

A True and Faithful Account: Newfoundland in 1680

Peter Pope

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A True and Faithful Account: Newfoundland in 1680

PETER POPE

INTRODUCTION

ON 15 SEPTEMBER 1680, HMS *ASSISTANCE* lay at anchor in Bay Bulls, under the command of the naval commodore at Newfoundland, Sir Robert Robinson. Captain Robinson's brief reply to the annual "Heads of Inquiry" has survived, so we know something of what he observed at Newfoundland that year.¹ We can learn rather more about the island and its inhabitants from a pair of documents penned by another visitor, who also served aboard *ASSISTANCE* in 1680 and who had "time and convenience" to write home that September evening. *ASSISTANCE* was to convoy sack ships sailing to the Mediterranean with their cargoes of salt cod. John Thomas, the ship's chaplain, therefore took the opportunity of his time in Bay Bulls to send word home, presumably aboard one of the ships taking fishing crews back to England. His letter has survived in the Wynne Collection at the Codrington Library, All Soul's College, Oxford.² A later report, "A briefe relation how the peopl in Newfound Land, stand as to Religion," survives in the same collection.³ This subsequent report is unsigned but written in Thomas' own hand and is obviously based, in part, on the letter of September 15.

We are not short of descriptions of Newfoundland in the late seventeenth century, for many of the naval commodores' replies to heads of inquiry have survived in the papers of the Committee for Trade and Plantations (CTP).⁴ These

observations reflect, of course, the biases of a particular class of privileged gentlemen.⁵ Thomas' letter and report are of interest in part because he was a different kind of observer. His social status would have been closer to the ship's purser Nehemiah Trout, who gave the CTP an interesting report on Newfoundland in 1678.⁶ Thomas' own clerical interests are evident in his letter and particularly in his report, which deals at some length with religious practice and *mores* in Newfoundland.

We know nothing more, for certain, of John Thomas than what we can infer from these documents: he was a married Welsh cleric in search of a living. He might have been the otherwise obscure eldest son (*fl.* 1670-1689) of William Thomas (1613-1689), Bishop of St. David's, which would make him father of William Thomas, the antiquary (1670-1738).⁷ The identification of Thomas with this educated and literary clerical family is plausible but uncertain. Nor do we know to whom Thomas addressed either his letter or the report. He refers to his correspondent as "Sir Richard" but there is no obvious evidence of who this was, although it is clear that Thomas was addressing a patron and that this was not his diocesan, the Bishop of Llandaf, in southern Wales.⁸ The documents came to All Souls College as part of a collection donated by Luttrell Wynne (1740-1814) and contain papers originally assembled by Narcissus Luttrell (1657-1732) and by Owen Wynne (*fl.* 1650-1690). Since the latter had been under-secretary to the Welsh-born admiralty jurist Sir Leoline Jenkins (1623-1685), when he was a Secretary of State and a member of the CTP, it seems most probable that it was this subordinate in the colonial administration who saved these and other papers recording Welsh views on Newfoundland.⁹ It was Owen Wynne who indexed Jenkins' papers when they were given to All Souls, in an earlier donation.¹⁰

As a member of the CTP and a Secretary of State in the early 1680s, Leoline Jenkins dealt with a number of proposals for a "settled," that is, local government of Newfoundland; generally by tabling them.¹¹ This was a period of intense but inconclusive debate over the best way of administering the English Shore.¹² It is worth noting that Thomas' superior, Sir Robert Robinson, was one of a number of senior naval officers who promoted the re-establishment of local colonial government.¹³ Some of the same arguments had been made a decade earlier in reports by Captain William Davies, one of which also found its way into the Wynne collection.¹⁴ For John Thomas, Newfoundland was missing both "massive pillars of a province and commonwealth," that is, magistrate and minister. Naturally, it is lack of the latter with which he primarily concerns himself and his report is a fine example of Newfoundland's oldest literary genre, the funding proposal.¹⁵ On the surface Thomas' report explains why a minister of religion is necessary in Newfoundland, indirectly he leaves the impression that he would be qualified for the post.

John Thomas has left us an appreciation of Newfoundland in 1680; he liked much of what he saw, whatever his doubts about social order. This admiration

suffuses his description with a warm lyricism, although he reports popular behaviour with a judicious tartness. Several issues, usually unremarked by the naval commodores, caught Thomas' caring eye. These include his direct impressions of livestock, housing, law and order, religious observance and the behaviour of women in a society demographically over-weighted by young men. He also reports what he has learned from planter residents regarding Native peoples and the designs of the French on the English Shore. Together these observations give his letter and report a value beyond their considerable literary charm.

Thomas has left us a valuable description of First Peoples in Newfoundland.¹⁶ He does not name these "Ancient Nations" and it is possible that he conflates reports of Mik'maq, Beothuk and, perhaps, Innu (Montagnais) peoples, all of whom were resident in or at least visitors to Newfoundland about this time.¹⁷ He reports contacts by unspecified Native peoples with New England traders, who are said to have supplied the former with European-style clothing. Thomas adds that the Natives "have guns now got amongst them alsoe," although the fact that they were still adept with bows and arrows suggests that they had no steady supply of European arms. Such relations with Europeans or Americans of European descent are otherwise unreported of the Beothuk and would best match the Mik'maq in this period. It is also possible that this description reflects planter knowledge of the Innu (Montagnais) of the Strait of Belle Isle. Part of Thomas' description is more specific, commenting that "Multitudes ... doe yet live and keep in the northern partes," which probably excludes Mik'maq, although it might just possibly include Innu (Montagnais) as well as Beothuk. If it is the latter to whom Thomas refers, "multitudes" is an exaggeration but one which corroborates Ralph Pastore's hypothesis of Beothuk survival in a kind of Anglo/Franco no-man's land in Notre Dame Bay. Thomas reports a "deadly feud and hatred to the English" but "commerce with the French," which is perhaps the most explicit early statement of something expressed more vaguely in later documents.¹⁸ We may well doubt that Thomas actually met any Beothuk, let alone Mik'maq or Innu, during his visit to Newfoundland, since the reply to inquiries for 1680 indicates that *ASSISTANCE* travelled no further north than Bay de Verde and no further south than Renews.¹⁹ His remarks are important, nevertheless, even if they record only the folk ethnography of planters somewhat removed from the various Native peoples of the region.

