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# Railways and Rebellion: The “Battle of Foxtrap” Reconsidered

KURT KORNESKI<sup>1</sup>

In late July 1880 a group of surveyors in the employ of Knipple and Morris, a London firm, set out to conduct a location survey for a proposed railway from St. John's to Hall's Bay. The question of whether Newfoundland ought to enter the railway age had been among the most contentious political issues in the colony since the mid-1870s. Nevertheless, popular support for the project in St. John's and in other towns on the Avalon Peninsula made this development strategy feasible, and the ruling Conservative Party, under the leadership of William Whiteway, hired the surveyors in anticipation of calling for construction tenders.<sup>2</sup> News that a survey had begun inspired excited optimism in many urban centres. As the survey party moved west of the capital, however, instead of enthusiasm and cheers the workmen found insults and threats. As they approached the community of Foxtrap, verbal assaults turned into physical confrontation. A crowd of over 500 irate residents (mostly women) armed with pitchforks, splitting knives, and rocks refused to let the surveyors pass. Indeed, at least some of those in the crowd made plain that if the surveyors pushed on with their work, the consequences might be dire. As the *Morning Chronicle* later reported, one woman, “arms bared and hair streaming behind her,” vowed to “let daylight into the stomachs of the invaders” should they persist.<sup>3</sup>

The Foxtrap upheaval drew attention immediately with both pro- and anti-railway factions in the colony mobilizing their propaganda machines to use the upheaval to their advantage. Those who opposed construction argued that proponents of the railway overstated the potential economic benefits of

rail development.<sup>4</sup> They argued that the financial outlay required for the project would ultimately be unsustainable and that it would bankrupt the colony and eventually force a union with Canada. According to anti-railway politicians and newspapers, then, the Foxtrap rebels represented the true views of patriotic Newfoundlanders everywhere and they commended them for gallantly resisting ill-conceived development strategies. As one commentator put it, residents of Foxtrap reflected “the opinion [that] prevails all over this district; indeed we may say all over the country, that this Railway business is a huge fraud, with self-interest running throughout it and Confederation at bottom.”<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, pro-railway newspaper editors and politicians argued that there was little about the Foxtrappers’ demonstrations that suggested patriotism or concerns about the future independence of the country. Instead, most of their complaints were with possible new taxes on consumer goods, the introduction of new means of raising revenues (particularly disconcerting for them was the spectre of a tollgate on the road to St. John’s), fears that they would not receive compensation for property surveyors damaged, and concerns that their property might be expropriated outright.<sup>6</sup> Supporters of the railway argued that there was no basis for such fears. Instead, they suggested that these concerns were rooted in the efforts of one or more unnamed anti-railway merchants who reportedly travelled out from St. John’s ahead of the survey. According to pro-railway observers, these “designing persons” spread “evil rumours and false stories” to instill fear and to incite unrest.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, they aimed to achieve through crowd actions what they could not achieve by legitimate means in the House of Assembly. For pro-railway observers, the episode was in some ways laughable. Particularly amusing was the apparently widely accepted notion that pieces of red flannel the surveyors used as markers were Canadian flags and that territory on which they were planted would be annexed. It was also, however, an embarrassment. Residents’ unfamiliarity with the national symbol of the neighbouring Dominion underscored that ignorance and backwardness pervaded the outport communities and highlighted the urgency of pressing on with the project. Only binding such regions of the island to the modern world with ribbons of steel would purge the population of such undesirable qualities.<sup>8</sup>

A state of unrest existed in a large number of Conception Bay communities.<sup>9</sup> The sensational nature of the events around Foxtrap made the community a focal point for contemporary observers. As is often true in social history, this case provides a window into the wider development of which it was a part. Most who have considered the upheaval have basically accepted the pro-railway interpretation of events.<sup>10</sup> This view relies on two related working assumptions

