

The Struggle for Influence and Power William Coaker, Abram Kean, and the Newfoundland Sealing Industry, 1908–1915

Melvin Baker

Volume 28, Number 1, Spring 2013

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds28_1art03

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Baker, M. (2013). The Struggle for Influence and Power: William Coaker, Abram Kean, and the Newfoundland Sealing Industry, 1908–1915. *Newfoundland Studies*, 28(1), 63–96.

The Struggle for Influence and Power: William Coaker, Abram Kean, and the Newfoundland Sealing Industry, 1908–1915

MELVIN BAKER

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the Fishermen's Protective Union (FPU) was one of the most significant social and political developments in early twentieth-century Newfoundland. Led by William Coaker, (1871-1938), the FPU challenged the established economic and political order.¹ One of the FPU's major objectives was to improve the welfare of sealers; sealing was an occupation of great importance to outport fishermen in those days.² Strongly opposed to those efforts were many of the merchants, shipowners, and sealing captains. In particular, Abram Kean (1855-1945), known as "Commodore" of the sealing fleet for his success in the annual seal hunts, embodied the forces opposed to Coaker and his FPU. Until the FPU arrived on the political scene in 1908, the authority of a sealing



William F. Coaker, 1913. (Maynard Clouter/Hilda Chaulk Murray)

captain like Kean had been supreme. However, by 1915 much had changed and the FPU had become a major force in Newfoundland's political and commercial life.

During the FPU's time of ascendancy between 1908 and 1915, Kean and Coaker clashed publicly many times. Their spats became deeply personal and reflected not only opposing philosophies but an almost unrestrained dislike of one another. In 1914, that animosity became intensely acute. In that year, Newfoundland experienced two major sealing disasters. The first was when 77 sealers from the *Newfoundland* were stranded on the ice and died in a snow-storm (another one died in hospital at St. John's). The same storm claimed the *Southern Cross* with a loss of 193 men. The two disasters shocked local society and prompted government efforts to improve working and living conditions for the men aboard the sealing vessels. Those tragedies also dramatically heightened the personal conflict between Kean and Coaker.

The existing literature on Coaker and the FPU in relation to the sealing industry deals generally with the Union's efforts to improve the working and living conditions of sealers, but provides little detail on the FPU's pre-1914 efforts in this regard and its involvement in lobbying for a commission of

inquiry into the two disasters. There is a brief chapter in Kean's 1935 memoir, *Old and Young Ahead*, in which he defends himself against Coaker's criticisms.³ What is present in the literature, mainly in Cassie Brown's moving 1972 book of the *Newfoundland* disaster, is a brief account of Coaker's moral outrage in 1914 and 1915 in laying the blame for the sealing tragedies squarely at the feet of Kean, despite the findings of judicial inquiries to the contrary.

This paper provides an overview of their spirited, antagonistic relationship before the 1914 Newfoundland sealing disasters. It then examines how their personal differences affected the investigations



Abram Kean. (ASC, Coll-115, 16.04.027)

of what caused the disasters, and the taking of remedial measures to prevent future sealing disasters. These investigations in 1914 and 1915 happened against a background of considerable legal acrimony between Coaker and Kean resulting from Coaker's claims that Kean was legally responsible for the deaths of the sealers of the *Newfoundland*.

An important archival source in capturing the voices of Kean and Coaker on the sealing industry is the contemporary newspapers of the day, all owned by competing political interests in a highly charged partisan world. At the time they were the main means of informed communication and public information. An integral part of this political battle was the letter to the editor section of each newspaper in which political antagonists debated public issues. Through the press, we can follow the views of both men fighting for public opinion and defending their interests. Until late 1913, Coaker was also the editor of the FPU newspaper, *The Fishermen's Advocate*, with an immediate forum to take on all who stood in the way of the FPU. Coaker subsequently wrote editorials for the newspaper and actively shaped its content policy.⁴ Kean, by contrast, had the sympathetic support of newspaper editors opposed to the Union, notably the *Evening Herald* and its editor, P.T. McGrath,⁵ and was not shy in writing his own letters to defend himself and attack his foes. It is through these media and other archival materials that this paper brings out the heated conflicts between these two pillars of opposing interests.

THE ANTAGONISTS

The St. John's-born Coaker spent much of his adulthood in the Herring Neck area of Notre Dame Bay where he had been a lobster factory manager and owner, telegraph operator, and farmer. His Twillingate-born father was a carpenter, sailor, and sealing master-watch with 40 years of sealing at the ice fields off Newfoundland's northeast coast; from him he would have learned of the first-hand experiences of a sealer, as he would have from the fishermen-sealers among whom he lived.⁶ From 1888, when he first moved from St. John's to Herring Neck, he became interested in the welfare of local fishermen, and in 1908 he launched the FPU to fight for better political and economic conditions for fishermen and sealers.⁷ In a major speech he gave to fishermen at Joe Batt's Arm, Notre Dame Bay, in February 1909, Coaker told them that "man's true destiny is not to be dissatisfied, but to be forever unsatisfied. Here we have the key to Unionism. We will find little comfort from grumbling about past

treatment. If we are to improve conditions, we must look forward to the future — be forever unsatisfied, always alert for new improvements, for new ideas, new methods.”⁸ The Union after 1908 experienced tremendous growth along the northeast coast, with 206 local (community) councils and 21,060 members by 1914.⁹ In February 1910 the FPU started its own newspaper, *The Fishermen’s Advocate*, which until late 1913 was a weekly edition published from St. John’s. It also had a political wing, the Union Party, modelled on the British Labour Party and its “balance-of-power” approach whereby one of the two existing parties would depend on the support of the Union Party for a majority vote in the legislature. In May 1910 Coaker declared that the FPU had no “desire to govern this country,” but was determined “to see those who do will govern in an honest, energetic way.”¹⁰ In 1912 it commenced a commercial wing with the Fishermen’s Union Trading Company, an incorporated company to supply provisions and fishery supplies to Union cash stores established by local councils and provided at cost to Union members. The company’s rented premises were located in the commercial heart of St. John’s and, for members visiting St. John’s, the FPU office could easily be found by the large sign painted on the building, the words being “FPU Office” on a blue background, white letters with a red edge.¹¹ Coaker and the FPU threatened the economic sway fish merchants held over fishermen and sealers who depended on them for fishery supplies and the export of fish to world markets. They also threatened the great influence that sealing captains had over fishermen and sealers, who respected and feared them because of the importance of the seal fishery in providing cash into what otherwise was mainly an outport credit and barter economy.¹² Now fishermen had one of their own advocating their cause and grievances. Opinionated, headstrong, and outspoken, Coaker inevitably would clash with the sealing captains and their authority.

Kean was born on Flowers Island, Bonavista Bay, and at age 13 began fishing with his uncle. In 1878 he became captain of his own fishing schooner and the following year made his first visit to the seal fishery. In 1889 he captained his first sealing vessel, the S.S. *Wolf*, and established his own fishery supply business at Brookfield, Bonavista Bay. From 1885 to 1889 (Bonavista District) and 1897 to 1900 (Bay de Verde District), Kean represented the Tory party in the House of Assembly, serving as Minister of Marine and Fisheries, 1898-99. Between 1904 and 1919 he was senior captain for Bowring Brothers, one of Newfoundland’s largest fish businesses, which also operated a government coastal mail service on Newfoundland’s northeast coast. This position allowed him to exert great influence on public opinion through his many contacts in

the outports. He commanded Bowring vessels each spring to the seal fishery. He was a man of supreme confidence in his seafaring abilities who commanded the largest and most powerful vessels at the seal fishery. Although he had a reputation as a difficult and hard captain to serve under, many men jumped at the opportunity for a berth with Kean because of his established seal-hunting skills. His social and political prominence also followed from his activities in the Loyal Orange Association, in which he served as Grand Master of the Lodge from January 1907 to 1911 when that organization expanded rapidly in Bonavista and Notre Dame bays on the northeast coast; its leaders were closely allied to political factions opposed to Robert Bond's Liberals.¹³ A fisherman's son who became an outport merchant, Kean was an important ally of the mercantile elite that dominated Newfoundland society and economy in pre-1914 rural Newfoundland.

PRE-1914 CLASHES

By late 1910 and 1911 Coaker was a major irritant to the St. John's business community. He advised fishermen not to sell their fish unless at the price he recommended and to threaten a strike before the start of a sealing season. To those merchants who promised to "injure" the Union and "frighten" Unionists, he warned that "strong doses of medicine" would be administered "to those chaps."¹⁴ Supporters of the government were pushing back, too, by publishing newspaper articles critical of Coaker's past that they hoped would embarrass him and weaken his reputation in the eyes of his supporters.¹⁵

Kean quickly became one of "those chaps." A loyal Tory, he had supported Edward Morris's People's Party, which had won the 1909 election. He also was one of Coaker's earliest critics. Coaker himself had supported Morris for a time but by 1911 had become disillusioned with him and sought a political accommodation with the Liberal Party led by Sir Robert Bond.¹⁶ Kean probably knew Coaker from at least 1903 when the latter played a role in the expansion of the Loyal Orange Association into Bonavista and Notre Dame bays. Most likely, their paths crossed during Coaker's travels along the northeast coast on steamers captained by Kean. On one such trip in January 1911 Kean said that Coaker gained personally from the FPU and its businesses with Coaker being paid "\$4,000 for his services to the Union this year." Kean's mail officer also made a number of anti-Union remarks, winning the latter a stern rebuke from Unionist Ab Stratton, who told him to keep to his mail

business and not to busy himself about the FPU. Through the *Fishermen's Advocate*, Coaker condemned the claim as a "deliberate falsehood," a "black lie," and challenged Kean or anybody else to come forward with evidence to the contrary.¹⁷

A story on 19 August 1911 in the anti-FPU newspaper the *Daily News* about Kean's "good seamanship," below a picture of Kean in full uniform, subsequently raised Coaker's ire and gave him the opportunity to respond to Kean, who was then the captain of the Bowring Brothers coastal steamer the *Prospero*. Kean's "good seamanship" happened on 15 August, according to the *Daily News*, when the *Prospero* was going to La Scie to land an invalided woman from that community. "When the *Prospero* reached near the harbor, a row boat, with two men, approached the ship, and when the steamer was about to shape her course for anchorage, the row boat ran right into her bows, and was cut down," the newspaper recounted. The two men clung to the stem of the *Prospero* and "in quick time Capt. Kean had them rescued and taken to the deck. The men attributed the happening to the ship's steering, and claimed damages, amounting to the value of the boat. Capt. Kean, while not assuming responsibility, decided to pay the amount personally, and the men agreed to accept." At dinner that night aboard the steamer, some American tourists surprised the captain with a purse equal to the amount he had given the two men.¹⁸ Coaker claimed in the *Advocate* that Kean's steamer had run down the fishing punt and threw its two occupants into the sea. With their punt broken into two, the men demanded from Kean payment of the punt's value, which he immediately paid. This was not the first time Kean's poor seamanship had been on display, Coaker asserted; earlier in the year Kean "ran down some of his crew the past Spring at the ice fields. Sent men sprawling in the water although he himself was in the barrel. The sufferers told him something that we can't repeat here" at the time.¹⁹ Swearing at Kean, a staunch Methodist, would have been an act of great disrespect.