A discussion of French designs on Newfoundland has a similar significance, because Thomas records "such report as I hear amongst the planters."²⁰ According to Thomas' informants, French inhabitants already talked of taking control of the English Shore, even imagining some kind of royal purchase. The alarm that Thomas, Captain Robinson, William Davies and others had attempted to raise in London about the precarious situation of the English settlements in Newfoundland was justified, in retrospect, when the serious French attack of 1696 exposed the military weakness of Britain's informal colony.²¹ What is significant about Thomas' report is that it shows the planters themselves were aware of their

weakness and, furthermore, perceived the relatively recent permanent French settlement of Placentia Bay as a threat to their own much less organized settlements. It also suggests that English planters were, nevertheless, in some kind of communication with their French equivalents, which in turn supports other reports of Anglo/French cooperation.²²

As a man of the cloth, John Thomas was particularly concerned with issues of morality and religious observance and it is with respect to these issues that his reports from Newfoundland would have most interested his contemporaries.²³ When the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was founded in 1700 the lack of organized religion in the settled areas of English Newfoundland was used as a prime example of the need for such an organization.²⁴ Although there would be no permanent clerical presence on the English Shore until 1701, seventeenth-century Newfoundland was not as bereft of men of the cloth on the one hand or private religious practice on the other as some visitors assumed. Thomas' own visit is an example of the kind of intermittent clerical presence which can be traced from the early days of proprietorship in the first half of the century. Thomas distinguishes the religious behaviour of ordinary folk from the behaviour of "honest loyall protestants and housekeepers," that is to say, householders or, in seventeenth-century Newfoundland terminology, planters.²⁵ The latter "doe usually read the Lyturgy of the Church of England in their own houses every Lordsday." Among "the generalitie," on the other hand, Thomas saw "Noe publicke prayers, nor sermons, noe sacraments, noe holy wedlock, noe worshipp, nor praise to God all the year long"; unless, of course, "a chaplain in a man of warr comes in and happily marryes, and baptizeth a very few in that harbour only..."

Although John Thomas did not hear of "any sectarie" in Newfoundland in 1680, dissenting clerics did preach on the island from time to time. Hans Rollman has shown that Puritan preachers, *en route* to or from New England, offered divine service when they were held over at Newfoundland, as they sometimes were.²⁶ Thus the Salem minister, Reverend Hugh Peters, who would become chaplain to the New Model Army and eventually one of the convicted regicides executed after the Restoration, preached in the south Avalon in 1641, as did several other dissenting New England ministers in the next few decades.²⁷ The Reverend Richard Blinman reported that he had been welcomed to Ferryland in 1659 by two dissenting New London fishing masters and Lady Sara Kirke herself. He told the New England Puritan leader John Winthrop, "People flock from neighbouring harbours to heare the word of God, & attend diligently."²⁸ He also reported Quaker missionaries at St. John's, in the persons of Hester Biddle and Mary Fisher. Their preaching managed to convert several ships' masters there, provoking a reaction from others, which led to an invitation which brought Rev. Blinman to St. John's as well. Other records indicate an earlier Quaker mission to Newfoundland, in 1656, and suggest that these continued into the 1660s.²⁹ As Rollman observes,

however, these were occasional activities, without an institutional footing in Newfoundland itself.

With respect to social *mores*, Thomas despaired of two practices in particular. One was recreational drinking. Middle-class Englishmen, naval chaplains for example, were beginning to publicly question levels of drinking by their social inferiors and criticisms of the Newfoundland "tippling house" coincided with a wave of similar doubts about workers' drinking establishments in England.³⁰ Neither the documentary nor the archaeological records leave much doubt that social drinking was a major pastime in early modern Newfoundland.³¹ Thomas' worries seem to go beyond the issue of levels of consumption, however. Like other middle-class visitors to Newfoundland, he was especially bothered that ordinary working people were consuming wine. Wines were, in seventeenth-century England, a middle-class luxury, but along the North American Atlantic littoral, ordinary fishing folk consumed wines and spirits in considerable quantities.

Complex cultural and economic issues underlie this pattern of demand. Portable, divisible goods, like alcohol, are well suited as prestations, or gifts which create social obligations. Such exchange is directed at the creation of social capital, in which the distributor acquires social credit among those with whom he shares. Because they have this power, little luxuries, like wine or tobacco, are and were markers of sociability and therefore of particular symbolic use in a place, like Newfoundland, in which there were few differentiated contexts for recreation. Alcohol, in the form of red wine or brandy, seems to have had a special value as a source of warmth in a cool climate. The association of these beverages and heat was primarily symbolic, deriving from ancient theories about the four elements (earth, water, air and fire) and four primary properties (coldness, moisture, dryness and heat). Health and dietary tracts of the period make explicit associations between the latter and sweet red wines and spirits. Wines were culturally useful goods to the consumer, whether planter or servant, while to the supplying merchant they were economically efficient returns for fish, since the economy of the cod fishery and the economy of the wine trade meshed at the southern ports where English ships delivered Newfoundland fish. With that other little luxury, tobacco, wine can be seen as the cultural face of local systems of credit and clientage. In the absence of more regular forms of commerce and government, these goods were more significant and perhaps thus relatively more common on the English Shore than in England itself.³² It is interesting to have this pattern of demand confirmed by another early observer. But seventeenth-century consumers ranked beer, wine and spirits in social prestige as well as in alcoholic content. When visitors like John Thomas brought such perceptions to Newfoundland, there arose a fundamental contradiction between social norms (working men drink beer, gentlemen wine) and what was then common sense (cold wet men should have "hot" "dry" drinks), hence the unease apparent in Thomas' discussion of the regional taste in alcohol.