that need closer scrutiny. First is the idea that working people tended towards irrationality and unjustifiably rash behaviour. Second is the view that only elites were capable of analyzing and developing a political consciousness and program in light of changing socio-economic circumstances. Drawing together and carefully analyzing newspaper reports, memoirs, census data, missionary reports, and recent scholarship on the social history of Newfoundland, this paper contests these assumptions. There is little question that those in the crowd were incensed at the surveyors and there is little doubt that they made serious threats and impassioned appeals. Yet, local opponents had good reason for fearing the development of the railway, and the severity of their response to surveyors was not an unwarranted outburst rooted in ignorance. Instead, it reflected desperation. For several decades leading up to the upheaval, Newfoundlanders of all strata coped with economic and ecological decline. While responses to these circumstances varied depending on social standing and geographical location, residents of Foxtrap increasingly turned away from the sea and towards the land to secure a livelihood. By the early 1880s, their attempt to make this transition found only limited reward. The considerable effort required to transform scrubby barrens into agricultural land, combined with uncertainties about the legitimacy of their claims to terrestrial resources, made these people uneasy with any incursion into their territory. When several prominent merchants who opposed the railway travelled to the communities just outside of St. John's, they played to the tenuousness of residents' situation and convinced them that the surveyors were a threat to strategies of community and family survival they had devised to cope with socio-economic change in the later nineteenth century.

## I

As David Alexander once noted, the "cross" that Newfoundland bore as a country was "to justify that it should have any people."<sup>11</sup> A scarcity of topsoil, a cold, wet, and short growing season, limited boreal forest, and scanty mineral resources meant that it was comparatively poorly suited for agriculture or for the development of industries outside of the fisheries.<sup>12</sup> For much of its post-contact history Europeans saw the island primarily as a place from which to catch and dry cod, and the majority of those who travelled to the island did so as members of migratory fishing crews. In the late eighteenth century a series of wars made transatlantic travel more treacherous than usual, caused a

spike in the price of fish, and rid Newfoundlanders of French and American competitors. Such conditions made mass settlement appealing for the first time, and the number of settlers rose from just over 11,000 in 1797, to just over 40,000 in 1815.<sup>13</sup>

The dominance of a single staple commodity in the economy of the emerging colony still fundamentally shaped social relations. The basic social unit was the fishing family, the members of which engaged in the “truck” system. In this system men caught fish from small vessels close to shore, while women and children formed the bulk of the “shore crew” — those who cured the cod after it was landed.<sup>14</sup> In addition to fishing, family members also tried to lessen dependence on merchants through raising what vegetables and livestock local resources would allow. Ideally, at the end of the season, fishers took their salt-fish to a merchant to repay him for any equipment or other items he might have given on credit at the beginning of the season, and also to purchase items essential to sustaining the family through the winter.<sup>15</sup> So long as prices for fish were high and cod were plentiful, the truck system sustained the island’s populace and provided a lucrative area of investment for both foreign and local capitalists.<sup>16</sup> After the end of the Napoleonic Wars, however, the British reinstated French and American fishing rights, and the conditions that made the island appealing to settlers vanished. The people were still there, however, and, as Alexander alluded, successive governments found themselves trying to justify the continuation of a settler project born of the particular economic situation in a crisis period long after those conditions had passed.

Efforts to explain persistent economic malaise and to justify the continuation of settlement on the island have frequently been explained in terms of what Sean Cadigan has called the “chimera of Newfoundland history.”<sup>17</sup> In this view, the roots of Newfoundland’s economic woes lay with a group of merchants who used political and legal channels, as well as price manipulation in the truck system, to keep Newfoundlanders dependent on the fisheries. While this view emerged early in the nineteenth century, more recent anthropologists and economic historians have echoed it.<sup>18</sup> Such studies rest on shaky empirical foundations. In fact, most prominent merchants wanted economic growth and diversification — and the benefits it would bring them — though they did differ over how to achieve these ends.<sup>19</sup> By the 1860s two general philosophies of development emerged. Some argued that the best way forward was to follow a state-centred policy of development premised on heavy borrowing, large-scale exploration for resources, and infrastructure development projects that would foster economic growth. Others advocated a more classical liberal, *laissez faire*

approach, one that emphasized low taxes, free trade, and private initiative and financing of new endeavours. Proponents of these approaches first engaged with one another systematically in the course of discussions of a union of British North American colonies in the mid- to late 1860s. At that time, Charles Fox Bennett and other liberals, intent on maintaining an independent Newfoundland, won out over Frederic Carter and other pro-Confederation proponents of transcontinental railway projects and the big government and big spending entailed in them.<sup>20</sup>

