>22</sup> As for Bradley, he continued to deal where, and as, he pleased. As Loveridge told head office in St. John's, as business declined on the coast the Battle Harbour store depended on the business of "independent" men like Bradley.<sup>23</sup> By 1938, Bradley's efforts proved so successful that he began to retail small items at Indian Cove to his neighbours.<sup>24</sup>

Gus Bradley and James Pye, mavericks within the larger group of Baine, Johnston's fishermen-dealers, did not enjoy exceptionally high incomes. Bradley earned a respectable \$600 while Pye registered no income in 1934-35. What separated these two fishermen from other family heads was the amount of equipment they owned. In the District, 46 families owned between them 67 cod traps, 65 families owned 89 motor boats, and 73 families owned 410 salmon nets. Bradley's two motor boats and two cod traps meant that he was somewhat better off than even those other families owning motor boats and cod traps. But Bradley's great advantage lay in the ten salmon nets he owned. The average number of these held by fishing families was only between five and six. Despite his lack of income, James Pye owned two each of motor boats and cod traps, but owned seven salmon nets.<sup>25</sup>

---

the need for government relief to subsidize "the unit cost of labour," thereby halting haemorrhage in the supply of fish to merchants. Again, by this abstraction of fishing households' participation in the development of relief, Sider denies fishermen their place within the historical dynamic of community development. Merchants and their government puppets act, but not producers. Fishing families appear only as the passive recipients of merchant capital's hegemonic dictates: see Sider, *Culture and Class*, 146-7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Baine, Johnston & Co. to S. Loveridge, St. John's, 11 July 1933.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Baine, Johnston & Co. to S. Loveridge, St. John's, 16 July 1934.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co., Battle Harbour, 10 July 1934.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co., Battle Harbour, 17 October 1934.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, S.D. Grant to Baine, Johnston & Co., Battle Harbour, n.d., 1938.

<sup>25</sup> Government of Newfoundland, *Tenth Census...*, Vol. II, Sec. I, Table II; PANI, Manuscript Census, 1935, Table 7, F-3, Manuscript Nominal Census, Vol. 36, 22-31, 43-63.

Differences in equipment ownership appear to be the only significant factor in allowing Bradley and Pye, the latter unsuccessfully, to challenge Baine, Johnston's claim to their produce. Neither Indian Cove (Bradley's home community) nor Cape Charles (Pye's home community) were far removed from the Company's headquarters at Battle Harbour proper [see Figure 3]. Bradley's and Pye's attempts to deal with firms other than Baine, Johnston were not facilitated by their being able to use distance as a shelter from the firm's watchful eye.

Bradley and Pye were distinct in the means which they used to catch more salmon than most. At a time when Labrador cod fetched low prices in international markets, Baine, Johnston turned increasingly to the salmon fishery for compensation. While Pye succumbed to Baine, Johnston's pressure, Bradley did not. Little direct evidence exists to suggest that Bradley's equipment, by providing livelihoods to those of his neighbours with less, gave him the influence with other families that the firm so worried about. But there are factors that make this a reasonable inference: Bradley could not operate all of his equipment on his own; Baine, Johnston clearly saw him as being much more independent than his fellow fishermen; and the Company acknowledged explicitly that Bradley was an important community leader. Bradley closely resembles those "trap skippers" Neis suggests were emerging in the northeast coast and Labrador fisheries in this period, using both their community positions and new importance in production and marketing to launch a direct challenge to the hegemony of merchant capital over their lives.

To prevent other fishermen from following Bradley's course, warnings to Loveridge by Baine, Johnston not to give credit to those dealing with other firms were accompanied by the caution "be tactful." The need for this tact can be seen in Baine, Johnston's dealings with another defecting fisherman, Jeremiah Thoms, in 1933. Thoms began to deal with a firm by the name of Moores, also buying other households' fish for that firm. Baine, Johnston instructed Loveridge to handle Thoms "as diplomatically as you can" because, until such time as Thoms had to look to Baine, Johnston & Co. for credit "he would try to hold us up to ridicule ...." for their attempts to secure Thoms' fish.<sup>26</sup>

Thoms was not able, like Bradley, to escape Baine, Johnston's hold over him. The next year, in 1934, Thoms had to approach Baine, Johnston about "what conditions can we come on as in the regards of something to eat for the winter." Baine, Johnston agreed to supply Thoms if he turned over "all your voyage to the firm."<sup>27</sup> Thoms communicated directly with Baine, Johnston's St. John's office because he felt shabbily treated at Loveridge's hands. ".... Sir I am writing you to See what you can do or the firm of Baine Johnston & Co. not Mr. Loveridge. I am not having any discussion with him whatever ...."<sup>28</sup>