Kean replied to Coaker's "teapot tempest" and "lies, abuse and misrepresentation," denying that he had run down the La Scie punt and the sealers. "While in the act of freeing a boat's crew from slob ice, in which they had got caught, some of the crew of the boat thinking the ship would run into them," he explained, "contrary to my orders left the boat, and ran away on the slob ice and fell in, but not one of them gave me a back answer or used language, that would be out of place to use in a church, much less in the columns of the . . . *Advocate*." Kean also denied Coaker's claim that he had refused to hire Union fishermen earlier in the year for the seal fishery, claiming he "made no distinction

between union or non-union men, in fact at Brookfield, where there is a whole nest of union men, and where I select all my crew, every man got his berth as he came for it, without any question.”²⁰ Returning fire in the *Advocate*, Coaker claimed that “Kean stood at the door way of Bowring’s office last spring with his money bag collecting his sons’ debts, and as the crew of the *Florizel* were paid most of them placed all or part of their earnings in Kean’s money bag to pay debts owed Kean’s trade at Brookfield.” Kean’s command of Bowring Brothers’ *Florizel*, and the record sealing catch he made in 1910, had made his head to “swell many more inches” but his recent success at the ice was because of the powerful Bowring steamer, and with it Kean had no difficulty in finding crew members and the seals. Kean had now turned his back on the fishermen from whose ranks he had sprung, Coaker asserted, denying he had fired the first salvo in this dispute, but that he would “take no further notice of Kean’s scribbling in the papers. We have finished with him.”²¹

Kean was not finished with his scribbling. In a 19 September 1911 newspaper letter he observed that “you cannot wrangle with a chimney sweep without being made dirty” and that “God forbid that I should get so low to be put on a level with W.F. Coaker.” “From what I heard of him, I thought he was fairly intelligent,” but “his best place is the Lunatic Asylum.” Kean acknowledged collecting the debts for his sons from sealers at Bowring’s office, but denied having had a policeman force some of the men to pay and having started the dispute with Coaker. He wrote it would not be “nautical etiquette, to call Coaker a liar,” but “if I saw Coaker coming down the street with Ananias on one side and Sapphira on the other, I should then conclude that Coaker was in the bosom of his family. I challenge him to prove that ever I made such a statement” concerning Coaker’s remuneration from the FPU. Kean said Coaker had no self-respect to throw such slander at him, and mocked Coaker and some of his “deluded followers” who have said Coaker was “divinely sent as was Moses and Joshua, to lead the poor down-trodden fishermen of this country out of bondage and oppression into the land of liberty and promise. But, sir, a glance at the character of these ancient men of old, and you will see there is no comparison between them. Moses was the meekest man in all the earth. Coaker is the greatest boaster.”²²

In 1909 Coaker had proposed a new way of dealing with the seal fishery that would take the competitiveness out of it and make the merchants and their sealing vessel captains equal partners with sealers in the hunt. His proposal was a more organized approach to the seal hunt, and consisted of an operating combine of 10 steamers all fitted with wireless telegraphy for improved communications and

placed under the control of a commodore of the fleet. The proceeds of the whole voyage would be put into one pool with the masters, officers, and crews sharing alike. At the beginning of the voyage, the commodore would give each ship a certain course so that the whole sealing grounds would be covered by the steamers. When one of the ships found a seal patch, the other ships would be informed by wireless telegraph and all would then participate in the hunt together. This approach would allow for a more economical hunt and prevent the stealing of pans. He also allowed for conservation measures: "we will insist on absolute cessation from sealing every tenth year, in order to let the seal herd accumulate."²³ Coaker's ideal situation aside, by contrast, the seal fishery by 1914 operated on a share arrangement with shipowners receiving a two-thirds share and sealers a one-third share based on the value of each seal pelt. For captains, their pay was 4 per cent of the gross value of the voyage paid out of the owners' share.²⁴ Moreover, a berth to the ice was a much valued and sought after commodity giving fishermen an opportunity to earn cash while giving sealing captains great power in the selection of crew members, with many captains coming from the outports of Bonavista Bay where FPU membership was strong but where the sealing captains held an exalted status.

At the FPU annual convention held at Greenspond on 27-30 November 1911, delegates approved several recommendations concerning the seal fishery. These were improved sleeping accommodations, a better diet, a prohibition for cooks doing non-cooking duties, a room to be fitted on each ship for use as a hospital, that firearms be prohibited in the prosecution of the seal fishery, and that the panning of seals (the practice whereby sealers gathered seal pelts into a pile and put the ship's flag on them so that the vessel could later pick them up) be prohibited. The FPU also wanted the owners of the large steam vessels to transport outport sealers to their homes as soon as possible after discharging so that they could return quickly to prepare themselves for the cod fishery. Other demands were that the owners of steamers should guarantee crews a prospective share of seals and that the cost of insurance be deducted from the proceeds of the voyage. Finally, the Union wanted the price of fat determined by the steamer and the FPU before sailing.²⁵ In short, Coaker promised Unionists that "men in future engaged prosecuting this industry must be treated as humans, and must be paid well."²⁶ On 9 January 1912 he negotiated with the representatives of steam vessel owners interested in the seal fishery and reached agreement based on the above proposals with the representatives of Job Brothers & Co. Ltd., Bowring Bros. Ltd., and A. Harvey & Co., the owners of the major steel steamers. The agreement included the fixing of a price for the 1912 season

of \$4.50 per hundredweight. Coaker was unable to convince them to prohibit the panning of seals, provide transportation for sealers to their hometowns, and not charge sealers for damaged seal skins.²⁷

The practice of convening a public meeting of sealers in St. John's prior to their departure from port had begun in March 1908 when Edward Morris announced the formation of his People's Party.²⁸ As Prime Minister, Morris used these meetings to enable sealers to have a discussion of public affairs.²⁹ In 1912 Coaker flexed the growing political muscle of the Union by confronting the political and business elite of Newfoundland with a sealers' meeting of his own in St. John's. On the night of 12 March, according to an article in the Liberal newspaper *Evening Herald*, the FPU paraded with about 1,000 people dressed in their fishermen's garb of "skin boots, rough coats and sweaters." At the front of the procession through the city's main commercial street, Water Street, were "two stalwart six-footers, 'fishermen to the manor born,' holding in their hands, a port and starboard light, evidences of their arduous and dangerous avocation. Spanning the street and upheld on either side by two other types of the same hardy race was a banner with the legend emblazoned thereon, 'Success to the Union Political Party.'"³⁰

The reaction of the opposition press was predictable, playing down its significant size and political impact. The *Daily News* reported that Coaker called Bond and Morris "has beens" and challenged Abram Kean's reputation as the sealers' friend. The newspaper said that when a sealer asked Coaker a question Coaker told him to "shut your — gab, or you'll get fired out over the heads of the people to the door." It quoted him as calling those who refused to join the Union "cowards," and stated that by the time the meeting closed only about half of the 700 members had remained.³¹ Coaker immediately refuted his critics, denying having made any "disparaging remark about Capt. Kean,"³² and the following day he dealt with the "lying reports" in the opposition press, denying having called Bond and Morris "has beens." He defended Bond's political credibility and reputation and his ability to retake the government at the next general election and suggested that the FPU would be willing to ally with Bond to do so.³³

Dueling sealers' meeting contests took place on 13 March. Coaker's meeting had 600 sealers in attendance with Unionists unanimously condemning the *Daily News* and the *Evening Chronicle* for their "untruthful" articles about the FPU's 12 March meeting.³⁴ At Morris's annual sealers' meeting, reputedly with over 2,000 sealers in attendance, Kean "tore the Coaker agreement . . . to rags." Kean had been a prominent speaker at Morris's past annual meetings; in 1909 he

told sealers he was “not in politics” and was “no partisan” while welcoming the opportunity to address “his friends, the sealers.” In 1911 he chaired the meeting, and in 1912 he took a lead role in criticizing the FPU.³⁵ Kean asserted that many of the improvements claimed by Coaker had already been implemented over the past two years by the merchants and the sealing captains, and other provisions would be a disadvantage to sealers. Prohibiting the cooks from performing any work other than cooking, Kean said, would mean that in his case, as he employed four cooks, there would be an extra thousand seals not taken and a financial loss for both the ship and the crew (and himself). He asserted it was stupid of Coaker not to have the sealing agreement include the ships owned by John Crosbie³⁶ and praised Crosbie for not signing. Kean referred to Coaker’s final absurdity of fixing the price of seal oil fat at \$4.50 per quintal, which thereby prevented sealers from being able to get a higher price.³⁷ Crosbie had refused to sign the agreement because he had little faith that his fellow merchants would actually live up to their side of the agreement.³⁸ Some sealers and FPU critics blamed the subsequent poor seal fishery in 1912 on Coaker having “jinked it.” Coaker had the date delayed by two days for when wooden ships left port and three days for when steel ships left St. John’s. Except for Crosbie’s *Fogota*, all had thus missed the main patch of seals. John Crosbie had sent the *Fogota* on Monday 11 March,³⁹ the regular date, and had done well with his ship returning to port with a bumper trip⁴⁰ and paid the sealers a higher price for the young seal fat. For 1912, the season’s total was 175,000 seals valued at \$330,000 as compared to the 1911 totals of 338,348 seals valued at \$628,000.⁴¹