Bennett's campaign during the election of 1869 helped to defeat Confederation for a couple of generations. The development strategy pro-confederationists held dear, however, remained alive and well, even though the breadth and intensity of anti-Confederation feeling among Newfoundlanders meant that, by the mid-1870s, the debate had shifted somewhat. The Carter faction, now led by William Whiteway, accepted that Newfoundland would go it alone.<sup>21</sup> Embracing a more nationalistic political rhetoric, Whiteway suggested that Newfoundlanders ought to create a proud, independent, prosperous British country, the inhabitants of which were progressive, modern, and enlightened. The way to achieve that end, he suggested, was by securing massive loans to build a railway across the island, the idea being to diversify the economy through exploiting resources in the interior. In effect, Whiteway recast arguments for government-sponsored development strategies in a nationalist framework and launched into populist appeals that promised workmen the means to live out their lives as proud, independent patriarchs typical of the "British race." Such appeals played to urban workers' commitment to prevailing notions of Britishness and to long-standing tensions between them and the mercantile community.<sup>22</sup>

## II

Historians have provided careful analyses of Whiteway's populism in the 1870s and 1880s, and for good reason. After all, his ability to navigate a politics increasingly oriented to what Kenneth Kerr has called a "creeping plebianism" in the later nineteenth century was key to his success.<sup>23</sup> Yet, as the fracas at Foxtrap demonstrates, working people were in no way uniform, and at least some of them also stood as obstacles to the policies he promoted. Historians' tendency to accept the view, common among the pro-railway faction at the time, that one or more unscrupulous merchants whipped ill-informed, easily led outpost residents into a frenzy is in some sense understandable. Indeed,

elements of this explanation are no doubt sound. There is, for instance, little question that the surveyors' work elicited a dramatic and highly emotional response. It is also likely that one or several anti-railway merchants from St. John's made impassioned appeals to outport residents emphasizing heightened taxes and a forced union with Canada. After all, those in the anti-railway camp, such men as Charles Bennett and Walter Grieve, were the same people who objected to Confederation with Canada in 1869. In the Confederation debates, they suggested that the enormous public debt implied in the Canadian scheme of union would saddle Newfoundlanders with an unsustainable tax burden while providing little benefit to the colony.<sup>24</sup> To rally popular support against the proposed union, Bennett and his counterparts launched a propaganda campaign — one that reportedly involved exaggerated, if not unfounded, claims about the consequences of Confederation — against their political opponents.<sup>25</sup> In 1880 Bennett and the others saw the debate about the railway as "a repetition of the hard-fought battle of 1869," and they objected to railway construction for the same reasons they had objected to Confederation. The large debt incurred in constructing a railway across the island would require higher taxes and would ultimately prove unmanageable for the colony. It is reasonable to think that the same people might have employed tactics that had previously won them success in confronting a new version of the high-debt, government-centred approach to development they saw as misguided.<sup>26</sup>

To attribute these exaggerated claims and the highly emotional, sometimes even violent, responses they engendered to the unreasoned response of an unsophisticated people, however, is mistaken. Indeed, to do so is to dismiss, rather than to explain, this episode. Instead, we should ask what circumstances might have led thinking people to embrace particular ideas and beliefs and act as they did. The Foxtrap rebels lived in a period of significant social transformation connected to changing international geopolitics and shifts in local ecological circumstances. After the return of peace in 1815, the cod fishery remained the central commercial activity in eastern Newfoundland. It remained so mostly because scarce local resources entailed a heavy dependence on imports for many essential food items, manufactures, and raw materials, and the main product settlers had to trade was saltfish and other marine species such as seals.<sup>27</sup> The problem was that the return of peace soon meant increased competition as France and the US regained fishing rights off of Newfoundland. To make matters worse, not long after the American and French fisheries resumed, fishermen and merchants alike noted a decline in particular year classes of local stocks of fish in longer settled portions of Newfoundland.<sup>28</sup> That residents