A second major social issue for Thomas was sexual promiscuity, which he reports as a kind of serial polyandry. Like observations were made of other seventeenth-century fishing communities along the Atlantic littoral, in which a great demographic imbalance existed between a large number of young men and a relatively small number of unmarried women. A royal commission of 1664 concluded that on the coast of Maine "as many men may share a woman as they do a boat."³³ For Thomas, this kind of behaviour was an aspect of the lack of proper clerical regulation of matrimony. Here Thomas probably exaggerates the contemporary importance of the clergy in establishing stable matrimonial bonds. It is true that there were neither clergy nor civil servants to solemnize informal marriages in Newfoundland; but, in this period, marriages among country folk of comparable social station in the old country were likewise often or even normally consummated without benefit of clergy or civil registration.³⁴ Surely the key *desideratum* at the fishing periphery was the low proportion of women in the population, even among over-winterers and even among conjugal households.³⁵

This demographic imbalance was a sign as well as a cause of transience of part of the population and was typical of several seventeenth-century colonies, for example Maryland, where it also restricted natural increase.³⁶ There were, nevertheless, some marriageable women in seventeenth-century Newfoundland. Widows with property were very marriageable. Some other potential partners for single male inhabitants of the English Shore were born on the Island. A pattern of very early marriage is probable in Newfoundland in this period, as it would be in newly-settled parts of the Island in later centuries.³⁷ An eighteenth-century visitor was very surprised by the early marriage of Newfoundland women and observed that some had children at the age of twelve.³⁸ Native-born daughters in seventeenth-century Maryland married at ages sixteen to nineteen.³⁹ There were 130 female children in Newfoundland in 1677, so we might assume that in the later seventeenth century each year would see five or ten girls reach the age of sixteen, which we might take as a possible marriage age.⁴⁰ By the 1680s, there was also a steady inflow of female servants. In 1681, Captain Story reported that the Irish "bring over a great many women passengers which they sell for Serv^t & a little after there coming they Marry among the fishermen that live with the Planters."⁴¹ It is probably safe to assume that most of the fifteen female servants resident in Newfoundland in 1677 married on expiration of their terms of service, perhaps five or ten of them in any one year.

Thomas' concern about informal unions gives us an indication that mating behaviour in Newfoundland differed, in a somewhat predictable way, from contemporary English norms. It seems likely that pregnancy would put an end to promiscuity, when it occurred, and result in permanent alliance. Marriages by women already living in Newfoundland are worth noting because the tendency to permanent residence exemplified by such unions is invisible to the nominal study of census lists, which is the way that the permanence of Newfoundland's early

settlement has usually been assessed. The early censuses did not consider women to be worth recording, unless they were widows and therefore heads of households. A significant group of persons among those most likely to remain resident in seventeenth-century Newfoundland, are thus systematically excluded from consideration, in discussion of permanence based on the persistence of surnames of predominantly male householders. Thomas' report serves, among other things, to remind us of these forgotten women, even while it despairs of their behaviour.

John Thomas raises a number of interesting questions in the historical anthropology of seventeenth century Newfoundland but, in the end, his letter and report are worth reading because they are the vivid expression of an inquiring soul. The transcription offered here is based on the microfilmed version of the manuscripts at the National Archives of Canada.⁴² Original spelling is retained, with the following minor exceptions: standard abbreviations are expanded and the use of *u*, *v*, *i*, *j*, *ff* for *F* and *y* for *th* are regularized. Punctuation is generally as in the manuscript, though this has been modified to improve clarity, occasionally with the result that a sentence begins with a conjunction, but this seemed the best way of retaining the rhythm of the seventeenth-century prose.

John Thomas, Letter to Sir Richard... from Bay Bulls, 15 September 1680, *Codrington Library, All Souls College, Oxford, Wynne Collection, ms 239, f. 229-230v*.

Worthy Sir:

Seeing it pleased the All mightie God in his providence to bring me to this place and that I have some time and Conveniences to write, I think it fitt to let my friends hear from me, and know it my dutie to acquainte yourselfe of anie man next my Diocesan, how I spend my time and in whos service. I conceive it is not news to you, for you might have heard it by Dr. Ellis^a, how, when, and wherefore I came to Sea, of which enterprise I thanke God I have not caus to Complain, being Chaplain to his Majties shipp Assistance, now att Anchor in Newfoundland att the Bay of Bulls. I send you these lines, of account of the present state of matters in this island, which I Intimate of you to take in good part and to read over when your leasure permitts. Sayling from Gravisend the 14th of June, we happily arrived to St. John's harbour in Newfoundland the second of August, in which seven weeks passage we had no Occurance worthy your worships observation — our men are well in health and likely persons whos life and behaviour are more decent and regular then is comonly seen amongst seamen, which alltogether is to be attributed to the watchful eye and firm hand of our worthy Commander, Sir Robart Robinson. The 14th of August we came off from St. Johns and in our way mett with his Majties shipp Assurance — our Consort for this voyage, Comanded by Captain Agrymon,^b newly come then from Tangiers. And that evening we came to the Bay of

Bulls, where we are now riding at Anchor, and staying for the Merchants which are to goe under our Convoy to the Streights^c which are not yet fully ladden, in expectation to depart about the beginning of the next month.