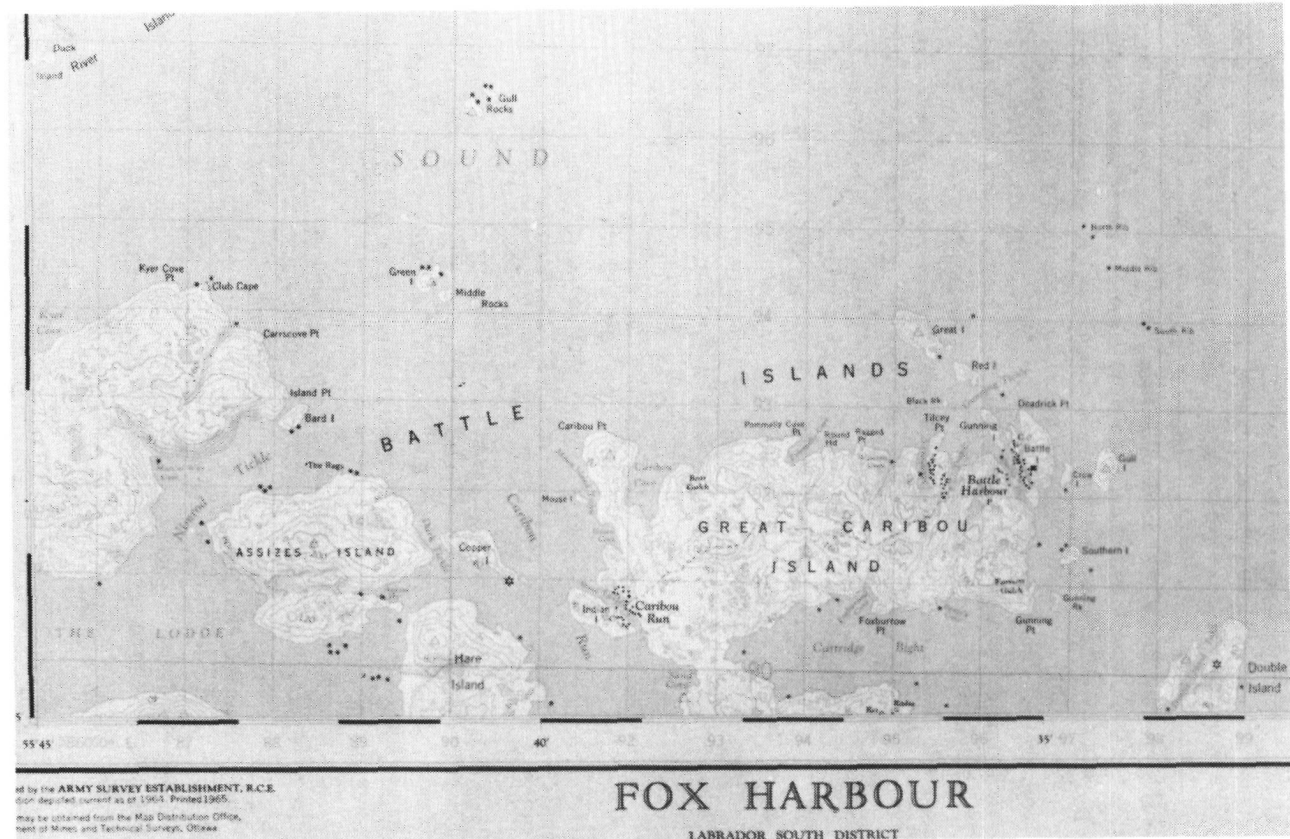
<sup>26</sup>PANL, Baine, Johnston & Co., P7/A/2, Box 23B, 1933-39, Baine, Johnston & Co. to S. Loveridge, St. John's, 9, 20 September, 1933; S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston and Co., Battle Harbour, 11 September 1933.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, Baine, Johnston & Co. to Jeremiah Thoms, St. John's, 18 September 1934.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, Jeremiah Thoms to Baine, Johnston & Co., Battle Harbour, 28 August 1934.

Figure 3

Location of Indian Cove. Note the proximity of Indian Cove to Battle Harbour. Cape Charles is located just to the south, but is not included on this map.



Source: Canada, Army Survey Establishment, *Fox Harbour, Labrador South*. (Ottawa: Department of Mines and Technical Service, 1965.)

This is important. Even dealers like Thoms who remained subordinated to Baine, Johnston, actively negotiated the terms of that subordination. The year before, in 1933, the firm reprimanded Loveridge for insulting James Pye in a dispute over the latter's dealings with Allen's. Pye wanted, and received, an apology from Loveridge for calling him a "cur" in front of other men on the wharf at Battle Harbour.<sup>29</sup> Head Office was losing its patience with Loveridge. When it earlier had told him to trim expenses, instead of cutting his own, Loveridge cut perks given to fishermen when they came to the store. Anonymous letters arrived in St. John's complaining of Loveridge's stinginess and he was reprimanded by the firm:

Perhaps in your eagerness to make the business a success you have been rather 'nippy,' as we have been told so. This does not pay, especially in a Labrador business, and when we tell you to economise we do not mean you to cut an old custom. What we mean is, when the dealers come from far away places you should give them a cup of tea, or what the fishermen call a 'mug-up,' rather than allow them to go away hungry. It may cost the firm perhaps five dollars or a little more to do so, but it is money well spent and we do not want you to stop this practice.<sup>30</sup>

Baine, Johnston's director, T. Collingwood, also instructed Loveridge to stop "charging the fishermen 40 cents for the use of the puncheons .... I do not think it advisable to do this because it seems sort of nippy, and while the charge is small it leaves room for people to talk, and may do more harm than good."<sup>31</sup> After more anonymous complaints through 1934-35, Baine, Johnston fired Loveridge to keep up some appearance of being a firm interested in accommodating the needs of Battle Harbour's residents. Baine, Johnston would rather dismiss its agent than further jeopardize relationships with its fish-suppliers, which already were strained by credit restrictions.<sup>32</sup>

The firing of Loveridge is a strong statement about the role some fishermen played in shaping their own environment. Because they controlled production, and because they enjoyed the intimate familiarity of families linked together in the structure of village communities, these fishermen had power. Its exertion was motivated by the family's well-being, its very subsistence, for, as Loveridge