caught fewer fish and got a lower price fostered significant changes in social and economic conditions in the colony in two main ways. First, the falling off of the fisheries made what income or sustenance residents could derive from local resources all the more important for survival. This increased dependence on local resources in turn shaped the distribution of the island's expanding population in the post-1815 period. As the population increased, and pressure on resources in a particular region became unsustainable, residents migrated to new territory to maintain the ecological balance essential to community and family survival.<sup>29</sup> Second, it gave rise to a process of technological transformation and spatial reorientation of the fishery itself. Finding it increasingly difficult to sustain profitable enterprises, at around the middle of the nineteenth century merchants began to restrict credit to those who could and would invest in such technologies as bultows, cod seines, and cod traps that enabled them to catch more of a declining resource locally, or to those who could afford the larger vessels needed to seek out and harvest fishing grounds further offshore or in more remote regions off the coast of Labrador.<sup>30</sup>

In turn, these local changes intersected with other, sometimes tangentially linked technological and international political and economic developments to produce further crises and change towards the end of the nineteenth century. A global depression, for example, depressed prices of fish and other primary products.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, while bultows, seines, traps, and the bank and Labrador fishery provided short-term solutions to problems of supply, they also meant that processors (the "shore crew") had to contend with large quantities of fish all at once. At the same time, the introduction of steamers, which carried larger cargoes than ever before, changed the dynamics of the fishery for exporters significantly.<sup>32</sup> To command the best prices for fish, Newfoundland exporters had to get their products to market before their Norwegian and French competitors. The emphasis on gathering cargoes and transporting them to market expeditiously led merchants to relax their standards. Indeed, during the last half of the nineteenth century many fish exporters, and particularly those dependent on the Labrador fishery, began purchasing fish *tal qual* ("just as they come"). With decreased selectivity fishers often concentrated on catching rather than curing fish, and overall there was a decline in the quality of fish produced in Newfoundland. In the long term, the diminished quality of Newfoundland fish made it difficult for merchants to increase, or even to maintain, their share of rapidly expanding foreign markets in the late nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup> The decline in the competitiveness of Newfoundland fish, combined with increased tariffs in what had been key markets for the island's exporters, only added to an already difficult



situation.<sup>34</sup> Thus, after 1866 policy-makers devised a range of strategies to deal with economic decline. Successive governments encouraged agriculture and passed a host of acts designed to generate growth.<sup>35</sup> They also eventually established a Fisheries Commission to address problems in the fishery and passed a Bait Act to disadvantage competitors in the fishery.<sup>36</sup>

### III

These post-1815 social and economic realignments were important for residents of Foxtrap. The community emerged as migrants from northern parts of Conception Bay around Port de Grave established themselves in the southern part of the bay to avoid overburdening local resources in the longer-settled region.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, census data indicate that the decline of the shore cod fishery was as apparent in Foxtrap as in any other locality during the last half of the nineteenth century. In 1845, the first year in which the community appears in the census, it had 88 inhabitants. There is no indication of the amount of fish landed and processed in that year. There is, however, evidence that the community was heavily dependent on fishing. Enumerators recorded 15 dwelling houses. They also indicated that there were 15 “planters, fishermen, or shoremen,” and did not indicate that anyone in the community was employed in an occupation other than fishing.<sup>38</sup> The 1857 census recorded an increase of 55 people. Of these 143 residents, 59 caught and cured 375 quintals of cod (just over six quintals per person) and produced about the same number of gallons of fish oil.<sup>39</sup> The 1869 census indicates that about 100 people, employing 21 nets and seines, were engaged in the fishery, though the amount of fish caught was not recorded.<sup>40</sup> Five years later, enumerators recorded that the number of people engaged in the fishery had dropped to 81. These people, representing about a third of the population of the community at that time, cured approximately 830 quintals of cod, meaning that the number of quintals per person had risen by almost four when compared with catch rates about a decade earlier. The higher yield was likely the result of the increasing use of more intensive gear, for even though the number of fishers had declined, the number of nets and seines grew to 32.<sup>41</sup> Ten years later, declining returns meant that far fewer people engaged in the local fishery both in absolute terms and as a proportion of the total population (33 people, or approximately 10 per cent of the population). These people, using significantly more gear per person (28 nets and seines in total), cured only 110 quintals of fish, or about three quintals

per person.<sup>42</sup> In the next census, which enumerators compiled in 1891, the population had increased to 381.<sup>43</sup> The number of people recorded as “engaged in catching and curing fish” was now 22 (16 males and 6 “others”), or about 5 per cent of the total population. These people caught and processed a mere 16 quintals of fish.<sup>44</sup>

