

Alliances and Conflicts on the French Shore: Captain Hamon's Journal, Written in Greenspond in 1770

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Alliances and Conflicts on the French Shore: Captain Hamon's Journal, Written in Greenspond in 1770

MICHAEL WILKSHIRE and FRANCES WILKSHIRE

IN 1783 THE LIMITS of the French shore, over which the French held fishing rights under the Treaty of Utrecht, were changed to exclude the section lying between Cape Bonavista and Cape St. John, the French being given in exchange that part of the west coast of Newfoundland from Point Riche to Cape Ray. The reason for this exchange was to avoid difficulties created by English settlement in the area ceded by the French. The difficulties are well known: there were continual disputes between the English and French over fishing rights. For example, the French steadfastly maintained that their rights were exclusive, while the English understood them to be concurrent. The English claimed that the only species the French were entitled to catch was cod; hence if the French took salmon it was in contravention of the treaties. And there was fierce competition for space.

A significant factor contributing to an exacerbation of this friction in the twenty years leading up to the treaty of 1783 was the fact that, in 1763, the Treaty of Paris had decreed that the islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon were the only remaining French territory in North America. Fishing rights along the shore of Newfoundland therefore became of vital importance to the French.

In 1770, Captain Jacques Hamon of Granville wrote an account of his experiences during that season when he was based in Greenspond, Bonavista Bay¹ (or "Grin d'Espagne" as it is referred to in a document of 1768).² His remarks are not limited to Greenspond; there are numerous references to Bonavista, as well as to Fogo and Twillingate. The report was written for Bretel Bros., the owners of the ship under his command, and later found its way to the

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government in Paris, where it appears to have been filed with other documentation involving discussion of possible changes to the treaty shore. It was published in French in 1950 by Charles de la Morandière under the title "Une campagne au French Shore en 1770," in *Le Pays de Granville*, a local publication in Normandy with limited circulation. The publication seems to have attracted little attention, and the transcription is at times faulty. Serious scholars would be well advised to consult the original.

The dominant theme of the report is that of the constant harassment of the French by the English. This takes a variety of forms, one of which is the destruction of French fishermen's property during their absence. Hamon opens his journal with an account of what he found on inspecting his premises after his arrival:

I began by inspecting the cabins, where I found all the partitions destroyed, broken up, burnt or removed... I then made my way to the salt store which I had had built the previous year; I found that the sides had been hacked into and burned. Moreover, only the wooden siding remained to hold up the roof, the supports having been chopped down in order to make it collapse. I was even more astonished when, seeing the flake, I perceived that it had been almost totally destroyed, particularly a new part which I had had built the previous year.³

Later Hamon relates how a fellow French captain runs into trouble when he tries to moor his ship in the only safe anchorage:

As soon as Captain Potdevin found himself at the place where the boats were usually moored, he began having the mooring lines put out, mainly on the south-east side, when a man named Green, an agent of this Mr. Randall[a merchant], with all his men, prevented him from doing so, so that Captain Potdevin, realizing that he did not have the strength of numbers to moor by force, was obliged to spend the whole night moored fore and aft to my own ship for fear of being driven out to sea if the weather had turned rough.

In some places there was a concerted effort on the part of the English merchants to dissuade the French from exercising their rights. This appears to have been the case in Bonavista, for example. Hamon records:

On 4 August, Mr. Brazil, an Irishman, on his way to Fogo with a cargo of merchandise, came to my house to see me and tell me that in Bonavista they were making plans to attempt to put us off going there, in the event that we decided to fish there. He said that when the Lieutenant had told them that they had no reason to hold back, they all volunteered to make themselves as much of a nuisance to the French as possible.

According to Hamon, the English even resort to physical violence to achieve their end. He relates an incident where a group, led by a Mr. White, attempts to prevent the French from occupying a cabin which is their property:

On going to take possession of it, Captain Potdevin found Mr. White with a band of men to prevent him from doing so and, not only that, but even to seize the

cabin. The Captain was on the point of abandoning the cabin and giving up, but in the end Mr. Renaudeau became involved, with the result that Potdevin and his men, scarcely flinching, prepared at once to face the danger of these men, spurred on by White, preventing their entry by force. In fact, one of the men with Mr. White, who was a captain and agent of Captain John Laike, seized an axe and was about to hit Captain Renaudeau and his men over the head with it. The same individual repeated this show of force a number of times. I had remained neutral up to that point, but seeing that the more worked up they became, the more serious the situation was, I felt I was justified in telling Captain White, who was encouraging his men, just how I felt.