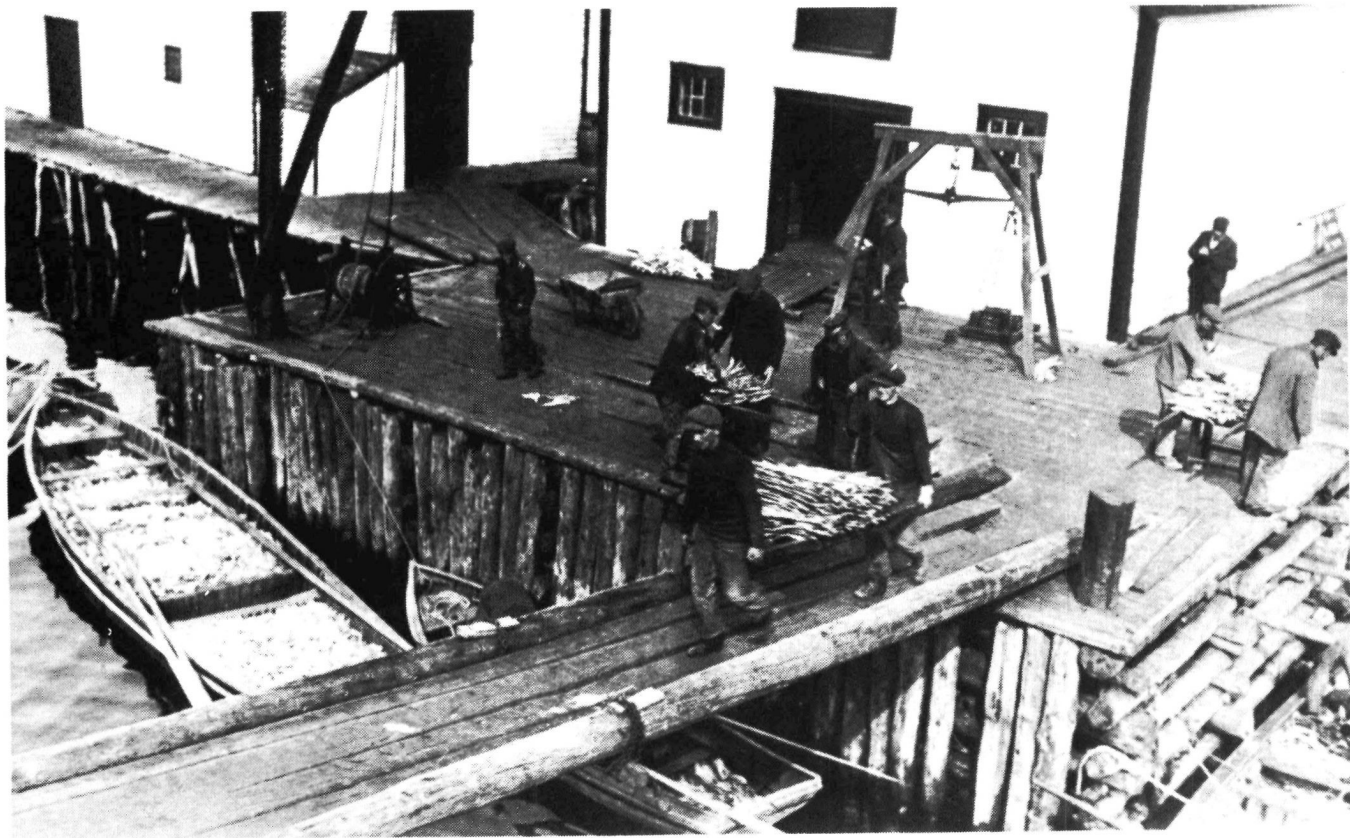
<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co., 21 October 1933.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, Box 22 B, Baine, Johnston & Co. to S. Loveridge, St. John's, 30 May, 1931.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 5 September 1930. It is not easy to convey the precise meaning of Collingwood's use of the term "nippy." In Newfoundland the expression often is used to describe someone who is being tight-fisted or parsimonious. Story *et al.* gave two definitions which are useful. The first "nip" is a verb meaning "'of ice, to squeeze or crush (a vessel).'" One might say that Baine, Johnston did not wish to appear to be squeezing the fishermen too much by wringing the last cent possible from them by charging for the use of puncheons, or denying a cup of tea. The second definition is "nipper" a noun used to describe any variety of loathsome gnats which, by constantly "nipping," or biting people, suck the lifeblood from their victims. In this sense, Baine, Johnston would not wish to carry too far their own parasitical expropriation of fishing household's produce. Both definitions seem appropriate self-descriptions of Baine, Johnston's relationships with fishing households in the 1930s. See the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Toronto 1982), 348-9.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, Box 23B, 1933-39; S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co., St. John's, 5 December 1936.