In some ways, residents of the community were typical in their response to the decline of the shore fishery. Foxtrappers responded to localized depletion partly by reorienting themselves spatially. Rather than focusing on stocks near their community, many men from the community fished off Labrador. Indeed, as newspaper editors pointed out, the reason that most of those in the crowds were women was that men from the community had not yet returned from these northerly fishing grounds. While for some the Labrador fishery meant the maintenance, creation, or expansion of a fortune, there is little to suggest that men of Foxtrap gained much more than subsistence for their trouble. Here again the census is instructive. No census indicated that a resident of Foxtrap owned a large vessel of the type needed to travel to the Labrador coast.<sup>45</sup> Most of the men from the community, then, signed on as crew members working for more affluent individuals in other communities.

The relatively modest earnings men would have procured in heading off to Labrador meant that those who remained behind also had to contribute to the income and nourishment of the family. Those who would have traditionally constituted the shore crew in Foxtrap and neighbouring communities embraced survival strategies that reflected their particular position on the island. Foxtrap’s residents lived in close proximity to St. John’s. With the influx of settlers in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it grew from a mostly seasonally occupied fishing centre to a bona fide commercial town. From the early nineteenth century onward local people began growing crops and raised livestock to supply an expanding urban market. By the middle of the nineteenth century, settlers had transformed the once barren belt of territory surrounding the city into some 400 productive farms that supplied St. John’s (then a city of about 25,000) with fresh meat, milk, eggs, butter, and produce.<sup>46</sup> By the later nineteenth century, a growing network of roads meant that residents in the region of Foxtrap could supplement their income by supplying the colony’s main urban population with agricultural goods, and census data indicate that residents redirected their efforts towards the land and away from the sea. In 1874 and 1884 enumerators recorded that residents of the community cultivated approximately 80 acres of land in and around their community.<sup>47</sup> Seven years later things were different. Now, 19 people identified themselves as farmers

by profession.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, there were 189 acres devoted to gardens (an increase of over 100 acres).<sup>49</sup> Given that it would have taken considerable effort to create a cultivable acre of land, the 1891 figure reflects a considerable outlay of effort over the preceding years. And, while the numbers of horses and milk cows changed modestly, the number of cattle more than doubled (from 19 in 1884 to 46 in 1891). The number of sheep also more than doubled, from 40 in 1884 to 101 in 1891, while the number of fowl (not previously recorded in the census) stood at over 700.<sup>50</sup>

#### IV

This context offers a better, if less dramatic explanation for why opponents of the railway emphasized the points that they did. Given the nature of their livelihood it is not surprising that community residents were alarmed by what they heard. With taxation, for example, opponents of the railway in 1880, as in previous years, emphasized that the debt required for constructing a railway was unsustainable in Newfoundland. In itself, this concern was reasonable. And, while proponents of the project assured residents that the economic dynamism spawned by the railway would offset the enormous loans required for construction, ultimately the predictions of the anti-railway faction proved accurate.<sup>51</sup> When politicians addressed residents of Foxtrap, however, they did not simply point to an ultimately unsustainable tax burden. Instead, they tailored their message to connect the anticipated rise in taxes to the lives and particular conditions in which community residents found themselves. In the nineteenth century, the Newfoundland government's key source of revenue was import taxes.<sup>52</sup> Since many of the goods on which residents of Foxtrap depended were imported, they could reasonably fear that the prices of many essential items would increase if the railway were to proceed. It is not surprising that they would have been incensed at the prospect of an increased cost of living. After all, they were already pressed by ecological decline and shifting economic circumstances in the colony and internationally. Any additional expense would only have worsened an already difficult situation.