On other occasions it is Hamon himself who is threatened:

On 8 July, Hoff and Will, working for Brixey [an English captain], once again picked a quarrel with me and insulted me in front of Mr. Hayward and Mr. Atkins who had come to visit me... The reason for these insults was that I had warned Mr. Renaudeau and Mr. Maniel that salmon or cod which chanced into their trammels were being taken by Hoff and Will and because of this, the latter were all set to attack me. Upon this I hit one of them in the face. Some of the supporters of these two men then appeared and seeing me alone, my stagers being all occupied, and the fishermen in their cabins, they decided to seize the opportunity. In fact one of them gave me a hard punch with his fist while the other made ready to grab me. Seeing myself in this crisis, I decided that it was vital to use a small stick of spruce which I had in my hand and which I broke on them; for this reason the other supporters dared say no more. This is the only effective way of getting the better of them because the complaints that one makes to the King's officers are ineffectual and we are told quite openly that these men have no respect for them.

But the most striking example of hostility towards the French is the treatment given to the body of a young French fishermen who had died in Greenspond. Hamon alleges that in 1768,

after my departure from the coast they had taken sharpened sticks and had driven them through his grave and his body, saying: "Would to God that the last of your damned nation were with you!"

When he confronted Randall, the man alleged to be responsible, he claims the latter reacted as follows:

not only did he insult me several times, but afterwards he asked what difference it made if they had driven sharpened stakes through the body of the deceased, what was so strange if it was a Frenchman?

Hamon is clearly outraged at this behaviour. His relations with officialdom are less extreme but far from friendly. He sees the defenders of law and order as being clearly biased against the French. The magistrate in Greenspond was none other than Keen, the man who had allegedly been responsible for the destruction of Hamon's premises after his departure the previous year. The Royal Navy is presented as participating in efforts to keep the French out of Bonavista, being

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totally unwilling to enforce any regulation that would injure the English merchants, and siding with them in any effort to harm the French. An example is the case of the theft of some property belonging to Hamon by one William Wixes and his accomplices. Hamon says of Lieutenant Parker of the Royal Navy:

He told me that he would arrest them and I clearly saw the opposite, because it is true that this William Wixes was in the harbour the whole time on the day when the Lieutenant was there, yet he did not take the trouble to issue a reprimand or even speak to him about it, directly or indirectly; the result of this is that the French will always be in danger of being robbed by a few villains who are to be found among the many honest people who live in Greenspond and who would like an example to be made to put a stop to these illegal acts.

The one sector of Greenspond society with which Hamon does maintain cordial relations is the local fishing community, which he records as greeting him warmly on his arrival and, later, giving him their best wishes as well as a supply of fresh vegetables for his return journey to France. And when the merchants attempt to recruit the locals into their scheme to drive out the French, they are unsuccessful:

On 22 July, around eight o'clock in the evening, an Irishman, J.D..., came to look for me at my cabin and, having found me there, warned me to be on my guard because two of Captain Brixey's men, Hoff and Will, had told numerous Englishmen coming to fish in Greenspond from other harbours where the fishing had been poor, to attack me; these two would initiate it, but they would have to pick the right moment when my men were absent. They added that as a reward the residents would be treated to a feast. They also wanted to draw the Irish onto their side, but most of these replied that, far from wanting to do me any harm, they would either remain neutral or would side with me. To which reply, the said Hoff and Will retorted that, in that case, a gunshot would settle the matter.

Some of the incidents cited by Hamon seem exaggerated but corroboration from other sources is not difficult to find. One of the examples of harassment that Hamon refers to involves an incident in Twillingate where the English decided to discourage the French from fishing on Sunday by boarding their boats and throwing all of their fish overboard. The following letter to Captain Delarue, dated 30 June 1770 and signed by twenty-six residents of Twillingate, leaves no doubt as to their feelings on Sunday fishing by the French:

Cap^t. De La Rue.