It is indeed an amazing thing to see how Divine wisdom hath ordered a mutuall Correspondence between Sea and land in this place. They seem to outstrip one another in forwardness to become usefull — whensoever an occasional necessitie shall require it. This exceedingly profitable Sea softly casting its amorous waves is entertained soe marvilyously Proude by this great Iland that one may think It doth, in all readines, affectionately receive thes gentl Billows to her strong Arms. And soe it is that when those chearfull Surges (which att most flow not above three or four foot high) are in some places oppugned^d by stupendious rocks, yet are they at others suffered to glide in smoothly wth great Freedome, and that which is more remarkable is the woody hills surrounding thes Fair harbours, as if by a general Condiscention, they had all signed to Contribute to the succour and refreshment of these fair havens.

Those Bays thus by nature most fittly adapted for harbourage run into the Land between those guarding hills some two, some three, miles long, more or less, with which the refreshing spring of the year brings in a most goodly Fleet of Merchant shippes from England, Irland, and New England, which Seasonably Supply these planters with wine, Bread, Sault, mault, Beefe, porck, Brandie, and all other sorts of provisions and fishing necessities, whereby they live from, in a plentiful though disorderly maner, wanting not necessities (though neither, granted, not much hay nor fruit, in all the land), for their bodily Sustenance; but the two massav^e pillars of a Provance an Commonwealth they greatly want, haveing neither magistrates nor Minister in all the populous places; but like the peopl of Lais they dwell careless and secure, when there was noe magistrate in all the Land to put them to shame in anie thing, and not delivered.^f

Into every particular harbour, which are many in Number through all the Costs of this Land, severall saile of merchant shippes, doe yearly arrive to some 20, to others 30 or 40, and may be but 10, more or less, in each harbour, as their Conveniences doe require. And soe remaining where they are fixed, untill they be fully ladden and have finished their business. [f.229]

All the shippes and vessels belonging to this Colonie amount (as I have it from some credibl persons who well know it) to 400 Sailes, all which (except a few that return to England after they have sold their provision) are all ladden with fish and oyl, being the Riches and treasure which God ordained for this part of the world. The great unimaginable Multitude and plentie of this one Sort of Fish, all cod, is a matter most incredible to all men but only Spectators, & besides other fish that's taken here, ie, salmon, herings, lobsters and severall others. Their value can be known but by the Number of harbours, together with the number of Boats belonging to each harbour, in which Boats three men in each Boat wthin a short space doe every day from May to the latter end of August^g, bring in their loades of Fish

containing Several hundreds. And heaving them up to their stages, with Forcks as we doe our Corn in harvest they immediately cutt them up, and casting off the heads presently salt them, and then being dryed in the Sun, upon hurdles two foot high from the ground, which they call flakes, they make them into great piles, as we make our Corn into cribs, containing thirtie or Fourtie Centls^h more or less Now every Centl is 112 pound weight.

In St. John's harbour, unto which belongs 300 boats and upwards, which will be seen to cover the Sea near the shoar when they are fishing in a pleasant maner, thick and near one another, as a great drift of Cattle may be seen in a fair field depasturing, where every summer is taken 60000 Centls and upwards which 60000 Centls at 12s a Centl the rate for them from the work in this plantation amount to 33000 £ sterling yearly, besides the oyl, of which here is a great quantitie made of Liver, ie, the Livers of the Codfish; and when this fish is carryed to other parts as Italy or Spain or England they are worth far much more. These shippes which goe under our Convoy are all laden with fish, which are thought will be some three or Four score Sayles, we are not certaine of their Number till they all come into this harbour, who Contract their Fish in Spain and Italie to the merchands of thos Countrys, and then return with great riches into England.

And seeing this one harbour produceth such great Quantities we must needs consider that the whol value of oyl and Fish together which is taken in this Land in all and singular the harbours being in number Fiftie three — doth amount to a verie vast Sum, which is computed by thos who have taken particular account of them all in generall (as I have it from good hands) the value of the whole fish and Oyl amounts to 666461 pounds sterling yearly, which may justly entitl this place — not only a verie Considerable rich Coloni, but a verie excellent plentifull Iland, which will deserve Care and Government for its preservation.

This Spacious Iland extending itself Five hundred miles in length well nigh as great as Great Brittain, which is considred Six hundred miles long, but this is thought to be broader, whos situation is by the quadrant 47 degrees, stands as yet without inhabitants, except the harbours, where the planters hath made some few smale houses, low and simply built, the best sort with sawd plancks from the foundation up, roof and all, others with the whol timber joyned together, standing stable wise and the roof covered with the rinde or Bark of trees, wth green turfs cast over them. [f.229v]

The wood Consisting mostlie of the Fair pine, spruce, Burgⁱ, Juniper and wilde thorne trees are soe easily got and soe near att hand all along the Sea shore that the Fishers may soon fitt themselves with all manner of timber smale and great to build withall, and to make Mainmasts when they want them. They may build their stages and lodging rooms where they think most Convenient for their purpose, soe that we may justly admire the provisions of God in adding to the plentie of Fish in the water, the greate Convenience of wood also on the shore. Thus with much ease, without anie charge att all, they have all things necessarie for their use. The Land

and Sea are interchangably helpful and Supplying one another as occasion doe require.