Handling codfish at Battle Harbour, 1920s. The wharf on which these men worked is most likely the same wharf on which Loveridge insulted James Pye, and refused other fishermen their customary cup of tea when they arrived to deal with Baine, Johnston. All of the buildings in the photograph were originally built by the Slades before 1871. They are still used in a salt fishery today. (*Peary-Macmillan Arctic Museum, L-223, Bowdoin College, Massachusetts.*)

admitted, "Tact will count for nothing and will not appeal to empty stomachs as they see looming before them even ... the Fall months."<sup>33</sup> Baine, Johnston constantly worried about their reputation in the talk of these fishing families because they feared agitation might start against the firm, causing the company to lose its fish business to competitors. To prevent this, occasionally, the firm granted a loyal dealer like Archibald Pye special credit favours because "He is quite a talker and has quite an influence with the fishermen."<sup>34</sup>

By cultivating the support of such fishermen, Baine, Johnston and Co. acknowledged the capacity of a differentiated fishing community to produce leaders capable of challenging its operations. Baine, Johnston continued to give credit for the fishery to influential dealers, and to those who proved to be good sources of fish. But as fish markets weakened, the Company began to have trouble with families to which it began to restrict winter credit. Yet Baine, Johnston did tighten credit and refused supply to poorer households unable to pay on their debts. The firm's solution was to turn to the Newfoundland government to make provisions for the impoverished's relief. In 1929 the Newfoundland government opened an account with Baine, Johnston at Battle Harbour so that, on the recommendation of Gus Brazil, the J.P. and relief officer, residents might charge goods on relief. Loveridge found that Brazil probably manipulated this account for personal gain, and, at the firm's instigation, the government eventually replaced Brazil with another officer, Reid.<sup>35</sup>

These relief measures by no means were some magnanimous measure taken by either Baine, Johnston & Co. or the government. Relief was the government's response to Baine, Johnston & Co.'s letter to the Colonial Secretary, Dr. Barnes:

.... the following is a copy of the telegram received by us last night from our Battle Harbour agent: "Several family men facing starvation, rumour around will take goods informed Government today," signed 'Hoffe.'

We may say that we made no provision last year for winter relief, but have ample stocks of provisions on hand to relieve all deserving cases.

Hoffe is our winter agent, and has only one or two assistants, so that in the event of an attempt being made to take the goods forcibly, we could not protect them.<sup>36</sup>

The grand total of government relief allowed for the next year was \$68.00 which, combined with a poor seal harvest, led S. Loveridge to comment "Many very deserving cases in sick and aged were left to mercy of poor friends and relatives, how these existed all through the long season is a mystery."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, Box 22B, 1927; 1929-32; Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co., Battle Harbour, 5 September 1931.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co., Battle Harbour, 4 October 1929.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, Baine Johnston to S. Loveridge, 28 March, (?) September 1927; 15 June, 4, 8 July 1929.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, Baine, Johnston & Co. to Dr. Barnes, Colonial Secretary, St. John's, 9 February, 1929. Charles Hoffe was Baine, Johnston's winter agent. He lived at Battle Harbour, managing the firm's business after Loveridge returned to his home at Twillingate at the end of October.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co., Battle Harbour, 6 June 1930.

The more-impooverished fishing households were not submissive victims of Baine, Johnston's winter credit restrictions, nor were they passive recipients of state relief. The 1929 telegram suggests that fishermen, when faced with the prospect of their families' starvation, were quick to take action against the merchants whose restriction of credit violated the historical accommodation of the truck system. Baine, Johnston recognized the power held by these fishermen, and yielded to it by encouraging the state to come to the poor's relief.

The paltry relief allowances of 1929-30 did not diffuse tension at Battle Harbour. The niggardly sums doled out seem to have been determined by Brazil, the relief officer. This caused problems for Baine, Johnston, as Loveridge wrote to Head Office:

Brazil is very unpopular with the people at Battle Harbour and he knows this, and I rather foresee that he will screw them down to the very smallest allowance per family & their threats of destroying our property would not have any affect on him if it came to their disputing that allowance was not sufficient for families to exist on.<sup>38</sup>

The Company lay between the rock, the popular discontent of Battle Harbour families with relief, and a hard place, government attempts to keep relief expenditures down.

The outcome of the tension imbued in this conflict was another threatened attack on Baine, Johnston's Battle Harbour premises. On 18 January 1930, Charles Hoffe telegraphed Loveridge that two men, Arch Rumbold and Levi Spearing, appeared with axes to break into the Company stores, take winter provisions, and threatened to shoot any who might get in their way.<sup>39</sup> The correspondence between the Newfoundland government, Baine, Johnston, and the agents at Battle Harbour about this incident is worth looking at in some detail because it says much about the potential for conflict between merchants and fishermen in Newfoundland communities.

Baine, Johnston immediately informed the government that "... the men threaten, when the present food is consumed, to shoot anyone who prevents them from breaking. There is no doubt that the situation is serious ... we have a lot of valuable property there without any protection, and that they should take the necessary steps to protect life and property."<sup>40</sup> The Acting Deputy Minister of Justice responded by wiring Brazil, advising him to hire two local men as constables to deal with Spearing and Rumbold. Brazil replied that it was "Impossible get two men as Constables here owing all relations." Brazil could not turn families against families; the solidarity of family producers at Battle Harbour forced him to give out extra relief rations.<sup>41</sup> As Loveridge informed Baine, Johnston:

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co., Twillingate, 21 January 1930.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, Charles Hoffe to S. Loveridge, Battle Harbour, 18 January 1930.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, Baine, Johnston & Co. to S. Loveridge, St. John's, 18 January 1930.

<sup>41</sup> PANL, GN13/1/2; Nfld., Dept. of Justice Correspondence, vol. 31, June 1929-February 1930, Reel Aa-1-30, Acting Deputy Minister of Justice to Colonial Secretary A. Barnes, St. John's, 18 January 1930.