Also clear is why anti-railway propagandists suggested that the government was likely to construct a tollgate on the road to St. John's to raise additional funds needed to pay for the railway. While critics at the time and subsequent scholars dismissed such ideas as preposterous, tollgates, toll bridges, and toll roads had long been means of collecting revenue in Britain and in the Empire.<sup>53</sup>

Given the enormous financial outlay necessary for railway construction, residents reasonably believed that additional sources of revenue would be required, and that those revenue streams would be garnered through new means of taxation. Opponents of the railway no doubt chose to emphasize tolls as a possible means of raising revenues; after all, such a gate would have made local producers less competitive with imported foodstuffs, or would have given an advantage to farmers whose lands lay just outside of St. John's. Such a competitive disadvantage would have undermined the community and family survival strategies that emerged in Foxtrap and vicinity in the later nineteenth century.

The other message that struck a chord with residents was the possible confiscation of property. While pro-railway papers claimed the anxiety over this possible eventuality reflected residents' gullibility and the unscrupulous nature of their anti-railway counterparts, later recollections of key participants in the events of 1880 suggest otherwise. For example, D.W. Prowse, a judge and noted historian, led the detachment of constables who suppressed the upheaval. After the initial disturbance, he continued working in the district to promote social stability. Part of his detail was to discuss the benefits of rail development with local residents. He also "attended the railway arbitrator as a sort of ambulatory court, setting titles to land." By Prowse's own admission the public information sessions were of questionable value in bringing about the desired effect. Residents do, however, appear to have been keenly interested in the settling of titles. Indeed, there was enough interest that Prowse set himself to this work for several weeks and thought his efforts ought to have earned him "some honour or reward."<sup>54</sup> No such recognition ever materialized. Nevertheless, the fact that he had to undertake such an effort to ease residents' anxiety is telling. It suggests that when surveyors approached communities just outside of St. John's, residents did not have formal title to the fields they farmed.

This scenario might seem strange. Yet, the marine orientation of Newfoundland's economy and society and the limited amount of agricultural territory available meant that often there was no formal title to land. Instead, as Alexander McEwan and others have pointed out, ownership and rights often derived from use. In this system people had rights to land that they improved and enclosed with a fence. This ownership did not necessarily rest in perpetuity. Instead, there were informal community rules that required the person to continue to use the land, or at least to use it fairly frequently, to retain title. In this sort of system, after the land fell into disuse for a period of time, someone else was free to take it over. In so doing, title had effectively transferred to the new person for as long as he or she continued to use and maintain the territory.<sup>55</sup>

Prowse's recollections indicate that when residents of Foxtrap and neighbouring communities looked away from the sea and towards the land for subsistence, they simply began working and enclosing the most promising tracts nearby. According to McEwan and others, this practice was typical in communities outside of St. John's. Indeed, some governments refused to grant land outside of St. John's until late in the nineteenth century.<sup>56</sup> The Registry of Deeds suggests that no one formally registered properties around Foxtrap until 1882 when James and Garland Butler ceded a portion of their land to the Newfoundland Railway Company.<sup>57</sup> A use-based system of property rights based on local custom could function relatively well among those in the community. Indeed, there is much evidence that such systems of property persisted and were effective into the late twentieth century.<sup>58</sup> Outsiders, however, did not necessarily recognize the local, informal rules and codes. While the Railway Act guaranteed that the island's residents would be compensated for any damage or property lost during the survey, it is reasonable enough that those in Foxtrap may have feared that their lack of official ownership would make any claim for restitution tenuous. Again, given their precarious circumstances, it is not surprising that residents of the community would have reacted strongly to the potential loss of nutrients or income with no compensation.

Moreover, while concerns about immediate crop and property damage no doubt were partly at the centre of controversy, it is clear that they were not the only source of concern. Residents continued to protest against survey and construction crews over the next several years and, after a rail line was in place, reports of attempted train-wrecking persisted even longer.<sup>59</sup> If resistance had only been the result of concerns about title to land, there is no reason that residents should have persisted after such matters had been dealt with in the aftermath of the initial upheaval. While the clandestine nature of train-wrecking and isolated skirmishes make subsequent resistance to the railway difficult to understand, an incident in the fall of 1881 provides clues about the source of residents' angst. At that time, residents of Foxtrap and neighbouring Manuels petitioned members of the colony's Executive Council. The petition was, as the editor of the *Telegram* noted, at once an appeal for help and a manifesto. It asked the government to save residents' gardens from "land grabbers." It also called for all those people along the line to "organize and take a determined stand against the invading forces of the Railway Company." If the line were to "pass a mile and a half inside of [their] settlements," they would "offer no resistance." If the Railway Company insisted on running directly through their fields, however, they would "fight it out on the line, even if it [took] all winter."<sup>60</sup>