Those loftie hills exalt their heads higher in some places than in others, when att their Feet the humble valleys largely extending themselves, with severall planes and clear parcells of ground, with some Fresh water ponds abounding with trout which seem att their appearances to invite the Approachings of the planters, and with the sweet grass which they plentifully bear, doe loudly call for the industrie and Care of the husband man to look after it. But that which is a matter of delight to me (Considering the want of it in many places) is the goodly sight of the many fluent Currents of pure Fair Fountaine Water, chearfully spring^j out of every hill in every corner of this land.

And with all the rest of the known commodities found here, I cannot pass by unmentioned, the exceeding good temperatures of this most healthie Aire, which in my judgment is much the same with ours in South Wales, the suns strength in Summer having equall influence here as it is with us, 50 degrees being the Altitude^k with us, and 47 being the Altitude here. Neither can I learn nor think that it is much colder in the winter, soe that I conceive, the situation of Great Brittain being more to the Northward, there is not better Air then this in anie part of all the habited earth. For several thousands of planters men women and children, besides other thousands of seamen that belong to the merchant shippes and fishers in the harbour, you shall not hear of the death of one man in half a year together. We have not heard that one dyed since our coming hither. Neither is this land infested with anie venemous beasts, nor hurtfull noxious vermins, neither snakes, toads, spiders nor Frogs in all this Iland.

I perceive by the maner of the Iron and tin works with us in Monmouthshire at Tintar,^l where the Furnasses doe blow, that in Several places in this Country is found the like Advantages of strong Tourrents of water streaming down with a Convenient fall, accompanied and attended with an infinit stor of wood; and if there be but Cinders^m to be found here alsoe, the ground here may be improved to have equall riches with the water whereby this can be not Inferior to anie of the American Ilands. The few Cattle and horses which the planters keep here running in the woods are as fat and likely beasts as anie we see in England, of a large stature full fleshed and good grained.

The Ancient Nations who formerly in a wilde maner possessed this Land, are mear Salvages, tawny and Naked; till that some are now clothed, since they have some doings with New England men. They are verie dextrous att bows and Arrows (and have Guns now got amounst them alsoe) with which they most comonly fight and kill their food. Multitudes of them doe yet live and keep in the Northern partes. They destroy the wilde dear (& Bears which are alsoe by the English said to be good meat here) likewise they kill foxes and otters [f.230] and the provident Beaver, feeding upon their flesh, which is most if not all the food these Salvages have; and preserving the Fur they sell a great quantitie of it. They bear a deadly few^d

and hatred to the English, but are said to have a Commerce with the french in this land. The English alsoe take many of these wilde beasts and make great profitts of them, especially the beaver, whereof here is found a greate many, whos skill in Building his hous and care in providing for winter with his great industrie otherwaies is well worthy anie mans observation. Here's plentie of all maner of Fowl, which are shot, especially in the winter, by the planters every where.

But for it is, that the present Condition and state of this Newfoundland is not only ungoverned and unguarded by the English, but alsoe Uncapable of avoiding, or resisting anie hostile force in their own defence. Being Armless and Unfortified it doth dangerously expose itself nakedly to the Invasion, crueltie and devastation of our assaultors, whilst the riches and Conveniences thereof togeather with the possibilities and facilitie of Conquest, which the swettnesⁿ and gaine in the conquest, doe charmingly tempt, and dayly invite the neighboaring Nation^o Vigorously, and suddinly to attempt it; which may not only, if not timely prevented, depopulate and ruine the poor planters, the Kings subjects, from all their plantation, and deny our merchants anie liberte or advantage here for the future, but alsoe strike att his majties lawfull titl and interest in the whol, and so engros it to their own proper use and profit. The French have their Governor and minister amoungst them and are in a capacitie both offensive and defensive, who are said, being soe near, to begin alreadie to talke of gaining the whole into their own hands, but with that salv of saying they would give the King of England a sum of money for it. Such report as I hear amongst the planters here. Therefore indeed it behooveth every serious man to endeavour as much as in him lyeth to see it prevented in due time, it being well worthy the consideration of the great and prudent, especially them that are in Authoritie who may doe verie well (as I humbly Conceive) in Communicating it to his majties royall person, who doughtles^p upon Enquirie will take Care and provide for its Safetie. And truly it doth universally concern the glorie of God, the honour and advantage of his most royall majestie and the Comon good of his subjects to see an worthy Governor with an abl minister sent and settled here, whereby these people who baptize and marry one another without praying or parishing amongst them, yea without God in the world, may be induced to a certain, regular way of living, who now (bearing the neame to our shame of protistants) live like heathens in a licentious & lawless incestuous^a maner.

Now, Sir Richard, I beg your pardon for the freedom and boldnes I took in this writing, beseeching you to send word to Landafte^t when you doe wish to Mr Roberts there that I am in health, and that he would acquaint my wife and friends of it. And, if you please, to write further that he should see that no injurie be don me in my Convenients, if ther be anie of mine att Landaft, you will adde to the former obligations laid upon me, who now in hopes of haveing the happiness to salute you in good health att my return, which I think will be next June, I now wist who am

Your worships most humble & faithfully obedient Servant

John Thomas

Att the Bay of Bulls aboard the Assistance in Newfoundland

September 15th. 1680.

I beg of you to present my Dutie, when conveniently you can, to our Lord Bishop of Landafte, my Doicesan, though unacquainted.