... S.W. Brazil would not succeed in securing services of even one man much less any number of men who would take responsibility of endeavouring to protect our property from any attack by hungry men who have also their families to keep from starving.<sup>42</sup>

The isolation of Hoffe and Brazil must have been intimidating. Outside their very door, the nine fishing families of Rumbolds, and the two of Spearings, constituted almost 25 per cent of the total families living at Battle Harbour, and 41 per cent of the village's fishing families. Other communities were even more heavily dominated by family ties, without any apparent links to those who represented Baine, Johnston and the state at Battle Harbour. Gus Bradley's fellow Indian Cove residents were, with one exception, Rumbolds (Bradley was a migrant from Newfoundland, but his wife Clara was a native Labradorian — the 1935 census does not give her former surname). The ten families at Henley Harbour all shared the surname of Stone. At Cape Charles, with one exception, all the families were Pyes. Fox Harbour, like Battle Harbour, shared an assortment of fishing family names with other communities in the District: Chubbs, Curl, Rumbold, Mangrove, and Poole. George's Cove was the domain of the Pennys, Giblunouchs, Burdens, and Wards. The six families of William's Harbour were all Russells. The remaining smaller communities all represented fragments of these families. In short, as Hoffe and Baine, Johnston acknowledged, the ties between District fishing families proved a potent force which, in times of crisis, neither the firm nor the state had easy ways to deal with.<sup>43</sup>

Unable to find support among District fishing families, Baine, Johnston could not turn to the coast's other important presence: the International Grenfell Association. While antagonisms arising out of the 1917 dispute between the firm and the Grenfell organization had lessened, neither had been able to come to terms with the other. Throughout the 1930s Baine, Johnston continued to support the Grenfell Mission's medical presence in a cottage hospital on the island of Battle Harbour. But when the Grenfell Association began to propose another cooperative store in the area, the Company withdrew its support, informing Loveridge that ".... the Mission can go their way and we will go ours; ... there must be no more favours, now that Dr. Grenfell has shown his teeth." The Association began to ignore Baine, Johnston as it went about its business on the coast; its correspondence for the 1930s is silent on the relationship between fishing families and Baine, Johnston.<sup>44</sup>

The state could not easily accept yielding its authority to that of Battle Harbour families' notion of what was morally right. Even if families were starving, said

<sup>42</sup>PANL, P7/A/2, Baine, Johnston & Co., Battle Harbour Letters, Box 22B, 1927; 29-32; S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co., Twillingate, 21 January 1930.

<sup>43</sup> PANL, Manuscript Census, 1935, Table 7, F-3.

<sup>44</sup>PANL, P7/A/2, Box 22B, Baine, Johnston & Co. to S. Loveridge, St. John's, 8 August 1932. The relationship between the Grenfell Association and Baine, Johnston is explained in greater detail in Sean Cadigan and Jessie Chisholm, *Understanding a Provincial Historical Resource: A Preliminary Historical Survey of Battle Harbour* (Happy Valley, Labrador 1989), 21-4, 77-90.

Colonial Secretary Barnes, that was no excuse for breaking the law: anyone like Spearing and Rumbold must be warned against breaking into the Battle Harbour store. But, and here is the essential point, the Newfoundland government recognized that it had no choice but to yield extra relief because it could not really protect Baine, Johnston's premises.

As there is not a sufficient force to control the people and to enforce law and order, it appears to the Government that it would not be wise to fight the situation, but, having let the men proceed to an unlawful act, the Justice of the Peace should then meet the situation to the best of his ability by granting such relief as he considers is proper and right.<sup>45</sup>

This final authorization of relief comforted Loveridge, who had begun to panic as the government tried to decide what actions should be taken:

Certainly Gracious the Justice Department are not going to delay action and wait until some desperate means have been resorted to by the heads of some starving families ....

... Hoffe is in great suspense these days and very anxious of what the outcome will be ....

I can foresee that it is only bunkum for the Justice Dept. to talk of getting Brazil to swear in special constables for protection of our property, if the people are demanding food to feed their families.<sup>46</sup>

When asked by Baine, Johnston as to whether or not one of the firm's fishing household clients would come to the Company's aid, Loveridge replied:

There is no sturdy independent man in the vicinity that I could recommend who would act in the event of any trouble. Augustus Bradley would be the only person that would have any influence. He lives three miles from Battle Harbour proper. I repeat again however that if families are destitute especially if on the increase ... then if any sympathy it will be expressed with those who may go so far as to break in the stores to obtain food for the families.<sup>47</sup>

Baine, Johnston could not count on the support of Battle Harbour's most successful fishermen like Bradley because their loyalties lay with their fellow household producers. Yet, luckily for the Company, people directed their hostility against Brazil despite the fact that the two men who started the affair, Levi Spearing and Arch Rumbold, were denied credit by Baine, Johnston. Loveridge felt that Spearing was too lazy, and Rumbold's family had grown so large Loveridge feared Rumbold would never pay for the increased supplies he took on credit.<sup>48</sup>

Baine, Johnston capitalized on popular disgust with Brazil by arranging to have relief administered through Charles Hoffe at the Battle Harbour store. The Newfoundland government ordinarily opposed such arrangements because it

<sup>45</sup>PANL, GN2 12/A; Nfld., Colonial Secretary's Correspondence, vol. 205, November 1929-February 1930; Reel A-10-2; Deputy Colonial Secretary to B.E.S. Dunfield, Acting Deputy Minister of Justice, St. John's, 4 February 1930.