As it turned out, the Railway Company did not heed the warning and in spring 1882 another battle broke out between residents near Foxtrap and employees of the railway.<sup>61</sup> The petition, however, reveals something about the motivations of the Foxtrap rebels. As pro-railways observers at the time pointed out, there seemed to be little congruence between residents' concerns and the anti-railway views and arguments of their political opponents. In fact, there was little in the petition to suggest that residents objected to the railway *per se*. Instead, their fields were of more central concern. Although the virulence with which they objected to any incursion into their territory may seem extreme, especially given that the government guaranteed compensation, essential to understanding its intensity is to see these protests in context. At around the time of the upheaval, residents faced challenges from two different directions. The declining fishery was, of course, a key source of their problems. But seeking to compensate the loss of income from the fishery by promoting agriculture also brought significant hardship, for it was necessary to surmount substantial ecological barriers in pursuing this course. One of the most obvious barriers to agriculture in Newfoundland is the lack of topsoil. Indeed, when compared to other colonies, it took an enormous amount of effort to find and bring into cultivation extant pockets of agriculturally viable land.<sup>62</sup> Sometimes there simply was no such land in the vicinity of fishing settlements. In these settings residents created garden plots by scrounging for soil and other organic material and centralizing them in raised beds. More often, however, they combined the two practices by locating, and then, through much effort, expanding and enhancing, areas viable for agriculture. The scarcity of this basic resource was sometimes a source of tension and conflict within communities as people either vied for the limited amount of fertile ground available, or sought to defend land they were able to bring into cultivation.<sup>63</sup>

In Foxtrap the number of acres under cultivation did not increase substantially in the years just prior to the upheaval. In fact, the census suggests that the amount remained relatively constant between 1874 and 1884. Seven years later, however, cultivated acreage more than doubled and the number of livestock also increased substantially. It stands to reason that the significant increase in land under cultivation and in the number of livestock reflected that even though the redirection of efforts may have begun not many years before 1880, the transition was underway. Contemporary press reports corroborate this supposition. On 27 July 1880, for instance, after much rhetorical flourish and a severe denunciation of the government, the editor of the anti-railway *Telegram* suggested that surveyors' intrusions were repugnant because residents were increasingly

dependent on their produce for survival. He also suggested that the timing of the survey was particularly problematic. It occurred, he remarked, "at a time too when residents were beginning to reap some benefit from their labors."<sup>64</sup> Given the decline in the community's staple trade and the more agriculturally based survival strategies they embraced, it is not surprising that perceived encroachments on hard-won cultivable soil would have inspired bitter discontent among Foxtrap's residents. After all, that land had been secured through countless hours of pulling stumps, draining bogs, centralizing what topsoil could be found, and composting fish and other organic material at hand to expand and enhance what was already present. To lose a portion of a field or a pasture was to lose not only the immediate product of the soil, but also the outlay of considerable effort that had gone into making it productive in the first place.

The prospect of losing the many seasons of hard work necessary to transform what one reporter described as the "sterile, rocky soil" near the community into productive agricultural land would have inspired much angst.<sup>65</sup> What evidence we have about circumstances in the community at the time suggests that such losses would have been particularly difficult to accept. Indeed, according to one reporter who had frequented the community for several decades prior to the upheaval, in the 1860s the region's "brooks and lakes teemed with trout" and the uplands "abounded with brown-plumaged ptarmigan." Since that time, however, the "advancement which lapse of time brings to even the quietest communities" had done its work. Game was scarce and there was almost no unclaimed land. The inhabitants, the author noted, "had a hard struggle for existence."<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, while local resources may have been in decline, the specific climatological conditions of the years just prior to the confrontation compounded an already difficult situation. In 1879, Edward Colley, a missionary who had lived and worked in the region around Foxtrap since 1847, noted that the winter of that year had been particularly harsh. This severe weather, combined with economically depressed circumstances, had been particularly hard on residents of the community, most of whom suffered from the cold and "from want of food and clothing."<sup>67</sup> The ensuing years were even worse. As Colley explained in 1882, "last winter was the severest I have known since I came to this colony." Again, weather was part of the problem. The storms of that year made him "think of the 'treasures of snow' spoken about in the book of Job." Yet, the generally impoverished and weakened state of the population meant that there had been in that year and in the years just prior to it, "a greater number of deaths than ever known on this shore in any year before."<sup>68</sup> In such lean