[John Thomas], "A briefe relation how the peopl in Newfound Land, stand as to Religion", *Codrington Library, All Souls College, Oxford, ms 239, f. 231-232.*

A true and faithfull accompt of the present state of affairs in Newfoundland," c. 1680'

The Iland"

The Iland being very spatious above 500 miles in length and 300 in breadth stands in the latitude of 47, the greatesteste parte thereof wooded, abounding with divers sorts of wild beasts; with streaming brooks in some, and fair runletts of fountains water in other places, without anie venomous vermine of any sort whatsoever. The aire is very Temperate and healthy, though the winter begins sooner there sometimes then in other places, yet I cannot be Convinced that it is much colder than it is in other hilly Countrys. And the humble valleys att the feet of these lofty hills doe very largely extend themselves with many fair freshwater ponds and clear parcells of pasture ground, bearing good sweet grass with sheeps, the few Cattle and horses that the planters have in very good plight.

The harbours in Num: 53

The havens, which are most admirably by Nature adapted for harbours, are guarded by the surrounding hills, as if they had all unanimously Condescended for the succour and refreshment of those pleasant Bayes, whereof some run two, some three mile long into the Land. Into which harbours every spring comes in a verrie goodly fleet of merchant shipp, to the Number of 400 out of England, Irland and New-England, which furnish and bring in to the planters all sorts of provision and necessaries for their Bodily Sustenance; and being Ladden with fish and oyl, the only riches of the Country, return and sayl away all befor Winter.

The unimaginable multitude of Cod-fish taken here every Summer is incredible to all men besides spectators; for in St. John's harbour only was taken this year that which did amount above 33000 £ sterling. And in all the harbours in the possession of the English as near as possible it cold be learned and to speak modestly the full value of the fish and oyle together amounts to 666640 £.

The Inhabitants that doe winter there, besides thos that come and goe out with the shipp, are Very Numerous, Consisting of Considerable families. But the number of men do far exceed the Number of women, especially in fishing time,

which lasts from April to the latter end of August, and I understand them to be for the most part, West-Country men, with a few Irish and Welsh amongst them. They live very hardy and Nasty except a few, like the peopl of Laiz^y, careless and secure without either Government or Ministry. A Custome they have, for the first [231] shipp that sailes into any of those harbours to give the Master the name of Admirall and to him as an Umpire or indifferent Arbitrator they refer all their Controversies for that year within that Bay wherein he is staged. But when a man of Warr comes in, he is supriam over all those litl Admiralls and rules in cheif.^w

Their lifes and Consolation

As for their lifes and Consolations I need not write of it; every rationall soul will soon conclude what can be expected amongst a lawles peopl. And truly I doe marvil that ther's not more mischeif amongst them. The only thing that terrifies them from destroying one another is that men-slayers are sent over into England to be tryed according to Law.^x And I believe that for the one that's sent soe, there is many that escape unquestioned though guiltie of Willful Murder. Other Notorious Crimes are not regarded. And though as the Ants they busie themselves about the Mole-hills of their Employ'mts, but neither grows great, yet they never studdy nor strive to be good. They have not the means of grace, neither do they generally Mind eternall glory: Noe ordinances nor Templ of God in all the Land, Nor sign of Religion. As if that part of the world were exempted from the first tabl of the Ten Commandments, they make them noe show of Duty towards God. Noe publicke prayers, nor sermons, noe Sacraments, Noe holy wedlock, noe worshipp, nor praise to God all the year long, Unless a Chaplain in a man of warr comes in and happily Marryes, and Baptizeth a very few in that harbour only when he resides. Neither did I here of any sectarie^y amongst them.

The people, being all seamen, are of a hasty temper, carred on with a licentious mirth whereby they allowe themselves such freedome of Spirit, that doth not Conflict with modesty, nor distinction. The lowest sort doe not only vainely spend such week days as they can spare but make it all the Lords day's business and night too to be tipling and Madding at their Wine houses, for Ale they have but litl and it is as dear as Wine. And when in their jollities with a Woman, one or other of the drunken crew starts up and made some parte of the Matrimony between them, soe that for a few days they call one another man and wife, Untill they be wearie of one another, and then change their wishe and chuse new Mates. In a word, it is such a Country that noe sober serious persion can ever abide to dwell in, Unless it please God and the King to send them a Governor and a Minister. [231v]

Some of them, notwithstanding, who are honest loyall protestants and housekeepers^z are of a more sober Temper then the generalitie be, who doe usually read the Lyturgy of the Church of England in their own houses every Lordsday — whereof the ablest sort told me, they would engage for five hundred pounds a year to a Governor and a Minister. And others tole me they would give more and further

declared their Unfeigned desire to the Ordinaunces of God, in soe much that some of them said they thought their Naturall food can be noe Comfortable blessing unto them whilst their souls were starved, for faith cometh by hearing. And how can they hear without a preacher? Others in Bonavist, and Placentia Bay where men of warr never touch, told our men who were sent a coasting that way, they had a great Number of children, who were never baptized some to the age of eight years and would give anything for to have an Ordained, lawfull minister amongst them if it were but onlie to baptize their Infants.

In short, the dry ground never wanted raine more than these poor Inhabitants doe want the ministrations of Gods word and the use of the Sacraments. A pilot to a ship was never more necessarie than a painfull^m minister unto this Colonie, when Gods name may be very soon exalted, and many Souls saved. There for, with all the veins of my heart, I wish they may be with all speed supplied, for indeed noe delay can be made in sending a minister there, without undervaluing Gods glory and mens souls.

The minister's residency must be at St. Jones, which is the cheifest harbour. And when the season of the year admitts, he may by water goe about to the other remoter harbours and spend some time there, according to his Convenience and their Occasions for ministeriall offices shall require, and soe be usefull for all the Land.