The Union’s second annual sealers’ meeting, in 1913 in St. John’s, was more successful than the inaugural one. About 3,000 people turned out for the Sealers’ Parade on 12 March. That night, sealers and their supporters carrying torchlights lined up in a procession in ranks three, four, and five deep led by a “fine able sealer clad in oil skins and a sou’wester, bearing the flag of the Union.” The Morris government held its sixth annual sealers’ meeting on 13 March, but had, Coaker claimed, only about 100 sealers present while the *Liberal Evening Telegram* said it was only a meeting of “his heelers” and “in no sense could it be termed a sealers meeting.”⁴² Captain Kean spoke and condemned the 1912 sealing agreement for the policy of fixing a price before sailing, which, he said, was “absurd” and “ridiculous” as it put all the risk of the success of the hunt on the owners.⁴³

The upcoming general election was very much in the minds of leaders of both sealers’ meetings. Held on 30 October 1913, the Morris government won re-election against a coalition opposition consisting of the Liberal Party led by

former Premier Sir Robert Bond and the Union Party led by Coaker. Coaker's Union Party won eight seats (Coaker won in Bonavista District) to seven for Bond's Liberals, some of whom, however, owed their success to FPU support. Bond resigned as Liberal leader rather than continue leadership of a diminished Liberal Party in the Assembly. He also made clear his great revulsion for the FPU, disagreeing with the FPU desire to dominate local politics.⁴⁴ In refuting Bond's reasons for resigning in January 1914 from the legislature, Coaker told Union members that he might call a general strike of sealers for higher wages prior to the 13 March 1914 departure date of vessels for the seal fishery.⁴⁵ The threat of a strike probably worked to his advantage in his efforts to improve working and living conditions for sealers. Coaker introduced a sealing bill in the House on 29 January, having first consulted the owners of the sealing vessels on the matter.⁴⁶ The bill essentially embodied the principles of the 1912 Sealing Agreement. The bill's movement through the House was slow and members in the Assembly and the Legislative Council were lobbied with objections to the bill from Kean, whom *The Fishermen's Advocate* derisively called a professional lobbyist, noting that the FPU reforms would change the way Kean and other sealing captains ran the seal fishery in a tight-fisted manner.⁴⁷ On 4 March Kean flexed his authority as the leading sealing captain in Newfoundland by taking a group of 12 sealing captains to Government House to protest the bill, especially the section defining the duties of cooks. However, as Governor Sir Walter Edward Davidson confided in his diary that day, the captains only "groused at the theoretical interference with their supreme control, and the interference does not amount to anything."⁴⁸ Thus, despite Kean's objections, the bill became law, but only after the 1914 sealing season had begun.⁴⁹

THE 1914 NEWFOUNDLAND SEALING DISASTERS AND REPORTS

In the *Newfoundland* disaster of 31 March to 2 April, the wooden steamer *Newfoundland* was under the command of Westbury Kean, 29-year-old son of Abram, who was in the largest steel steamer at the ice, the *Stephano* owned by Bowring Brothers. His brother Joseph commanded the second-largest steel steamer, the *Florizel*. The *Newfoundland* had its wireless removed. The owners, A. Harvey & Co, could not justify the cost of the equipment and operator because of the ship's past poor sealing record. As a government inquiry later noted, wireless at this time was regarded only as a means for captains to transmit to each other information on where the herds of seals were to be found.⁵⁰

Its removal proved critical as Westbury Kean would be unable to contact other vessels. The *Newfoundland* had taken few seals and Westbury had informed his brother of his bad luck when his ship had come alongside the *Florizel*. Joseph passed this news on to their father, who was having some success. On the morning of Tuesday 31 March Westbury sent his crew on the ice towards the *Stephano*, a distance of between five and seven miles, where they would take orders from his father. Leaving at 7 a.m. the men, except for 34 who returned to the *Newfoundland* because they believed a storm was coming, reached the *Stephano* at 11:20 a.m. Those 132 men had a dinner of tea and hard bread after which Abram ordered them to the ice at 11:50 a.m. to kill a patch of seals and return to their own ship. Led by their master watch, George Tuff, the men began harvesting seals but the storm that was brewing became worse. Tuff ordered the sealers to return to their ship although they could not see it and were unsure where they were. Back at the *Newfoundland*, as the storm worsened, Westbury Kean assumed that his men were aboard one of the two steel steamers. The result was tragic. The men spent the afternoon and night on the ice in a raging blizzard, then a rainstorm, and finally another snowstorm. When the storm had died down by the following Wednesday morning, nobody looked for the men. Westbury assumed they were on the *Stephano* and, with no wireless, he could not contact the other ships. Those who had not already perished spent another night on the ice in bitterly cold weather. The next morning, some survivors slowly found their way to the *Newfoundland* and Westbury Kean raised a distress signal that was seen by the *Stephano*, which sent men to the *Newfoundland* to determine what the problem was. Along with the *Florizel* and the *Bellaventure*, the *Stephano* spent the rest of the day recovering the dead and survivors.⁵¹ Seventy-seven of the 132 men died on the ice and another one later died in hospital.

The same storm also caused the *Southern Cross* tragedy, the worst in Newfoundland's sealing history, which was the disappearance of the steel steamer captained by George Clarke, who was rushing from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to claim the prize of the first arrival in St. John's from the ice. The steamer had a full load and on 31 March the coastal steamer *Portia*, near St. Mary's Bay, reported the *Southern Cross* as going in the direction of Cape Race. The *Southern Cross* was never seen or heard from again.⁵²

With Prime Minister Morris out of the country in England on public business, the government's response fell to Colonial Secretary John Bennett and Finance Minister Michael Cashin, who were advised by P.T. McGrath, a close Morris confidant and newspaper editor. Bennett immediately convened an

emergency meeting of the Executive Council and appointed a committee to handle matters in looking after both the living and dead once the *Bellaventure* arrived in port with the sealers from the *Newfoundland*.⁵³ On 6 April Minister of Justice Richard Squires appointed Magistrate Arthur Knight to conduct a judicial inquiry into the *Newfoundland* disaster so that survivors of the disaster could be interviewed in St. John's before returning to their homes in the outports.⁵⁴

Knight commenced his investigation on 7 April, with lawyers A.B. Morine (the FPU lawyer) and William Lloyd (Liberal MHA and editor of the *Evening Telegram*) on behalf of the FPU representing some of the sealers from the *Newfoundland*.⁵⁵ The inquiry's primary object was "the collection and selection of such evidence as may point to criminal liability on the part of any person or persons whose position made them responsible for the safety of such men of the crew as died."⁵⁶ Providing testimony at the public inquiry were Captains Westbury Kean and Abram Kean, sealers from the *Newfoundland* and the *Stephano*, and Marconi wireless operators from several steamers at the ice. Knight ended his investigation on 30 April. The proceedings were published daily in the local press. Coaker considered the investigation "superficial" because "scores of questions yet remain to be put and answered" and stated that "someone blundered" and "very few believe that this calamity is the Will of God" as the men's lives had been sacrificed to negligence.⁵⁷

Writing to Morris on 16 April, his adviser, P.T. McGrath, noted that Coaker was "making a great crusade against the Government, the merchants who own sealing steamers, and Capt. Kean and his son." Yet, on Coaker's criticisms of some of the sealing ships, McGrath acknowledged that "such is the case, and that some of the sealing vessels, the *Southern Cross* amongst others, were known to be in poor seaworthy condition."⁵⁸ With an intimate knowledge of what the sealers felt and knew about the *Newfoundland* disaster, Coaker saw no need to await the findings of the Knight inquiry before going public. He criticized the Keans and urged immediate reforms in the seal fishery to prevent future tragedies, reforms for which he had been calling for several years.

On 13 April Coaker, who according to McGrath, in writing to Morris, had "raised Cain" in the past few days⁵⁹ in the FPU press, called on Acting Premier John Bennett to appoint a commission of inquiry into the two sealing disasters. While acknowledging that "no one believes that anyone in the recent disaster gave an order that entailed risks to life," Coaker asserted that "nine-tenths of the sealers engaged in the hunt the past spring feel sure that sufficient precautions were not taken to safeguard the lives of the men which was the result of want of thought." Coaker said that Captain Wes Kean should "have known no rest that

Tuesday night until certain about the whereabouts of his men” and “he did nothing and imagined all was right until he neared the *Stephano* on Thursday morning. In every other respect he is blameless, but he can’t be exonerated from this serious omission of having taken no steps to make absolutely certain the whereabouts of his men that Tuesday night.” As for “Capt. Ab. Kean he seriously erred in not holding the men on board his ship when the weather had set in while the men were on board” and should have made “absolutely sure of the whereabouts of the men whom he had placed on the ice that afternoon, who had been overtaken by the blizzard, instead of proceeding to take panned seals on board.” Kean also “erred in not reporting the incident to all the other ships. Herein lay the cause of the loss of life.” According to Coaker, the three steel steamers in the area would have been able to search for the *Newfoundland* crew on the ice and the sounds of the whistles from the steamers “would have so encouraged the weary as to prevent the loss of one life.” These facts “can’t be gainsaid,” he wrote, and “to charge either captain with serious wrongdoing will accomplish no purpose; but a serious error in judgment on the part of both has had a terrible result, and cannot be permitted to pass with impunity” because of Abram Kean’s “large experience.” Coaker noted that over the years Kean had “men missing on the ice as long as three nights in succession, and not a small number either and they escaped solely because the weather held clear.” The sealers were dependent on him to “protect their interests, and whether pleasing or displeasing to me or to anyone,” he had a “duty to perform on their behalf.”⁶⁰