years, the loss of any possible source of income or nutrition could have dire consequences for families, and no doubt the frantic nature of residents' protest was linked to the severity of the circumstances in which they found themselves.

V

In the summer of 1880 the Newfoundland government took the first steps to bring Newfoundland into the railway age. While many professionals, working people, and merchants alike in St. John's applauded such efforts, many residents of Conception Bay communities just outside of St. John's did not share in the celebration. Instead, they did their utmost to obstruct and harass survey and construction crews. The dominant view among historians and others is that the unrest reflects the frantic remonstrances of simple rural folk who had been led to violence by one or more rumour-mongering individuals from the colony's anti-railway camp. However, a careful analysis of contemporary sources, when read in the spirit of the body of social history that has emerged in Newfoundland and elsewhere over the past several decades, suggests otherwise.

While no doubt stirred somewhat by the propaganda campaign of the anti-railway faction, the Foxtrap dissidents must be understood as thinking people who operated in ways that seemed reasonable given their particular life circumstances. For residents of the increasingly agriculturally oriented communities in the Foxtrap area, the railway threatened to increase the cost of living and, especially, to divest them of hard-earned productive land, the development of which had been central to the survival strategies they created in response to the economic and ecological decline of the nineteenth century. Their reaction to the railway surveyors was emotive and desperate but had a quite rational basis — to protect their own meagre interests.

NOTES

- 1 In its long gestation this paper has benefited from numerous conversations with colleagues and from the critical readings some of them have given it. Thanks in particular are owed to Robin Whitaker, Sean Cadigan, Jeff Webb, and Jim Hiller. Thanks, also, to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper. I completed part of the research for this paper as a Postdoctoral Fellow at Memorial University's Institute for Social and Economic Research; I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of that institution.



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  - 32 Ryan, *Fish Out of Water*, 77-98.
  - 33 Shannon Ryan, "The Newfoundland Salt Cod Trade in the Nineteenth Century," in James Hiller and Peter Neary, eds., *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Essays in Interpretation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 51.
  - 34 Ryan, *Fish Out of Water*, 133.
  - 35 For instance, in 1868 they passed an Act to encourage oyster farming, in 1873 they passed a homestead law based on similar US and Canadian legislation, and in 1877 an Act to encourage manufacturing. Two years later they sought to compensate for declining in-shore catches of cod by passing an Act to encourage the bank fishery. In the same year, they offered grants of land, tax breaks, and exemptions to existing legislation restricting the ownership of dogs to prospective sheep farmers. See 31 Vic., Cap. 11 (AGAN [1868], 78); 36 Vic., Cap. 7 (AGAN [1873], 85-89); 40 Vic., Cap. 10 (AGAN [1877], 61-62); 42 Vic., Cap. 14 (AGAN [1879], 89-91); 42 Vic., Cap. 10 (AGAN [1879], 80-82). On the parallels between the Newfoundland and Canadian and American homestead legislation, see Michael Staveley, "Saskatchewan-By-The Sea: The Topographic Work of Alexander Murray in Newfoundland," *Newfoundland Quarterly* 77 (Fall 1981): 31-41.
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  - 37 Town of Conception Bay South, *A Place To Grow: Agricultural History of Conception Bay South* (Conception Bay: Spectrum Communications, 2010), 7-10.

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- 48 Government of Newfoundland, *Census of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1891*, Table I, 18.
- 49 *Ibid.*, Tables II and III, 19.
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- 66 *Ibid.*
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