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Notes

¹Robert Robinson, "Inquiries Made ... In Answer to Severall heads, given ... by the Lords Appointed for a Committee for Trade & Plantations..." 16 September 1680, Great Britain, Public Records Office (PRO), Colonial Office, CO 1/46 (8x), 33-34v, calendared in W. Noël Sainsbury and J.W. Fortescue (eds.), *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, America and West Indies* (London, 1860-1896). Robinson also submitted incomplete censuses of fishing ships and planters.

²Ms 239, f. 229-230v.

³Ms 239, f. 231-232. Both documents can be consulted at the National Archives of Canada, on microfilm A-1625. I am indebted to the Codrington Library for permission to copy the document for purposes of transcription.

⁴The most interesting of these are for 1675 and 1684: John Berry, Letter to Secretary of State Sir Joseph Williamson, 24 August 1675 and Letter to Sir Robert Southwell, 12 September 1675: CO 1/34 (118), 240-241 and CO 1/35 (16), 109-110; Francis Wheler, "Answers to the heads of Inquiries ... Concerning Newfoundland," 27 October 1684, CO 1/55 (56), 239-246v (calendared in *CSP Colonial*).

⁵J.E. Crowley, "Empire versus Truck: the Official Interpretation of Debt and Labour in the Eighteenth-century Newfoundland Fishery," *Canadian Historical Review* 70(3) (1989), 311-336.

⁶N. Troute, Deposition to Committee for Trade and Plantations, 1 February 1678, CO 1/42 (22), 58-59v. This receives only a brief entry in *CSP Colonial*, unfortunately; for discussion see Peter E. Pope, "The South Avalon Planters, 1630 to 1700: Residence, Labour, Demand and Exchange in Seventeenth-century Newfoundland," unpublished PhD dissertation, MUN, 1992, 57-60.

⁷"Thomas, William (1613-1689)" and "Thomas, William, D.D. (1670-1738)" in Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee (eds), *Dictionary of National Biography* (London, 1917), vol. 19.

⁸The Bishop of Llandaf from 1679 to 1706 was William Baew; see *Crockford's Clerical Directory* (London, 1990), 1049.

⁹Paul Morgan, *Oxford Libraries Outside the Bodleian* (Oxford, 1980), 5-6; J.C. Sainty, *Office-holders in Modern Britain*, vol. 2, *Officials of the Secretary of State, 1660-1782*, vol. 3, *Officials of the Boards of Trade, 1660-1870*, vol. 4, *Admiralty Officials, 1660-1870*, Institute of Historical Research, (London, 1973-1975). The Wynne Collection also contains William Davis [=Davies], "The State and Condition I found his Mastly Island of Newfoundland in the yeare of our Lord 1671 when I was there Comander of his Majts ship the Mary Rose," ms 239, f 233-234 and Captain Charles Talbot, "The State of Newfoundland," ms 243, 115v-116v. Talbot was naval commodore at Newfoundland in 1679, cf. his "Answers to the Enquiries," 15 September 1679, CO 1/43 (121), 214-217. For Davies' original reports see William Davies [Captain HMS MARY ROSE], "...reasons of the decay of the trade..." and "The State and Condition of the Island of Newfoundland," c. 1672, CO 1/29 (78) 206-207 and (79) 208, v.

¹⁰On Owen Wynne, see "Wynne, Edward," *DNB*, vol. 21.

¹¹E.g. Bishop of London, Letter to Sir Leoline Jenkins, 20 June 1681, CO 1/37 (15) and cf. enclosures (15 i-v).

¹²Keith Matthews, "A History of the West of England-Newfoundland Fisheries," unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Oxford, 1968, 200-239.

¹³Robert Robinson, Reasons for a settled Government in Newfoundland, 1669, CO 1/64 (71) in *CSP Colonial*.

¹⁴Davies, "State and Condition of Newfoundland," c. 1671.

¹⁵Cf. Anthony Parkhurst, Letter [to Edward Dyer?], 1577, British Library, Lansdowne ms 100 (10), in David B. Quinn (ed.), *New American World: A Documentary History of North America to 1612*, vol. 4, *Newfoundland from Fishery to Colony. Northwest Passage Searches* (New York, 1979), 5-7.

¹⁶Thomas, Letter (1680).

¹⁷Ralph T. Pastore, *Newfoundland Micmacs: a History of Their Traditional Life*, Newfoundland Historical Society Pamphlet no. 5 (St. John's, 1978), 10-12; "Fishermen, Furriers, and Beothuks: the Economy of Extinction," *Man In the Northeast* 33 (1987), 47-62 and "The Collapse of the Beothuk World," *Acadiensis* 19(1) (1989), 52-71; Charles A. Martijn, "Voyages des Micmacs dans la vallée du Saint-Laurent" in Charles A. Martijn (ed.), *Les Micmacs et la mer* (Montreal, 1986), 197-223 and "Innu (Montagnais) in Newfoundland," in William Cowan (ed.), *Papers of the Twenty-first Algonquian Conference* (Ottawa, 1990), 227-246.

¹⁸On commerce see Peter Bakker and Lynn Drapeau, "Adventures with the Beothuks in 1787: A Testimony from Jean Conan's Autobiography," in William Cowan (ed.) *Actes du Vingt-cinquième Congrès des Algonquistes* (Ottawa, 1994), 32-45.

¹⁹Cf. Captain Agremont, Journal HMS ASSURANCE, PRO Admiralty, ADM 51/4119, 15 August to 7 October 1680.

²⁰Thomas, "Letter" (1680).

²¹Alan F. Williams, *Father Baudoin's War: D'Iberville's Campaigns in Acadia and Newfoundland 1696, 1697* (St. John's, 1987).