Abram Kean testified at the Knight inquiry on 13 and 14 April. Immediately an intense public debate broke out over Kean’s responsibility for the disaster. McGrath wrote in a letter to Morris on 14 April that a “scapegoat had to be found, and he is conveniently provided in the form of Abraham [*sic*] Kean, who, to do him justice, was not alone trying to get a load of seals for himself, but also for his son and who is now paying the penalty.”⁶¹ At the same time Kean was giving his testimony, an article by a Newfoundland correspondent appeared in the *Montreal Daily Star* that quoted survivors as placing blame for the disaster on him. Such charges “I don’t think I need worry over,” he wrote in a letter in the *Evening Herald* on 14 April, as “they can be so easily contradicted both by my own crew” and by the sworn testimony of the survivors at the inquiry. He took great exception to Coaker’s claim of leaving men on the ice during his sealing career and said, “I am prepared to declare on oath that during the 26 years I have been master of a steamer and two years master of a sailing vessel I have never had a man all night on ice except on two occasions, when, in both instances, I had placed boats on the ice, and sails for tents, and plenty of coal

and food and kettles and cooks, and they were never longer that one night at a time." Coaker was a "man so lost to all sense of common decency as to make a barefaced charge of that kind against me needs no words of mine to show what reliance can be placed on such a character." Coaker made his charge while Kean was giving testimony to the Knight inquiry and, if he had wanted information, Kean wrote, all Coaker had to do was to have Lloyd question him on such matters.⁶²

Coaker responded the next day in the press about Kean having left men on the ice in the past for three nights in succession. "That information was given me in the preference [*sic*] of many witnesses," Coaker wrote:

by a man who was one of the number of the *Wolfs* crew who were three nights on the ice in succession. My informant now intimates that the actual time was two nights and three days. At that time Captain Kean picked up seventeen thousand seals while the men were on the ice, and instead of seeking his missing men he continued picking up seals and the last night the men were out he stated on board that they would have to look after themselves for if he went on to take in the men that night he would pass out of the patch of seals then surrounding him and may never see them again, so palling the chief engineer ordered him to burn her down.

Some of the men "became ice blind while out on that occasion and their sight was restored again before they reached the ship. I have no doubt but what some of the men who suffered then will publicly reply to Capt. Kean's remarks." Coaker could "inform Capt. Kean that hundreds of men who sailed under him consider him the hardest and most regardless master they ever sailed with." Coaker had interviewed all the survivors who were recuperating at the General Hospital and they "all point blank lay the blame for their suffering to Capt. Kean's lack of good judgment and common sense in sending them away from his ship at a time when they say they would not drive a dog out of doors." If given a choice, Coaker said that not ten of the 120 men who had left the *Stephano* would have gone if they had a choice and "some of them actually intended to stowaway when they heard the order to get on the ice. An officer of the *Stephano* went through the ship crying out that if any of the crew of the *Newfoundland* were there to get out on the ice." The men blamed Kean and Tuff, the master watch, for the whole trouble — "the universal cry of the men at the hospital" — and "one of them recently told Capt. Kean's daughter that he

blamed her father for the loss of the men and said he ought to be hanged. Will the Capt. deny that?" Coaker concluded that he could "fill a book with the sealing actions of Capt. Kean that would open the eyes of the people to goings on, that would surprise every reasonable man," and that the "universal opinion" was that Kean "should never again be permitted to sail for the ice floe as master of a steamer."⁶³ The FPU newspaper noted that it had received a letter from one of the sealers who was out on the ice for two nights and three days under Kean in the *Wolf* and would publish it the following day, which it did. "S.T." told readers of his experience on the ice and wrote that "I never sailed with a man who so little regarded his men on ice or in coming on board of the ship. Many a time I risked my life in boarding ships since Captain Kean commanded steel ships."⁶⁴

Kean replied in the *Evening Herald* to Coaker's latest letter by noting that "there is an old saying that a man that is born to be drowned will never be hanged. I have no desire that my end shall be brought about in either way, but of the two I would prefer to drown. After Mr. Coaker's latest attack in the *Daily Mail* of this date I never expect to be hanged, and if I can escape drowning the probabilities are I shall die a natural death." Kean noted that a friend of his used to say that "the devil was a fool, as well as a liar," and declared that "Coaker's latest proves the truth of that statement." He refuted the claims against him of having left men from the *Wolf* on the ice in 1894, about the *Newfoundland* men not getting a dinner on the *Stephano*, whose cooks were all Union men from the Brookfield council, and wrote that his daughter denied Coaker's claim that one of the sealers told her that her father was responsible for the loss of the men. She believed that Coaker "ought to be hanged for making the statement."⁶⁵ After dealing with Coaker's informant concerning the *Wolf* incident, Kean said he would refrain from further comment to Coaker's letters on the matter.

Coaker replied to Kean's "two columns of rif raf" quickly, saying that "S.T.'s" letter about the *Wolf* incident was the "utterings of a man who endured bitter sufferings owing to Capt. Kean's inhumanity" and that "while Newfoundland remains Capt. Kean will be known as the man that could have averted the massacre of 77 of his Countrymen but failed because he refused to make the effort."⁶⁶ Mark Sheppard, a St. John's sealer who had been at the hunt aboard Kean's *Stephano*, joined the press fray, saying that he was the one who was "logged" by Kean, who had mentioned at the inquiry that he had done so because Sheppard had used offensive language against him with no defence for doing so. Kean said that Sheppard had defied a work order from him. Sheppard gave his explanation for not doing so as "You'll get my defence in the court house,

sir." He told Kean not that he wouldn't work but "I can't very well work after what I've seen of this disaster through neglect and I don't think you competent to look after me."⁶⁷

Kean once more defended himself against public accusations of his indifferent behaviour towards sealers in the *Wolf* and other incidents, including the Sheppard letter. In the *Evening Herald*, Kean wrote that "another champion has appeared on the scene" in connection with the *Newfoundland* disaster, "but although signing himself a Sheppard, is really a wolf in sheep's clothing." Kean said that "there is an old saying that a truth which is only half a truth is the very worst of lies," as Sheppard had told only half the truth concerning his "disgraceful conduct" aboard the *Stephano* on 6 April. "Like his master, Coaker," Sheppard "appears to be possessed of a very poor memory" and "as regards anything he can say hurting me, he is known too well, and so am I; and as he is not worth any more space on, I leave him to the tender mercies of his friend."⁶⁸ Kean also replied to the *Wolf* incident allegation, expressing his disappointment that Coaker's informant never gave his own name but chose to "shelter behind a name-de-plume." Kean could only remember one name from the *Wolf* with the initials "S.T." and "a few years afterwards he went off his head and was put in a straight jacket, and when I read this letter I thought he was getting another fit of insanity or he must have thought everyone else was." Kean refuted "S.T.'s" charges with written evidence from other sealers who had been present at the time of the *Wolf* incident.⁶⁹ Sheppard and "S.T." each replied to Kean in the *Daily Mail* (the FPU daily newspaper) on 21 April. Sheppard asserted that he told only half he knew and felt this was "sufficient to cure the Kean disease." Sheppard said that he had asked Garland Galton, the officer in charge, to search for the *Newfoundland* crew to help save their lives and Kean in turn was adamant that he would not be dictated to. As for "S.T.," he repeated his claims while denying the statements made on behalf of Kean's "heelers."⁷⁰

Coaker's call for a commission to examine the seal fishery was having its effect on the government, McGrath wrote Morris in a letter on 20 April.⁷¹ Concerning Coaker's 23 April written request for a commission of inquiry, Bennett responded that Knight's inquiry "has been the fullest and most complete enquiry" and that the "entire evidence, with the investigating Magistrate's report thereon, will be submitted to a Commission of Enquiry to be appointed by the Governor in Council." This commission would have "full powers" to take additional evidence and make the "most exhaustive enquiry and examination into the facts in connection with both the S.S. *Newfoundland* and *Southern Cross* disasters, and generally into the whole question of the sealing industry. The Government will

spare no effort so that the investigation may be thorough, with a view to taking such steps as may prevent a repetition of the terrible tragedy of 1914." The commission would report to the government as soon as possible and "draft a bill for submission to the next session of the Legislature so that the lives and welfare of our sealers may be fully protected."⁷²

Coaker's indignant newspaper articles about Abram Kean also generated several libel suits. On 22 April Kean brought a charge of libel against the *Daily Mail* and Coaker "because of a question asked by a correspondent 'S.T.' about some beef and pork matters alleged with the *Wolf* many years ago."⁷³ In this suit, Kean claimed damages for \$10,000. Kean made a second charge of libel against the FPU newspaper on 27 April for alleged defamatory references in a letter published in that newspaper concerning the evidence of the *Florizel's* wireless operator, P.J. Barkley, where he stated the message he sent to Abram Kean included the words "and the *Newfoundland's*." Under oath Kean had stated the message was "you look after our men and I will take care of yours."⁷⁴

"A wave of excitement swept over the city," the FPU newspaper commented on 27 April, so pleased were Coaker and his supporters over their "persistent fight," which had obtained a "notable victory."⁷⁵ Still not fully satisfied, Coaker called for the commission's immediate appointment rather than wait for the completion of Knight's inquiry and suggested that Bennett "should lay the names of nominees before the President of the FPU before officially appointing them in order to secure the approval of the FPU and thereby ensure complete confidence in the work of the Commission."⁷⁶ Knight completed his inquiry on 30 April and submitted his report to Minister of Justice and Attorney General Squires on 26 May 1914. The government had it published the following day in the local press.⁷⁷