Sir,

The preceding Fishing Season, the Fishing Admirals; together with the Residents. of this, place; Order'd that no Boat either English or French should go out on the Fishing Ground, or Ledges, in Order to Catch Fish on the Sabbath or Lords Day! to which you was pleas'd to Pay due Obedience... but last Sunday to

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our Surprize! your Boats went out on the Fishing Ground; to Fish &c., without the least Regard or Distinction to y^e Day!... And as it is a thing in Particular so contrary to the Commands of the Almighty Power;... the Laws and Customs of our Country in General... We cannot with Indifference! behold the same without thinking it a crime of the highest nature not to remark on the same to you... And at the same time Petition your forbearance of the forbidding and Evil Practice in future; so entirely contrary. to the Almighty's Commands, the Laws & Customs of our Nation. In whose Country you are. & to whose Laws &c.; you ought to be Obedient to... And in Consequence of the same; Let we all hope that Gods Blessing; may Attend. & be sufficient with our Lawfull Endeavours; the Remaining Six Days in the Week... And with the same lett Peace and Tranquility reign amongst [you?] & us...

Who Are...

Sir

Your most Obed.

Servants⁴

The same issue of strict observance of the Sabbath had surfaced the previous year. In the summary of reports from the French fishing captains for 1769, religious differences are specifically mentioned:

The Anglican religion, being subservient to the letter of the law, does not allow its adherents any dispensation to permit them to work on Sundays. The English are subjected to this rule and have to obey.

The Catholic religion, which is concerned with the spirit of the law, allows for dispensation in appropriate cases; it allows its subjects to work on Sundays... ⁵

It is true that, following the 1770 incident, Lieutenant Parker did write to Delarue stating that he was entitled to fish on Sundays without interference, and that he also enclosed a copy of a notice to that effect posted in Twillingate as a result of the incident.⁶ The French nevertheless remained convinced that the failure to punish any of those responsible for boarding French boats and throwing their fish overboard was a form of silent acquiescence on the part of the Royal Navy.

Relations between Parker and Hamon were further strained by the fact that in 1769 Hamon had made a formal complaint about the Lieutenant's behaviour. There had been considerable debate over whether the French had the right to fish out of Bonavista. Hamon claimed that Parker had informed him

that if he [Hamon] were to go into the harbour of Bonavista to leave boats there, he [Parker] would burn them and arrest him and his men, and would take them to St. John's as prisoners.⁷

The English had attempted to maintain that the intention of the Treaty of Utrecht was to give the French that section of coastline stretching north from Bonavista; consequently any part of it that was located to the west, but also to the south, of the latitude of Bonavista was excluded from the French shore. This

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strange claim arose in 1768, when it is mentioned in the summary of the reports of the French captains for that year.⁸ It was dismissed as unfounded, but Hamon notes that Governor John Byron issued a proclamation pointing out that the French had treaty rights "from the place called Bonavista" whereas the treaty of Utrecht refers to the Cape rather than the town of that name.⁹

Yet another reason for this mistrust was the fact that in 1768 Hamon had caught a whale, which had been confiscated, an act supported by the local magistrate, Keen, on the grounds that the French were not entitled to fish for anything other than cod. In 1769 Hamon raises the issue again, noting that Keen had told him the money from the sale of the oil had been deposited with the admiralty in St. John's.¹⁰

The general pattern of events described by Hamon is echoed by another report from Jacques Renaudeau, the captain of the other vessel from Granville fishing in Greenspond in 1770, the *Comte de Lillebonne*. He confirms the numerous disputes with the English, the obstacles put in the way of the French attempting to anchor, and the English threatening to ram French boats. Moreover, when Renaudeau had complained to Parker of the theft of French possessions left over the winter, Parker had responded that such theft was quite proper, since the French had no right to leave anything behind, and advised him not to leave any salt on shore if he hoped to find it still there the following year!¹¹

What Hamon sees, then, is a situation in which the English merchants are determined to use any means available to deter the French from fishing in Bonavista Bay, with the Royal Navy paying lip service to the law yet at the same time acting in collusion with the merchants, and the governor maintaining an appearance of respect for French rights while using, at best, minimal efforts to defend them. The one note of harmony in this troubled picture is the excellent relations Hamon maintains with the local community.

In Hamon's report we have a splendid first-hand account of how difficult a French captain's situation could become in the face of a well-organized campaign of harassment on the part of the English, a campaign that spreads throughout Bonavista Bay. However, beyond the purely historical interest of his report, it is the personality of Hamon that breathes through the pages. What comes through is, above all, a sense of the man as an ardent defender of French rights who refuses to be intimidated by anyone. When he is informed of how the English forced the French out of Twillingate, he himself points out that other Frenchmen might have followed his example:

They informed me that at Twillingate the English were preventing the French from fishing. To which I replied that the French at Twillingate were not men, otherwise they would have shown that they were not under English domination.