²²E.g., Wheler, "Answers" (1684).

²³Thomas, "A briefe relation" (c. 1680).

²⁴Thomas Bray, *A Memorial representing the Present State of religion on the Continent of North America* (London, 1700), 16-19. The author is indebted to Hans Rollman for this reference.

²⁵Pope, "South Avalon Planters," 198ff.

²⁶H. Rollman, "Anglicans, Puritans, and Quakers in Seventeenth-Century Newfoundland," unpublished paper, Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, St. John's, 1992.

²⁷John Winthrop, *The History of New England from 1630 to 1649*, ed., J. Savage (Boston 1826), vol. 2, 240-243, cited by Rollman, "Anglicans, Puritans and Quakers." On Peters see Raymond Phineas Stearns, *The Sirenuous Puritan: Hugh Peter, 1598-1660* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1954) and Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550-1653* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), *passim*.

²⁸Richard Blinman to John Winthrop Jr., 22 August 1659, Mass. Hist. Soc., transcribed in Rollman, "Anglicans, Puritans, and Quakers."

²⁹George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. N. Penney (Cambridge, 1911), vol. 2, 334; *Letters, &c, of Early Friends...* (London, 1841), 292; both cited in Rollman, "Anglicans, Puritans, and Quakers."

³⁰Cf. Peter E. Pope, "Fish into Wine: the Historical Anthropology of the Demand for Alcohol in 17th-century Newfoundland," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 27(54) (1994), 261-278.

³¹Peter Pope, "Historical Archaeology and the Demand for Alcohol in 17th Century Newfoundland," *Acadiensis* 19 (1) (1989), 72-90 and "Past Time Pastime: a Statistical Assessment of Tobacco and Alcohol Use on Early Modern Sites," unpublished paper, Canadian Archaeological Association, Montreal, 1993.

³²Pope, "Fish into Wine."

³³Cited in Charles E. Clark, *The Eastern Frontier, the Settlement of Northern New England, 1610-1763* (1970, rep. Hanover, NH, 1983), 35 and cf. 27-28.

³⁴Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London, 1977), 31.

³⁵Gordon W. Handcock, *Soe longe as there comes noe women: Origins of English Settlement in Newfoundland* (St. John's, 1989), 31-32; Pope, "South Avalon Planters," 230-234.

³⁶L.G. Carr and L.S. Walsh, "The Planter's Wife: The Experience of White Women in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," *William and Mary Quarterly* (3rd series) 34 (1977), 542-571.

³⁷P.A. Thornton, "The Demographic and Mercantile Bases of Initial Permanent Settlement in the Strait of Belle Isle," in J.J. Mannion (ed.), *The Peopling of Newfoundland, Essays in Historical Geography* (St. John's, 1977), 152-183.

³⁸Gordon Grant, *The Life and Adventures of John Nicol, Mariner* (1822, rep. London, 1937), 52.

³⁹L.S. Walsh, " 'Till Death Us Do Part': Marriage and Family in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," in T.W. Tate and D.L. Ammerman (eds.), *The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century, Essays on Anglo-American Society* (New York, 1979), 126-152.

⁴⁰William Poole, "A particular Accompt of all the Inhabitants and Planters....," 10 September 1677, CO 1/41 (62 iv,vi,vii), 157-166.

⁴¹Captain James Story, "An Account of ... Shipps Planters &c from Trepasse to Bonavista....," 1 September 1681, CO 1/47 (52i), 113-121v.

⁴²NAC microfilm A-1625.

Notes to transcripts

^aProbably Sir William Ellis (1609-1680), judge of the Court of Common Pleas, 1673-1676 and 1679-1680; see *DNB*, vol. 6.

^bCaptain Agremont.

^cOf Gibraltar, *i.e.* the Mediterranean.

^dOpposed.

^eMassive.

^fOn the people of Laish, see *Judges* 18, verse 7: "Then the five men departed, and came to Laish, and saw the people that were therein, and how they dwelt careless, after the manner of the Zidonians, quiet and secure; and there was no magistrate in the land, that might put them to shame in any thing; and they were far from the Zidonians, and had no business with any man." The Zidonians were the people of Sidon. Verse 27 records the fate of the "quiet and secure" people of Laish, when the people of Dan arrived and "smote them with the edge of the sword, and burnt the city with fire," a remarkably prescient biblical reference.

^g"September" deleted.

^hQuintals.

ⁱBirch.

^jSpringing.

^kLatitude.

^lPresumably Tintern. Cf. [John Blaeu], *Blaeu's Atlas of England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland* (1645 and 1654, rep. London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), Plate 42, "Monmouthshire."

^mPotash?

ⁿSweetness.

^oFrance had established an official colony at Placentia in 1662.

^pDoubtless.

^qIn the secondary seventeenth-century sense of adulterous; see J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner (eds.), *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edition, Oxford, 1989), vol. 5.

^rLlandaf.

^sCover title.

^tPage heading.

^uMarginal notes are given here in italics.

^vLaish, *Judges* 18:7 and 27.

^wNote the distinction between fishing admirals, who were migratory fishermen, and the commanders of men of war, who were naval officers. These are often confused by twentieth-century students of the period.

^xCf. Charles II in Council, "A Charter Granted to the West Country Adventurers," 27 January 1675, CO 1/65 (36), 128-135v, in Keith Matthews (ed.), *Collection and Commentary on the Constitutional Laws of Seventeenth Century Newfoundland* (St. John's: Maritime History Group, MUN, 1975), 171-180; see 172.

^yDissenting cleric.

^zHouseholders.

^{aa}Painstaking.