In his report, Knight assigned no criminal liability to anybody. George Tuff had legal responsibility for the movement of the *Newfoundland* men and "Captain Abraham [*sic*] Kean assumed no legal responsibility respecting these men." Both Tuff and Abram Kean erred in their judgement that the weather would not be bad when the *Newfoundland* men left the *Stephano*. Knight believed, on the evidence, that the *Stephano* put the men on the ice closer to their ship than when she did pick them up. Not "too much evidence should in my opinion be given to the evidence of Patrick J. Barkley, Operator on the S.S. *Florizel*," Knight wrote, "as to the message that was sent by Captain Joseph Kean to the *Stephano*, and in which he says Captain Joseph Kean asked Captain Abraham [*sic*] to look out for his men 'and the *Newfoundland's*.' The manner of giving his testimony — everything practically dragged from him except this one little bit which came

voluntarily and with apparent feeling — indicated to me, and, I venture to assert to all who heard it, that he was prejudiced from some cause or another.” While Tuff “may have erred in his judgment,” Knight wrote, the “fact remains that he took all the risks and shared all the terrible hardships with his fellows.”⁷⁸ Knight indicated that there were several other errors of judgement by individuals involved in the *Newfoundland* disaster. One was the fatal decision to remove the wireless from the *Newfoundland*. Another was that Westbury Kean should not have assumed that his crew was safely aboard another vessel but should have kept his ship’s whistle constantly blowing. The FPU newspaper’s editor, Dr. Harris Mosdell, observed that “Knight labored incessantly to whitewash Abram Kean, even to such an extent as to be ridiculous. It contains nothing of importance.” The report made “George Tuff the Black Sheep, and even attempts to show that the *Florizel*’s operator lied when he said Joe Kean’s message did contain the words — ‘and the *Newfoundland*’s’ — but the public will place its own construction on the Judge’s indiscreet references about Barkley and who they will believe.” Now that the “dummy report” had been released, the newspaper called for the immediate appointment of a full commission of inquiry, stating that the public will not “rest until three good men, possessing the confidence of the Toilers, are at work ascertaining what was responsible for the slaughter of seventy-eight Sons of Terra Nova, and what may be done to prevent such catastrophes.” The FPU would “not allow the crime of slaying . . . to go unavenged” and proclaimed that it “will arouse the Country from end to end over this matter until Right prevails.”⁷⁹

With Morris back in the country, the Prime Minister’s absence could no longer be used as an explanation for inaction on a commission of inquiry.⁸⁰ Writing to the Colonial Office on 9 June, Governor Davidson commented that the “Inquest proceedings elicited interesting evidence but did not lead to any conclusions other than a formal verdict.” He noted that the government was contemplating the appointment of a commission consisting of Supreme Court Justice George Johnson, a local naval officer (Commander Anthony MacDermott, captain of the HMS *Calypso*), Liberal leader James Kent, and two retired sealing captains, Henry Dawe (Bay Roberts) and William Bartlett (Brigus).⁸¹ Further delay would be the result of internal government discussions concerning the statute under which the commission would be appointed and the scope of its mandate.⁸²

Following Britain’s declaration of war against Germany on 4 August 1914, the Newfoundland legislature convened a special war session on 2 September to deal with Newfoundland’s support for Britain. Coaker’s support for government

measures in this regard was affected by his disdain for the government because of his outrage about the sealing disasters. Like most local public figures, Coaker thought the war would be of short duration and was preoccupied with domestic matters, mainly Union business. The special session allowed the government to amend the Public Enquiries Act to provide for a special inquiry into the two sealing disasters. On 2 November 1914 the government appointed Chief Justice William Horwood and Judges George Emerson and George Johnson.⁸³ The FPU demand for inclusion on the commission of inquiry was denied. The commission was to inquire into and report on the circumstances attending the death of members of the crew of the *Newfoundland* and the *Southern Cross*; “the manner of prosecuting the seal fishery; and the provisions made for conserving the health, comfort and safety of persons engaged therein so as to ascertain the causes which have contributed to the above disasters and which may possibly contribute to the causing of others in the future; and to suggest such remedial measures as may be desirable to render similar disasters unlikely hereafter.” Coaker was not satisfied with this approach. One legal person was necessary, the Union newspaper noted on the Commission’s appointment, but not three. It should consist of three men, who would be a leading legal man, a qualified shipbuilder, and a qualified sealer.⁸⁴ Another concern the Union had, as the FPU paper explained on 21 November, was that several libel suits dealing with remarks made about the sealing captains and sealing ships were before the courts, and how litigants could “submit with confidence to trials by judges who are sitting as commissioners in a public inquiry about the same matters, and who in the latter capacity are to be the jury as well as the judges. No better illustration could be afforded of the impropriety of the judges acting on the Commission.”⁸⁵ Governor Davidson noted Coaker’s strong opposition to the inquiry in his diary entry for 5 December, stating that Coaker had no confidence in the judges and would not appear.⁸⁶ The Commission began its hearings on 30 November and closed in February 1915, calling a total of 52 witnesses, many of whom had appeared at the Knight magisterial inquiry. Attorney General Squires conducted the investigation for the government while William Lloyd appeared before the Commission at the request of the government on behalf of the relatives of the victims of the sealing disasters.

THE BOWRING OUTRAGE

Coaker's outrage towards Kean also involved mobilizing the FPU membership to his stand. At the 1914 annual convention held at Catalina, the FPU passed a resolution calling on the House of Assembly to "prohibit Abraham [*sic*] Kean from ever again sailing from any port in Newfoundland as the master of a ship." The convention also empowered the Union president to "take any steps he may deem necessary, even to organize a strike, should Bowring Bros. so defy public opinion as to attempt to place Abraham [*sic*] Kean in command of one of the ships cleared by them for the seal fishery or coastal service."⁸⁷ Coaker then met with the managing partners of Bowring Brothers, John Munn and Eric Bowring. Both men evidently took the resolutions "lightly" and considered it of "little importance," but they told Coaker the *Stephano* (Kean's vessel) probably would not be engaged in the forthcoming spring seal fishery. Coaker wrote Munn and Bowring on 11 January 1915, asking whether the firm intended to give Kean command of a sealing steamer the coming spring. He wrote because Kean had been recently involved in engaging a crew for the seal fishery and that every sealer engaged by Kean had to sign an agreement that he would stand by Kean in the "event of a strike or mob." If the firm were to give Kean a command, then the FPU "will use all its influence and strength to prevent Capt. Kean from sailing as Commander of a Sealing Steamer during the coming Spring." Coaker further laid "upon your shoulders the responsibility for anything which may happen as a result of your decision to defy the FPU's request laid before you by me personally and repeated in this communication." Coaker told them that he would:

stand by any resolution which the men may make, and if that resolution be to take Captain Abraham [*sic*] Kean by force from one of your ships, I intend to lead the men in that act. Any trouble in this matter will be a national calamity and upon you will rest the responsibility for if anything does happen, it will be only because of your determination to defy the people and back up a man who is chiefly responsible for the death of the seventy-eight of the crew which sailed last March in the *Newfoundland*.⁸⁸

Governor Davidson observed in his diary that Morris told him that when the sealers congregate in St. John's in early March, Coaker "may feel himself bound to carry out his threat . . . and it is possible that some of these men may be led

into an attack on the property of Messrs. Bowring Brothers or into a personal attack on Capt. A. Kean." However, the governor inclined "to the opinion that the incident will pass off without violence. I understand that the most prominent of the Opposition members in the House of Assembly will exercise such influence as they may possess on the side of law and order."⁸⁹

Munn replied to Coaker the following day, saying that "we have sent your communication to our Head Office, Messrs. C.T. Bowring & Co, Ltd., Liverpool." On 13 January FPU Secretary William Halfyard wrote Munn requesting that the managing owners at Liverpool cable the Union directly with their answer, if necessary at the Union's expense. With no reply forthcoming, Coaker cabled the Liverpool managing directors on 10 February. A reply came the following day: "Reply your cable decided withdraw *Stephano* also Kean this season's sealing voyage." To which Coaker replied that same day, 11 February: "Thanks will show appreciation your important decision."⁹⁰ Coaker thus considered the Kean matter settled and soon published this information in the FPU newspaper. In the meantime, his libel case with Kean had been set for trial on 12 February 1915.

Kean's libel cases against Coaker were slowly working their way through the legal process. With the case scheduled for 1 February 1915 before Chief Justice Horwood, Kean's lawyer, Martin Furlong, asked for a postponement until 12 February and that the case be heard before a special jury. Coaker's lawyer, Morine, objected to the postponement because a witness for the defence was on the *Florizel* and would not be present. Furlong responded that the *Florizel* was expected in port on 7 February and hence the case could be held on the 12th subject to the arrival of the witness.⁹¹ In the 13 February issue of his newspaper, Coaker announced the decision of the Liverpool firm on Kean not going to the ice for the 1915 season and "this ends the matter so far as the F.P.U. is concerned," the newspaper informed its readers, as "the people's will has prevailed and punishment sufficient to satisfy the Country has been administered. Therefore we trust the Country will never again be called upon to discuss a serious sealing disaster." The newspaper regretted that "we are not privileged to-day to thank the firm's principals here for the grateful action performed by the principals at Liverpool. For Mr. Munn we have always cherished the best of feelings and we regret that he lacked the foresight and initiative to accede [*sic*] to the F.P.U.'s request when first intimated and thus have prevented such unpleasantness."⁹²

However, on 14 February Coaker received another cable from the Bowring head office in Liverpool stating that its decision had been made without

knowledge of the previous arrangements made by local directors, who would have final say in the matter. Coaker was furious at this apparent duplicity by Bowrings at both ends of the Atlantic Ocean. His 15 February cable to Liverpool informed the managing directors that the "country will look upon last cable as act of deception. . . . Only solution withdraw *Florizel* otherwise matter will cause strike and probably riot. Reply to-day, otherwise will initiate agitation paper immediately." An immediate cable from Bowrings to Coaker that same day stated: "Decline interfere decision St. John's directors." After receiving this cable, he immediately wrote Munn asking him to confirm that the Liverpool directors had decided to withdraw Kean from the 1915 sealing voyage and if so, then, he would not "expose this matter or call upon the fishermen to treat this act of treachery and decit [*sic*] as it deserves." Otherwise, "an agitation such as this Colony never experienced, in the interests of the fishermen and to protect their lives, will be immediately initiated and there will be no let up by us until this act of deception receives its just desserts." If it were true, Coaker wrote, that the St. John's directors threatened to resign their positions if the Liverpool firm overruled them, then "Heaven protect our poor unfortunate country." Munn never replied to Coaker, but in a conversation with the Union solicitor, Morine, he intimated that Kean was going in the *Florizel* as master.⁹³ On 24 February Coaker addressed the Conception Bay District Council at Spaniard's Bay,⁹⁴ where FPU delegates voiced their strong support for Coaker in the Bowring-Kean dispute. The 27 February issue of the Union newspaper was a special edition devoting eight pages to Bowring and Kean in the opening barrage of a major publicity campaign to petition the government to have Kean arrested for criminal negligence as contained in secret resolutions passed at the Spaniard's Bay meeting. The Bowring Outrage Resolution condemned Bowring Brothers for its "glaring act of dishonour and deception." The Criminal Negligence Resolution called upon the Crown to "arrest Captain Abram Kean on a charge of criminal negligence" and for the delegates to draft and sign a petition to the Governor-in-Council asking for Kean's arrest and for copies of the petition to be circulated throughout Newfoundland for signatures, which would be handed over to the proper authorities if necessary.⁹⁵ Over the following days the FPU's daily, the *Mail and Advocate*, published resolutions from various local councils condemning Kean and calling for his arrest.