And when he hears of moves afoot among the merchants to prevent the French fishing on Sundays as had happened in Twillingate, he recalls with obvious

satisfaction, if not self-congratulation, that things worked out differently in Greenspond:

it was decided that the inspecting Lieutenant would have to be consulted before any action was taken since I was a crafty dog who would not allow myself to be ruled like the others at Twillingate.

It could even be argued that Hamon's obvious feistiness might well have contributed to his own difficulties. Indeed La Morandière suggests that he may in fact have hindered rather than helped progress towards a diplomatic solution by making problems at a time when the authorities would have preferred to smooth them over. Hamon took the initiative of writing to Hugh Palliser when he was Governor of Newfoundland, and then to Byron, who replaced Palliser. Morandière quotes from a note from the French minister written into a report from Hamon in 1769:

Captain Hamon has also taken the liberty of writing to Sir Hugh Palliser. These discussions are always disadvantageous for us when they are conducted by people such as Hamon. Moreover they are improper with Sir Hugh Palliser. Mr. Hamon should limit himself to giving an account of what happened to him.¹²

It is not always simple to draw a line between the point where spirited defence ends and active belligerence begins.

We also need to ask whether Hamon's protestations in the face of English harassment were totally disinterested, and the answer is clearly that they were not. In 1763, when the French started to contemplate making use of their rights over the coast between Cape St. John and Cape Bonavista, they were well aware that there was an established English presence. As both La Morandière and Bellet explain,¹³ the French Ministère de la marine even granted bonuses to ships willing to attempt to establish a French presence. Bretel, the owner of Hamon's ship, argued forcefully for such compensation from the ministry (see Morandière 914). It appears obvious to us that Hamon had every interest in highlighting the difficulties that he faced in the hope of maintaining and perhaps even increasing the bonus. In 1771, the owners of the *Marie-Anne* and the *Comte de Lillebonne*, together with others, presented a case for the maintenance of some bonuses and a substantial increase in others to compensate for losses suffered, but their request has on it the annotation, presumably from the Minister: "accorder les primes ordinaires seulement" — "grant standard bonuses only"¹⁴ (Archives nationales, Archives des Colonies, c12, vol. 3, f. 179). It was the *Marie-Anne* that Hamon had under his command in 1770 when he wrote his report.

While it is true that Hamon's journal needs to be approached with a certain amount of caution, it is nevertheless a lively and interesting account of the daily life of French fishermen in Bonavista Bay at a time of growing tension between the French and English, and certainly deserves to be rescued from the neglect into which it has fallen. This is the prime object of our paper.

Notes

¹Archives nationales, Paris, Archives de Colonies C¹¹F vol. 4, ff. 86-93; microfilm 971-8F12 (Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador - PANL) or F-222 (Public Archives of Canada - PAC).

²"Extrait des declarations des Capitaines de navires qui ont été employés en 1768 à La pesche de La morue seche sur La côte de L'isle de Terrebonne contenant le detail de Laditte Côte et ce qui s'y est passé D'interessant" (copy). Colonies C¹¹F vol. 4, ff. 36-43; f. 36 (verso).

³All quotations from Hamon's journal are from our unpublished translation.

⁴Colonies C¹¹F vol. 4, f. 74.

⁵Colonies C¹¹F vol. 4, ff. 44-57; f. 53 verso. Our translation.

⁶Colonies C¹¹F vol. 4, f. 72.

⁷Colonies C¹¹F vol. 4, f. 44 recto. Our translation.

⁸Extrait des declarations... Colonies C¹¹F vol 4, 41 verso.

⁹Extrait des declarations... Colonies C¹¹F vol 4, f. 44 recto.

¹⁰Archives nationales, Archives des Colonies, Série C¹², vol. 3, ff. 95-8. Microfilm PANL 971-8F15, PAC 569. Report from Captain Hamon to the Bureau des Classes de la Marine, Bordeaux, dated 7 October 1769 (copy). See f. 97.

¹¹Colonies, C¹¹F, vol. 4, ff. 83-85. See f. 84 verso.

¹²"Une campagne au *French Shore* en 1770" 49. Our translation.

¹³Charles de la Morandière, *Histoire de la pêche française de la morue dans l'Amérique septentrionale*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1962-66. 3 vols. 3: 914-5. Adolphe Bellet, *La Grande Pêche de la morue à Terre-Neuve depuis la découverte du nouveau monde par les Basques au xive siècle*. Paris: Challamel, 1902, 59.

¹⁴Colonies C¹² vol. 3, ff. 178-9.