<sup>46</sup>PANL, P7/A/2, Baine, Johnston & Co., Battle Harbour Letters, Box 22B, 1927; 1929-32; S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co., Twillingate, 4 February 1930.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston and Co., Twillingate, 29 January 1930.

feared that merchants would be too liberal in opening the public purse.<sup>49</sup> But in the Baine, Johnston case, a new form of government chicanery occurred to Colonial Secretary Barnes, in light of the state's inability to use force to ensure minimum public relief expenditure: the Newfoundland government would arrange with Baine, Johnston to distribute relief without any participation by the Relief Officer.

The people when they are in need will approach ... Charles Hoffe, who will use his discretion and give the people applying such goods only as he thinks they actually need on the understanding that if they have no cash then, they will pay for the same from the process of the seals or fur that they may catch during the Winter Season.

That is, the goods given out will not be understood to be Government goods for the relief by those receiving the same, but will be taken as advances by your firm to men who will pay for the same in due course.<sup>50</sup>

The government assured Baine, Johnston that any accounts not balanced would be paid for by the public account.

Baine, Johnston accepted this arrangement because, in the face of continuing defections by its best fishermen, it allowed the company to appear as if it was honouring old commitments to its dealers by nothing more than good will, when what appeared to be winter credit was guaranteed payment by the Newfoundland government. The Company realized that Hoffe would become the focal point for families' discontent about its strict credit policies, "... but it cannot be helped. The [government] realize that relief will be necessary, and all they ask us to do is to be firm, and after investigating to relieve those in need, and to get returns if it is possible. They have no intention of making us scapegoat."<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately for Hoffe, Battle Harbour families expressed much discontent about the new arrangements, and he feared that "much abuse will be hailed against us."<sup>52</sup> Throughout 1931-1934, Hoffe had to fend off complaints about tight credit and surreptitious government efforts to replace traditional white flour with supposedly more healthy, if cheaper, brown flour.<sup>53</sup> In 1932, worried about more threats of violence, Baine, Johnston prevailed upon Battle Harbour's Anglican minister, D.C. Noel, to pressure the government to increase guaranteed payment to the firm from \$800.00 to \$2,500.00. At this time, Baine, Johnston was only too happy to let Noel play an increased role in doling out relief. The Company could see the end of Dominion government coming as Newfoundland tottered on the brink of financial ruin, and accordingly tightened relief in fear the government would not honour its commit-

<sup>49</sup>PANL, GN2/1/A, Nfld., Colonial Secretary's Correspondence, vol. 205, November 1929-February 1930, Reel A-10-2, Deputy Colonial Secretary to Rev. J.A. Reese, St. John's, 13 February 1930.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, Deputy Colonial Secretary to Tom Collingwood, Baine, Johnston & Co. Ltd., St. John's, 25 October 1930.

<sup>51</sup>PANL, Baine, Johnston & Co., Battle Harbour Letters, P7/A/2, Box 22B, 1927; 1929-32; Baine, Johnston and Co. Ltd. to S. Loveridge, St. John's, 5 November 1930.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co., Battle Harbour, 21 November 1930.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, Correspondence between Loveridge and Baine, Johnston & Co., 11 June, 2 September, 10-16 October 1931; 3 October 1932.

ments.<sup>54</sup> By 1933 the government appointed its own official, Neil, to begin taking over relief responsibilities, and Rev. Noel took charge of certifying relief cases so that government would pay Baine, Johnston. Through 1934 Neil administered relief and, in 1935, the Commission Government appointed a Ranger,<sup>55</sup> Glendinning, to administer relief, although he would relieve only a small number of the most destitute.<sup>56</sup> No evidence remains to suggest how those families Glendinning would not relieve survived. They probably continued to eke out a living from the fishery as best they could, perhaps even moving off the coast in search of work.

While no other threats of violence appear to have been made, households that either did not receive, or did not ask for relief refused to acquiesce in Baine, Johnston's continued restriction of credit. Local dealers who did not like the Company's low prices offered for fish, or the lack of credit, in Loveridge's words "put the pistol to our heads (so to speak) for to barter some of the remains of fish that were on their hands or otherwise they would barter at Morgans."<sup>57</sup> These fishermen sold salmon to anyone who might pay in cash. Loveridge's successor S.D. Grant charged that these families behaved as they did "to protect themselves for the winter and want us or somebody to feed them this fall. It is coming to a point where the supply system must end or find some means of protection against such treatment."<sup>58</sup>

Baine, Johnston replied that they did not "see why we should carry dealers on, who in the past, and especially this year, shipped their salmon and fish clear of us; in other words those who haven't played the game in the past ...."<sup>59</sup> In fact, Baine, Johnston was "firmly opposed to winter credit because it has proven ... that the fishermen have enough to do to look after their summer accounts ...." but they would supply "thoroughly reliable dealers" who did not carry too much debt on their accounts.<sup>60</sup> Two firms in particular, Morris and Monroe, continued to compete with Baine, Johnston. The firm cautioned Grant not to tolerate competition, but that he must give supplies to keep the firm's potential supply of fish available because they did not "believe the codfishery is done, and some of those who are scared and talking blue ruin, may be next year they will have a different tune, and

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, Baine, Johnston and Co. to S. Loveridge, 10 October 1932.