Momentum for the agitation gained further strength with the press publication on 5 March of the report of the Sealing Commission and the arrival of sealers in St. John's to join ships for the spring fishery. The report from the three judges had majority and minority findings, with the three judges having

examined most of the witnesses who had appeared before the Knight inquiry, including Captains Abram and Westbury Kean. Judges Horwood and Emerson found that “there can be no question that a grave error of judgment was completed by the captain of the *Stephano* in advising their going on to kill seals at the time and in the circumstances without arranging with them that the *Stephano* would return to enable them to board her before night.” They wrote that the “protection of human life is the paramount consideration, alongside of which all other considerations fade into insignificance.” Justice Johnson differed; he was “equally satisfied that that crew’s failure was in no degree attributable to any mistake” to Abram Kean, and “I find that, so far from being guilty of any omission whatever, the *Stephano*’s captain went beyond what was incumbent on him and displayed commendable care for the safety of these men for whom he was in no way responsible. . . . Captain Kean had sufficient reason to conclude that they had reached their ship.” Kean’s “clear record of twenty-eight years as a sealing master rebuts conclusion that he here failed in any duty. He is no more to blame than is the captain of the *Southern Cross* because weather indications were deceptive. It is easy to prophesy after the event.” Both sealing disasters were the “Act of God, and in the circumstances inevitable.”⁹⁶

Coaker had written Munn on 2 March (some of the Commission’s findings had appeared prior to the report’s formal release) asking him to confirm his commitment from a previous conversation that Kean would not be allowed to be a master of any Bowring vessel if the Commission found Kean to blame for the sealing disaster. Munn replied that same day denying having made any such statement, emphasizing that he had said he thought Kean was “innocent until proven guilty,” and stated that no proof “in the smallest degree has been suggested or even suggested by the Commissioners,” although he had not seen the findings of the Commission. It was Munn’s understanding that “two of the Commissioners hold that Captain Kean committed an error of judgment, and the other Commissioner holds him entirely blameless. If this is so the findings of the Commission cannot be said to be holding that Captain Kean committed any offence or crime, and consequently there can be no question of guilt.” Coaker immediately asserted that Munn did say what Coaker claimed he did, both in his presence and in a telephone conversation, namely, that if the Commission found anything against Kean, then Kean would be withdrawn as a master of a sealing vessel. Moreover, there was no mention of the phrase “innocent until proven guilty.”⁹⁷

Emphasizing that an unbiased Commission had found Kean guilty of “a grave error of judgement,” Coaker asked Morris for an immediate response for

the hundreds of sealers who were arriving in the city. The Prime Minister replied by noting that the government would propose sealing legislation at the forthcoming session of the legislature, based on the recommendations of the majority report of the Commission, to provide for the safety of the sealing crews. As for the various petitions the Union had been presenting to the Crown through the Governor, Morris informed Coaker that the Governor had given them to the Colonial Secretary, who in turn would forward them to the Minister of Justice, and "you may rest assured that full consideration will be given the matter by the Law Officers of the Crown."

Unimpressed, Coaker wrote Morris that same day: "I asked you a plain question and I demand of you a plain answer." He told *Advocate* readers that Morris's reply was "not worthy . . . of the serious crisis now confronting the Colony over this matter. . . . It is the right of the sealers coming into this City that you should now speak honestly." Undaunted, Morris replied to Coaker, pointing out that the Commission with regard to Kean did not "call for any action, nor afford ground for any intervention by the Government." As for the petitions, they were being considered by the Department of Justice and the Attorney General was forwarding to the Colonial Secretary that day, 5 March, a report that Morris would give to Coaker.⁹⁸ The government view was that Coaker would not follow through with his threat; as Governor Davidson noted in his diary on 8 March, Colonial Secretary Bennett told him that the riot promised by Coaker will come to nothing and that the government would probably take no action against Kean. The following day, 9 March, Davidson spoke with John Crosbie, a long-time political foe of the FPU, who told him that Kean was the best possible sealing master and no man has ever refused to go to sea with him. Indeed, if Bowrings had failed to stand up for Kean, then he, Crosbie, would have done so himself. Although he recently had sold his steamer, the *Sagona*, to the Reid Newfoundland Company, he had put a clause in the sale that permitted him to use it for the seal fishery and it was his intention to have Kean captain the *Sagona* if Bowrings refused to allow Kean to command a ship at the ice.⁹⁹ Other than Bowrings, the other owners of steel steamers had sold their ships to Russia, which needed them for ice-breaking purposes, thus greatly reducing the number of steel steamers available for the fishery.

The Union held a meeting for its sealers on 4 March and the 500 present passed resolutions condemning Bowring Brothers for their attitude towards the Union, called on the government to arrest Kean, and decided that sealers should reject the price of \$3.75 offered by seal buyers, down from the previous year's price of \$4.75, a cut made without consulting the sealers. A resolution stated

that sealers would reject the new price and offered an alternative proposal that the price be submitted to a board of arbitration consisting of one member appointed by the Union, the second appointed by the buyers, and the third to be chosen by the other two members.¹⁰⁰ In its editorial for 6 March, an emboldened *Mail and Advocate* warned that “Kean must stay on shore, or this country will be hurled into a revolution before another six weeks passes,”¹⁰¹ while Coaker praised the majority report for its clarity, which reflected the “great legal ability of those gentlemen,” and proclaimed that the “tenor of their findings read guilty Capt. Kean in almost every paragraph.” As for Judge Johnson, he wrote, “we don’t consider his report requires much attention at our hands.”

The FPU held another sealers’ meeting on the evening of 10 March with Coaker in the chair. He expressed the Fishermen’s Union Trading Company’s determination to purchase the sealers’ share of seals at \$4.50 per hundred-weight, unless the buyers agreed to meet that price before the ships sailed on Saturday.¹⁰² Coaker had secured the services of Walter Baine Grieve of Baine Johnston & Co. and Murray & Crawford to manufacture seals purchased by the Trading Company. A Thursday night meeting (on 11 March) featured a demonstration involving a parade of 800 sealers, half of whom were Union members, through the commercial heart of the city. Coaker addressed the audience, telling them that to date over 6,000 names had been obtained to the petitions demanding Kean’s arrest. He told the sealers that they should demand the price of \$4.50 from the seal buyers before they sail. If that price were not forthcoming, then they should make a deal with the Trading Company for their seals before they sail. Concerned over possible violence when Kean would board his ship to leave for the ice, Coaker now told sealers that they must do nothing unlawful and insisted that Kean must be punished under the laws of the country and not at the hands of the sealers themselves. The FPU newspaper wrote that “had Mr. Coaker said do as you like, there would have been a riot in St. John’s on Saturday morning. The feeling of the sealers was most bitter and dozens of men, said Mr. Coaker, came to me to-day and pleaded for action to take Kean ashore from the *Florizel*. I have said the sealers would not interfere, said Mr. Coaker, and I must keep my word.”¹⁰³

On Saturday morning (13 March) at 8:30 a.m. the Commodore of the Fleet in the *Florizel* led a fleet of steel sealing steamers through the Narrows as “ringing cheers were given by thousands who had assembled along the waterfront, and volleys of musketry resounded from the battery.”¹⁰⁴ In this battle, Kean won the fight to command once more at the seal fishery. The FPU had allowed Kean to leave as master of the *Florizel*, Coaker said, because there were

only about 500 Union sealers in port and the "Government had 400 volunteers trained, ready for use."¹⁰⁵ They had their machine guns. Had we moved against Kean, the Riot Act would have been read, and if our men moved after, the troops would move, and if that did not succeed, the guns would be used." Had a strike ensued, he and other FPU leaders would have been arrested and "if guilty, would have lost our seats in the House, thus killing the Union Party, the F.P.U. and the Trading Company. . . . We forced the buyers to give \$4.50 for seals instead of \$3.75. That gave us the victory over our enemies and opened the eyes of Non-Union men."¹⁰⁶

In the midst of the FPU's campaign against Kean, the Coaker-Kean libel case was heard before Chief Justice Horwood and a special jury on 11 March. The case concerned the accusation of theft whereby Kean was alleged, in 1892, to have taken a barrel of flour from the sealing steamer *Wolf*, of which he was the master, for his personal use at home. Morine called no witnesses but "pleaded with regard to the statement that it was intended for a joke and was not calculated to injure the plaintiff in any way." The jury found in favour of Kean with \$500 in damages.¹⁰⁷ In a circular letter to local councils, Coaker blamed his loss in court on a biased jury and claimed that the "Judge was strongly against us. The Jury were friends of Kean's, except two. I did not know one of the men." He also explained that "Kean offered to take an apology if I promised to give up the disaster matter against him and say no more about it. I refused. He thought he would get \$3,000. He sued for \$10,000. He got \$500, but the end is not yet."¹⁰⁸

At a session of the legislature later in 1915, Prime Minister Morris observed that there was now a general consensus that the sealers' safety was critical and, with the two disasters in 1914 still fresh in the public mind, especially the *Newfoundland* disaster, he said that "I don't know that it will serve any good purpose at this date to make any further enquiry as to the causes which brought about this deplorable result." The report of the judges, both majority and minority opinions, were without bias, Morris asserted, and their recommendations were worthy of legal consideration despite Coaker's continuing demands that Kean be legally prosecuted for his actions. Coaker continued to condemn Kean, declaring that "on the evening of the blizzard Captain Kean must have been insane, for had he possessed his ordinary faculties, he could not have arrived at the conclusion that these men were absolutely safe on board their ship." Coaker said he had no "personal enmity against Captain Kean." Rather:

My opposition to him is based solely upon the fact that he was chiefly to blame for the loss of these men, and that being so, that he should be punished in order to impress upon all sealing masters the necessity of taking every safeguard and doing all in their power, under similar circumstances, to protect the lives of the men under their care.

Kean's failure at the ice in the 1915 fishery showed to the "ordinary man" that what the FPU "does not succeed in accomplishing is accomplished for us by Providence."¹⁰⁹

Resolution of another Kean libel case, one arising from the sealing disasters, had also slowly wound itself through the legal process, partly because Morris had been trying to reach a compromise between Coaker and Kean on the matter.¹¹⁰ This one — heard before Justice Johnson and for \$10,000 in libel damages — involved Coaker's claim that Abram Kean had falsely sworn before the Commission of Enquiry that he did not receive a wireless telegraph message from his son, Joseph, master of the *Florizel*. The jury found on 13 October 1915 for Kean with an award of \$1,800. Kean reacted by sending telegrams to his friends in the outports announcing his victory over Coaker. However, Coaker appealed. Justices Horwood and Emerson ruled that Johnson had erred by correcting a statement at trial by Morine, counsel for Coaker, based on Johnson's own knowledge of the matter when sitting as a member of the Commission of Enquiry. As a result, on 5 November 1915 the two judges set aside the jury's decision and granted a new trial. Chief Justice Horwood and Justice Johnson presided over the new case and a new jury awarded Kean \$100 for libel damages, a reduction that Coaker considered a victory.¹¹¹ However, the decision highlighted for Coaker the difficulty of outport fishermen getting justice in St. John's and reinforced his decision to move the headquarters of the FPU and its commercial companies from St. John's to somewhere along the northeast coast of Newfoundland, which the FPU would begin to do in 1916 at Catalina.¹¹²

Coaker remained convinced that Kean and, more broadly, the established order that Kean represented were responsible for the deaths on the ice. Despite not being able to prevent Kean from returning to sea, it was through his struggle with Kean that Coaker advanced the cause of the FPU and over the next few years greatly increased its political and commercial power.¹¹³ When a general election was called in 1919, Coaker's Union Party joined forces with the Liberals led by Richard Squires and together they swept to power. Kean ran in the election in 1919, but thanks in no small part to Coaker's vigorous campaign against him he was defeated by a Union candidate. In the new Squires

government Coaker served as Minister of Marine and Fisheries, with a mandate to reform the fisheries the way the FPU long had wanted.

Because of Coaker's 1914-15 outrage, the legacy has remained that Kean was responsible for the *Newfoundland* disaster. Kean, in his 1935 memoir, remained defiant in defence of his innocence: "that part of my history which took place in 1914 and the succeeding years is one which I would willingly forget, but painful recollection must be sacrificed on the altar of truth. Through no fault of my own I was subjected to the most bitter attack launched on any man in this or any other country."¹¹⁴ Indeed, historian Shannon Ryan observes that even after the disaster "many sealers wanted to serve under Kean's command because they respected him as a successful captain." Kean continued to play a prominent role in the public life of Newfoundland as a sealing captain, businessman, politician (from 1927 to 1934 he served as a member of the appointed Legislative Council), president of the Newfoundland Board of Trade in 1928, and as a general commentator in the press on fishery and other public matters. His reputation at the time and afterwards has suffered from his association with the 1914 *Newfoundland* disaster.¹¹⁵ Yet, his great self-confidence in his seafaring abilities left Kean with no self-doubt that he had done wrong. For his part Kean continued to command sealing vessels, and in 1934 was widely celebrated for having brought in his millionth seal.

CONCLUSION

This paper has situated the public controversy between William Coaker and Abram Kean over the two sealing disasters in 1914 within the broader context of Coaker's efforts to grow and consolidate the power of the FPU in the face of overwhelming opposition from the business community. There was already considerable acrimony between the two men before the disasters: they represented competing interests for control and for reform of the seal fishery and the Newfoundland economy in general. Behind Kean's early opposition to the nascent fishermen's union were the beginnings of a reactionary response from the business community to the threat posed by the rapid growth of the FPU, but he failed, as did the business community, to undermine Coaker's standing among fishermen and sealers. From 1912, the annual Union Sealers' Meetings in St. John's clearly demonstrated to the business community and St. John's that the political and economic power of the FPU was real, and the success of the Union Party in the 1913 general election showed that fishermen wanted change

in how they were governed. Or, as “Newfoundlander” wrote in an article in the American periodical the *Review of Reviews* at the time, Newfoundland was now in a “revolt by the common people against conditions under which they asserted were most unjust and unfair.”¹¹⁶ The FPU survived Kean’s and other onslaughts to become a significant player in the political and commercial life of Newfoundland. One St. John’s businessman in 1915 confided to a Canadian lawyer that the growth of the FPU and its business operations had “astonished everybody” and that Coaker, by selling goods at cost, at first had made it so that “every merchant was down on him and would boycott anyone who sold [to] him. However, the position has changed and today there is not a firm in St. John’s not after his trade, and will give him any terms asked for.”¹¹⁷

NOTES

- 1 What the FPU had in common with Canadian and American rural protest movements at the time is explored in Gerald Panting, “‘The People’ in Politics,” in Robert H. Cuff, ed., *A Coaker Anthology* (St. John’s: Creative Publishers, 1986), 71-78, and in his “The Fishermen’s Protective Union of Newfoundland and the Farmers’ Organizations in Western Canada,” *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association* 42, 1 (1963): 141-51.
- 2 The literature on sealing in early twentieth-century Newfoundland includes Briton Cooper Busch, *The War Against Seals: A History of the North American Seal Fishery* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1985); James E. Candow, *Of Men and Seals: A History of the Newfoundland Seal Hunt* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1989); Shannon Ryan, *The Ice Hunters: A History of Newfoundland Sealing to 1914* (St. John’s: Breakwater, 1994); Patrick O’Flaherty, *Lost Country: The Rise and Fall of Newfoundland, 1843-1933* (St. John’s: Long Beach Press, 2005); Chesley W. Sanger, “Sail versus Steam: Post 1863 Technological and Spatial Adaption in the Newfoundland Seal Fishery,” *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 23, 2 (2008): 139-69; Sean T. Cadigan, “The Newfoundland of Blackwood: A Historical Setting,” in Katharine Lochnan et al., *Blackwood: David Blackwood Prints of Newfoundland* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2011), 71-84. A popular and emotional account based on contemporary newspapers and judicial inquiries is Cassie Brown’s 1972 *Death on the Ice: The Great Newfoundland Sealing Disaster of 1914* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1974).
- 3 Abram Kean, *Old and Young Ahead* (St. John’s: Flanker Press, 2000, reprint of 1935 edition).
- 4 Dr. Harris Mosdell (1883-1944) served as editor of the Union newspaper from late 1913 until early 1915.
- 5 See Melvin Baker, “Patrick Thomas McGrath,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 15 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). Between 1907 and 1912 McGrath edited

- the *Evening Chronicle* newspaper before reacquiring the *Evening Herald* in late 1912.
- 6 *Evening Telegram*, 2 Feb. 1900.
- 7 Melvin Baker, "William Ford Coaker, the Formative Years, 1871-1908," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 27, 2 (Fall 2012): 225-66.
- 8 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 19 Nov. 1910.
- 9 Ian McDonald, "*To Each His Own*": *William Coaker and the Fishermen's Protective Union in Newfoundland Politics, 1908-1925* (St. John's: ISER Books, 1987), 27.
- 10 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 14 May 1910.
- 11 W.F. Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years of the Fishermen's Protective Union of Newfoundland* (St. John's: Advocate Publishing Company, 1930), 46. The premises had been previously used by John Crosbie. See also Sir William Ford Coaker Heritage Foundation Archives (Port Union), file 96.16.360, Circular Letter for 20 Apr. 1912.
- 12 On the FPU, see McDonald, "*To Each His Own*"; Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years*; Coaker, *Past, Present and Future* (St. John's: Advocate Publishing Company, 1932); Gene Long, *Suspended State: Newfoundland before Canada* (St. John's: Breakwater, 1999); Melvin Baker, "Plaindealing and the Fishermen's Protective Union, 1908-1910," *Newfoundland Quarterly* 105, 4 (Spring 2013): 43-51.
- 13 On Kean's career, see Kean, *Old and Young Ahead*. There is no scholarly treatment of Kean's public life. See also Baker, "William Ford Coaker, the Formative Years, 1871-1908," 247-49.
- 14 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 14 May 1910.
- 15 One of Coaker's earliest newspaper critics was William Dooley of the *Western Star*, published at Curling on the west coast. See the *Western Star* for 13 Sept., 11 Oct., and 1 Nov. 1911. Others were the St. John's weekly newspaper *The Plaindealer* and the daily *Evening Chronicle*.
- 16 On Coaker's relations with Bond and Morris in this period, see Melvin Baker and Peter Neary, "Sir Robert Bond (1857-1927): A Biographical Sketch," *Newfoundland Studies* 15, 1 (Spring 1999): 23-25; James Hiller, "The Political Career of Robert Bond," in James Hiller and Peter Neary, eds., *Twentieth-Century Newfoundland: Explorations* (St. John's: Breakwater, 1994), 12-45; S.J. Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).
- 17 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 7 Jan. 1911. Similarly, Bonavista merchant Philip Templeman, who operated a branch firm at nearby Catalina and opposed Coaker's efforts to raise the price of fish, tried to tarnish Coaker's character by telling Catalina residents that Coaker had personally made \$8,000 from the sale of guernseys to Union members. See *Fishermen's Advocate*, 26 Aug. 1911.
- 18 *Daily News*, 19 Aug. 1911. See also Kean's letter to the *Twillingate Sun*, 2 Sept. 1911.
- 19 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 26 Aug. 1911.
- 20 *Daily News*, 2 Sept. 1911.
- 21 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 2 Sept. 1911.
- 22 *Evening Herald*, 19 Sept. 1911.
- 23 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 19, 26 Nov. 1910.
- 24 Ryan, *The Ice Hunters*, 241; Candow, *Of Men and Seals*, 98.