<sup>55</sup>In 1935 Hope Simpson, the new British Commissioner responsible for Newfoundland's justice department, reorganized the colony's magistracy and police to establish a Ranger Force responsible for all aspects of criminal and civil administration in Newfoundland's outports. A quasi-military force, the Rangers attended almost everything from customs duties, medical services, and implementation of agricultural innovations to policing outport communities. Yet from 1935 to 1940 most Rangers spent from half to three-quarters of their time overseeing government relief programs. After Confederation, the Rangers were amalgamated with the RCMP. See Marilyn Tuck, "The Newfoundland Ranger Force, 1935-1950," MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1983, 54-60, 74-83, 98-108.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, Box 23B, Correspondence between Charles HOFFE, S. Loveridge, and Baine, Johnston & Co., 16 February, 16 November 1933; 16 October, 10 November, 10-12 December 1934, 14 November 1936.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, Box 22B, S. Loveridge to Baine, Johnston & Co. Ltd., Battle Harbour, 22 October 1932.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, Box 23B, S.D. Grant to Baine, Johnston & Co., Battle Harbour, 18 August 1936.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, Baine, Johnston & Co. to S.D. Grant, 24 September 1936.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 25 September 1936.

although I told you to be careful about supplies, I leave you to use your discretion."<sup>61</sup>

In a time of crisis during the Great Depression, then, fishermen did not restrict their response to the increased severity of merchant capital's exploitation by telling self-mystifying cuffers, stealing food from each other, or dressing up during Christmas to go house-to-house and redistribute their anxieties. The fishermen of Battle Harbour did not limit their responses to Baine, Johnston to cuffers, scoffs, or mummering. These customs probably were an important part of the lives of Battle Harbour's fishing families. But such "traditions" must be reinterpreted in light of the more overt manner in which fishing families did challenge merchant capital over the issues of winter credit and relief.

In a society in which differentiation did occur among household productive units, some of the better-off fishermen chose, when Baine, Johnston began to restrict winter credit, to break away from the firm and deal on better terms with other traders. Their actions cannot be seen simply as a passive "leakage" in the merchant credit system, but represented an active rejection of merchant capital's right to dominate fishermen's lives. If the actions of these fishermen were not an abstract economic force, neither should they be regarded merely as profit-maximizing opportunism by proto-capitalist entrepreneurs. The language of conflict between Gus Bradley and Loveridge, between Jeremiah Thoms and Baine, Johnston, were as much about the manner in which the firm reneged on its customary credit obligations, and other no less important, if "smaller" customs, like treating fishermen with respect and not being "nippy" about providing lunches when fishermen came to deal at Baine, Johnston's wharves and stores.

The fishermen of Battle Harbour were no more proletarians than they were capitalists. Despite this, fishing families, as a form of non-industrial labour, could resist the effects of their reliance on a merchant capital-dominated fishery for a livelihood. Fishermen controlled the daily production of fish as a commodity. This control gave fishermen power in society, although as Gus Bradley's case demonstrates, this power was distributed unequally. It consisted in the ability to determine whether or not a merchant might get enough fish to have a good year, and to demand that merchants treat producers with "tact" or respect.

The struggles which developed between fishermen, Baine, Johnston, and the Newfoundland government in themselves constitute a definition of a moral economy as "... a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community ...."<sup>62</sup> This is not to argue that Battle Harbour fishermen's efforts restored the edifice of the moral economy. By the 1930s, irreparable cracks in the surface of Battle Harbour society had begun to appear. Leakage was the internal contradiction of a cod fishery in crisis. As the winter supply obligations of truck disintegrated, fishermen did turn

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, Baine, Johnston & Co. to S.D. Grant, St. John's, 3 March 1939.

<sup>62</sup>E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present*, 50 (February 1971), 79.



to Baine, Johnston's new competitors on the Battle Harbour coast; they turned to the market place to find a fair return for their labour that Baine, Johnston would no longer concede. But it is in such a break between fishermen and Baine, Johnston that one can find demarcated the boundaries of Battle Harbour's moral economy.<sup>63</sup> The actions of Battle Harbour fishermen like Gus Bradley or James Pye implied that they held traditional notions about *fair* prices for fish, or giving Baine, Johnston a *fair* share of their fish in return for *fair* winter credit allowances. These fishermen, already participating in the production of staple commodities for export markets, were quick to abandon Baine, Johnston, once the firm removed the prospect of fair credit. Baine, Johnston ultimately let go of people like Bradley who could use the market to their advantage; it usually did not offer better prices or credit to recapture lost clients. Instead, when Baine, Johnston broke with tradition by allowing the marketplace to intrude overtly in their relations with fishermen (by restricting winter credit) the firm resisted the defection of their fishermen by a combination of threats *and* tact, using the assistance of the state to buttress Baine, Johnston's apparent return to tradition. To keep up such appearances, Baine, Johnston even went so far as to fire an agent who could not find a place to sit on a fence between merchant profit and fishermen's customs.

When it came to the poor whom merchants and the state thought they could neglect, fishing families took collective action to secure relief on their own behalf. Such actions resembled, on a much smaller scale, the bread riots of 18th-century French and English crowds in defence of a moral economy rooted in another pre-industrial context. Like these French and English rioters, fishermen at Battle Harbour did not take kindly to the inroads of capitalist market logic into the custom of winter credit. Like the 18th-century rioters, these fishermen found in threats to the subsistence and well-being of their families a powerful motivating force in a united action against the merchant, by threatening Baine, Johnston's agent and store, as well as anyone who might stand in the way of families taking what they needed to survive.<sup>64</sup>

The actions of Battle Harbour fishermen, unlike the food rioters of 18th-century France and England, did not pose any challenge to the structure of patriarchal authority within the District's fishing families. The food riots were often led and dominated by women in their roles as managers of the family's consumption and reproduction. It was women who began to protest as they arrived at a bakery or market only to find merchants 'unjustly' raising the price of bread, or limiting its availability. For these women, marketing was a facet of their everyday lives.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> As Peter Sinclair has shown, fishermen on Newfoundland's northwest coast were quite willing to sell fish for cash whenever the opportunity arose. Fishermen's acceptance of truck represented the absence of the alternative of cash sales in the pre-1965 fishing industry. Necessity, not tradition, forced fishing families to accept truck. When alternatives appeared, some families abandoned truck's exploitation, but within the context of a struggle over social customs that were the legacy of a moral economy negotiated around truck at Battle Harbour. See Sinclair, *From Traps to Draggers*, 48-9.

<sup>64</sup> George Rudé, *The Crowd in History 1730-1848* (London 1938), 55-6.

<sup>65</sup> Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (New York 1981), 55-6.

The families of Battle Harbour, like families in other staple-based societies and economies, differed in that export-oriented production intensified the sexual division of labour within households. Women focused their productive activity on family maintenance throughout the year, while men concentrated on the work associated with the production and export of the staple commodity. In such households, the male family head continued to appropriate all the surplus of the family through his dominance over the market nexus of the staple, and his ownership of the household's property.

The organization of household production in the fishery of a place like Battle Harbour intensified this form of patriarchy. Household production in agricultural societies, such as in 19th-century Ontario, eventually gave rise to indigenous markets for much of what had been women's non-waged work within the household.<sup>66</sup> In Newfoundland, even such limited opportunities for women to engage in activities relating to the world outside the household did not exist in a place like Battle Harbour. In such fishing communities, women played crucial roles with their reproductive labour, and, along with other family members, as curers of fish. But in the inshore fishery, men totally dominated ownership of the means of production more completely than in any other staple-based activity. Only men owned the boats and gear used in the fishery. The fishery did not give rise to local markets on the coast of Labrador, and the region's harsh soil and climate provided no basis for the kinds of indigenous market activity farm women undertook in Ontario. Moreover, fishing boats were the only means of travel among Battle Harbour District communities. At the Village of Battle Harbour, men alone usually dealt with the Company; they were the ones who actually had access to boats so that they might travel to Baine, Johnston's premises.<sup>67</sup>

Among the more desperate of Battle Harbour's families (those like Levi Spearing's or Arch Rumbold's), the threat of violence, the threat of something like a riot, was a blunt sanction against a merchant's unwillingness to play fair, in keeping with traditional expectations that it would sustain families throughout the winter. Although it entailed only a solitary threat of violence, the importance of the actions of Spearing and Rumbold should not be underestimated. The two men brought to a boiling point tensions over the restriction of winter credit which had been simmering between Battle Harbour District's fishermen and Baine, Johnston. Anxious to keep a lid on such a difficult situation, both the Company and the state reconsidered carefully their position on winter credit. Fishermen did not overturn merchant capital, but they did force it to turn to the state for a relief system to replace what was lost in the winter credit system, without any cost to Baine, Johnston. The actions of Battle Harbour fishermen joined those of people across Newfoundland

<sup>66</sup>Marjorie Griffin Cohen, *Women's Work, Markets, and Economic Development in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto 1988), 29-59.

<sup>67</sup>On women's productive and reproductive roles in the Newfoundland fishery, see Marilyn Porter, "'She was Skipper of the Shore-Crew': Notes on the History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Newfoundland," *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (Spring 1985), 105-22.

during the 1930s. As recent work by Jim Overton suggests, riots, or the threat of riots, everywhere forced both Dominion and, later, Commission Governments to either maintain, or increase relief allowances.<sup>68</sup>

It is important to see that family well-being was the fundamental basis of fishermen's conflicts with the state and Baine, Johnston concerning winter relief at Battle Harbour in the 1930s. When merchant capital looked to the state for relief provisions, it did so in the first instance because Baine, Johnston restricted winter credit due to the "leakage" caused by some fishermen trading with the competitors of their old suppliers. This "leakage" represented fishermen exercising their power over the control of the supply of fish to sanction a firm which restricted credit. Fishermen who could not elsewhere find credit, especially for the winter, demanded, with threats of violence, that Baine, Johnston fulfill its customary role in helping their families survive a winter. These demands forced the company to turn to the state. The Newfoundland government had to concede relief because it had to acknowledge that in outport Newfoundland, the state had little actual means of enforcing a rule of law over custom. Government relief at Battle Harbour represented a compromise between the state and merchant capital to protect the latter's interests. But this compromise was essentially a concession to fishermen's claims. Fishermen's "traditions" included the ability to challenge and negotiate the terms of their exploitation by Baine, Johnston. Battle Harbour fishermen, whether they broke away from Baine, Johnston and dealt with other firms, or openly threatened the firm's Battle Harbour premises when Baine, Johnston tightened winter credit, showed a tremendous capacity to challenge the hegemony of merchant capital over both society and the state.

*I would like to thank Rosemary Ommer, Gregory Kealey, Jim Overton, Mark Leier, and the anonymous readers of Labour/Le Travail for their criticisms of earlier drafts of this paper. Thanks also to the organizers of the Atlantic Canada Workshop at St. Mary's University, Fall 1989, where the first version of this paper was presented.*

<sup>68</sup>Jim Overton, "Public Relief and Social Unrest in Newfoundland in the 1930s: an Evaluation of the Ideas of Piven and Cloward," in Gregory S. Kealey, ed., *Class, Gender, and Region: Essays in Canadian Historical Sociology* (St. John's 1988), 153-66.