- 25 Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years*, 41.
- 26 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 9 Dec. 1911.
- 27 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 13, 20 Jan. 1912.
- 28 *Evening Chronicle*, 6 Mar. 1908.
- 29 *Daily News*, 14 Mar. 1912.
- 30 *Evening Herald*, 13 Mar. 1912.
- 31 *Daily News*, 13 Mar. 1912.
- 32 Coaker to *Evening Telegram*, 13 Mar. 1912.
- 33 Coaker to *Evening Telegram*, 14 Mar. 1912.
- 34 *Evening Telegram*, 14 Mar. 1912.
- 35 *Evening Chronicle*, 6 Mar. 1909; *Daily News*, 10 Mar. 1910, 8 Mar. 1911.
- 36 The Brigus-born John Chalker Crosbie (1876-1932) was a minister without portfolio in Morris's cabinet from 1909 to 1918, a major fish exporter at St. John's, and owner of a coastal steamer along the northeast coast where the FPU was rapidly growing in membership. Coaker strongly criticized Crosbie for being the recipient of a government mail coastal contract while a member of the cabinet. See Melvin Baker, "John Chalker Crosbie," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (forthcoming).
- 37 *Daily News*, 14 Mar. 1912; *Evening Chronicle*, 14 Mar. 1912.
- 38 *Proceedings of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council, 1914*, 489.
- 39 *Evening Telegram*, 13 Mar. 1912.
- 40 *Evening Chronicle*, 29 Mar., 3 Apr. 1912. Some sealers evidently had burned an effigy of Coaker "the jinker" while still at the ice.
- 41 *Western Star*, 15 May 1912.
- 42 *Evening Telegram*, 13 Mar. 1913.
- 43 *Daily News*, 13 Mar. 1913.
- 44 On the 1913 general election, see Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland*, 95-115; Baker and Neary, "Sir Robert Bond (1857-1927)", 23-25. Because of their parliamentary inexperience, the Unionists decided to have the Liberals be the Official Opposition in the House of Assembly, but the Unionists under Coaker remained a formidable force, questioning Morris on government policy.
- 45 The Rooms, Provincial Archives (RPA), MG136, file 2.02.001, diary entry for 18 Jan. 1914.
- 46 *Proceedings of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council, 1914*, 29 Jan. 1914, 212; *Daily Mail*, 12 Feb. 1914.
- 47 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 6 Mar. 1914.
- 48 RPA, MG136, file 2.02.003, diary entry for 4 Mar. 1914.
- 49 Candow, *Of Men and Seals*, 90.
- 50 *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Sealing Disasters of 1914* (1915), 21.
- 51 Ryan, *The Ice Hunters*, 311-16.
- 52 Ibid., 310-11. See also John Feltham, *Sealing Steamers* (St. John's: Harry Cuff Publications, 1995), 126-31. For the 1914 seal fishery, Coaker had arranged a visit to the seal fishery on one of Job Brothers' steamers, the *Nascopie*, to observe first-hand working and living conditions at the ice. See Melvin Baker, ed., "President Coaker's Log of his

- Trip to the Ice Floe last Spring in S.S. *Nascopie*,” *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 25, 2 (Fall 2010): 217-52.
- 53 Archives and Special Collections (ASC), Memorial University Libraries, St. John's, Coll-175, McGrath to Morris, 14 Apr. 1914.
- 54 *Daily News*, 13 Apr. 1914.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 8 Apr. 1914.
- 56 Judge Knight's report as published *ibid.*, 27 May 1914.
- 57 Coaker to *Daily Mail*, 11 Apr. 1914.
- 58 ASC, Coll-175, McGrath to Morris, 16 Apr. 1914.
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 *Daily Mail*, 13 Apr. 1914.
- 61 ASC, Coll-175, McGrath to Morris, 14 Apr. 1914.
- 62 Kean to *Evening Herald*, 14 Apr. 1914.
- 63 Coaker to *Daily Mail*, 15 Apr. 1914.
- 64 See “S.T.” to *Daily Mail*, 16 Apr. 1914.
- 65 Kean to *Evening Herald*, 16 Apr. 1914.
- 66 Coaker to *Daily Mail*, 17 Apr. 1914.
- 67 Mark Sheppard to *Daily Mail*, 27 Apr. 1914.
- 68 Kean to *Evening Herald*, 18 Apr. 1914.
- 69 Kean to *Evening Herald*, 20 Apr. 1914.
- 70 Sheppard and “S.T.” to *Daily Mail*, 21 Apr. 1914.
- 71 ASC, Coll-175, McGrath to Morris, 20 Apr. 1914.
- 72 *Daily Mail*, 25 Apr. 1914.
- 73 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 25 Apr. 1914.
- 74 *Free Press*, 28 Apr. 1914.
- 75 *Daily Mail*, 27 Apr. 1914.
- 76 *Ibid.*, 27, 28 Apr. 1914.
- 77 RPA, GN121.45, Magisterial Enquiry into the loss of life at the Sealfishery from amongst the crew of the S.S. *Newfoundland*; *Mail and Advocate*, 27 May 1914.
- 78 *Ibid.*
- 79 *Mail and Advocate*, 27 May 1914.
- 80 *Ibid.*, 16 June 1914.
- 81 C.O.194/288, Davidson to Harcourt, 9 June 1914.
- 82 RPA, GN2/5, file 107-C, Charles Hutchings to John R. Bennett, 6 June 1914, and Bennett to Hutchings, 9 June 1914.
- 83 *Ibid.*, GN9.23, 1913-1914, Minute of Executive Council, 2 Nov. 1914. See also GN2/5, file 107, appointment of a Commission of Enquiry of Sealing Disasters.
- 84 *Mail and Advocate*, 28 Oct. 1914.
- 85 *Ibid.*, 21 Nov. 1914.
- 86 RPA, MG136, Box 1, file 2.02.008, diary entry for 5 Dec. 1914.
- 87 Coaker, *Twenty Years*, 93-94.
- 88 *Mail and Advocate*, 27 Feb. 1915.

- 89 RPA, GN1/3/A, desp. 24, Davidson to Harcourt, 3 Feb. 1915.
- 90 *Mail and Advocate*, 18 Feb. 1915.
- 91 *Evening Herald*, 1 Feb. 1915.
- 92 *Mail and Advocate*, 13 Feb. 1915.
- 93 *Ibid.*, 18, 19, 27 Feb. 1915.
- 94 *Ibid.*, 2 Mar. 1915.
- 95 *Ibid.*, 27 Feb. 1915.
- 96 *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Sealing Disasters of 1914*, 8-10, 23-25.
- 97 *Mail and Advocate*, 3 Mar. 1915.
- 98 *Ibid.*, 8 Mar. 1915.
- 99 RPA, MG136, Box 1, file 2.03.003, diary entries for 8, 9 Mar. 1915.
- 100 *Mail and Advocate*, 5 Mar. 1915.
- 101 *Ibid.*, 6 Mar. 1915.
- 102 *Ibid.*, 10, 11 Mar. 1915.
- 103 *Ibid.*, 12 Mar. 1915.
- 104 *Daily News*, 15 Mar. 1915.
- 105 They were members of the Newfoundland Regiment waiting to go overseas.
- 106 Coaker Heritage Foundation Archives, file 96.16.360, circular letter for March 1915.
- 107 *Evening Herald*, 11, 12 Mar. 1915; *Daily News*, 12 Mar. 1915.
- 108 Coaker Heritage Foundation Archives, circular letter for March 1915.
- 109 *Proceedings of the House of Assembly and the Legislative Council, 1915*, 99-102, 172. Post-1915 legislative efforts at improving working and living conditions in the seal fishery are discussed in Candow, *Of Men and Seals*, 86-106.
- 110 Kean, *Old and Young Ahead*, 3-4.
- 111 RPA, GN5/2/A/1, Box 55, Book 1914-16, 12, 13, 21 Oct., 5, 6, 10 Nov. 1915; *Mail and Advocate*, 15, 16, 18, 19 Oct., 4, 5, 13 Nov. 1915; *Daily News*, 14 Oct. 1915.
- 112 *Mail and Advocate*, 18 Oct. 1915. That section of Catalina harbour where Coaker established the FPU companies became known as Port Union.
- 113 On Coaker's battles with the business community, see McDonald, "To Each His Own"; Mike O'Brien, "Producers versus Profiteers: The Politics of Class in Newfoundland during the First World War," *Acadiensis* 40, 1 (Winter/Spring 2011): 45-69; Patricia Ruth O'Brien, "The Newfoundland Patriotic Association: The Administration of the War Effort, 1914-1918" (MA thesis, Memorial University, 1981); Peter McInnis, "All Solid along the Line: The Reid Newfoundland Strike, 1918" (MA thesis, Memorial University, 1988).
- 114 Kean, *Old and Young Ahead*, 31.
- 115 Shannon Ryan, introduction in Kean, *Old and Young Ahead*. A 1922 account of a trip to the seal fishery with Kean can be found in George Allan England, *The Greatest Hunt in the World* (Montreal: Tundra Books, 1969).
- 116 Newfoundlander, "Newfoundland's Fishermen 'Playing Politics,'" *American Review of Reviews* 49 (1914): 462-64.
- 117 Quoted in McDonald, "To Each His Own", 165. See also RPA, MG223, Borden Papers, V. Jennison to Robert Borden, 11 Mar. 1915.