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Organic Settlement in Pre-19th Century Newfoundland

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Biography

Iain Wilson received his Honours Bachelor of Arts degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto, with a Major in History and a Minor in Anthropology. He is the winner of the Michael Bliss Essay Prize in Canadian Political History, the George Metcalfe Memorial Scholarship for High Standing in Canadian History, and most recently the Gunn Award for Best Essay on International Migration in Canada. He has worked previously at the Ontario Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, supporting Indigenous land claim negotiations through historical research. Iain is currently pursuing a Masters in History at Queen's University, where he is studying Canadian state policy towards Indigenous peoples in the late 19th century.

Paper Abstract

Although claimed as English territory in 1583, Newfoundland would not be granted official colonial status by Great Britain until 1825, even though both Britain and France asserted during negotiations between in 1761 that “The Newfoundland fishery was more valuable than Canada and Louisiana combined, ‘as a means of wealth and power.’” This paper explores why, despite the considerable value of Newfoundland’s fisheries (one of the most potent in the world until recently) and the strong state interest of the English Crown in maintaining this economy, European migration to Newfoundland remained relatively inconsiderable until the 19th century, why those who did settle chose to do so, and how these organic communities created the foundations for future migration influxes.

On commission from the English Crown, John Cabot explored Newfoundland in 1497, and the island was formally claimed for Queen Elizabeth I by Humphrey Gilbert in 1583.¹ Despite this, Newfoundland remained relatively unpopulated by European settlers until the 19th century, and was only granted official colonial status by Great Britain in 1825. Until very recently, the waters surrounding Newfoundland presented one of the most potent fishing grounds for cod in the world, which brought wealth to those merchants and fishermen able to exploit it, and power to those European states able to control it. However, no group was enthusiastic about settlement of Newfoundland as a means to achieve such ends, and organized settlement schemes were rarely targeted towards the island as they were elsewhere in North America. The settlement and growth of Newfoundland's British colonial population before the 19th century was instead a mostly organic process centred around local control of the fisheries, and much more driven by the actions and reactions of local communities, rather than the limited intervention of the English state, whose attitude towards settlement was ambivalent at best.

Until very recently, Newfoundland's coastlines and the surrounding Grand Banks presented one of the most potent fishing grounds in the world. In 1578, Anthony Parkhurst estimated that a total of 350 ships from several European nations exploited the resource, importing as much as 75 000 tonnes annually, and later estimates put the total amount at as much as 200 000 tonnes.² This resource was particularly valuable in European markets, owing to the Christian tradition of eating fish on Fridays.³ Thus, merchants and fishermen from England's West Country, already possessing the infrastructure and naval experience necessary to outfit large fishing

¹ Ryan Shannon. *History of Newfoundland in the North Atlantic to 1818* (St John's: Flanke Press Limited, 2012), p. 6.

² Peter E. Pope. *Fish into Wine: The Newfoundland Plantation in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 20.

³ Shannon, *North Atlantic to 1818*, p. 9.

expeditions, profited enormously from English claims to Newfoundland. From the 16th century onwards, merchants based in coastal towns such as Bristol and Poole sponsored annual fishing expeditions in the waters off Newfoundland. These expeditions were crewed by young to middle-aged seasonal labourers, drawn from West Country, who possessed long familial histories as seamen.⁴ Ships set out from England in the spring, and returned by the end of summer before ice flows cut off Newfoundland's coastline from access. The crews established storehouses on the island's shore for the salting of fish, and control over desirable coastal strips sometime became the focus of violence between crews working for different merchants or for different nations.⁵ English fishermen and merchants frequently competed with their Portuguese, Dutch, New Englander, and French counterparts, the last of which were supported by the French state, which held a competing claim to the island until 1713, and still possesses the islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon today.⁶

From the outset, support of this model of seasonal fishing expeditions presented a military advantage to the English state. Beginning in the 16th century, English military doctrine asserted that a strong naval presence could adequately defend the home islands in place of a standing army, while also controlling trade routes and colonies which were crucial to mercantilist competition.⁷ For England, the annual fishing expeditions to Newfoundland provided an opportunity to train unseasoned men for naval life, forming what was repeatedly referred to as a 'nursery for seamen.' After 1649, England began providing naval escorts to the expeditions in an effort to assert its military strength in the region and provide experience to its crews.⁸ This training was so important that in 1675, the Crown mandated that "Every fifth man carried out be a green man, not a seaman,"

⁴ Pope, *Fish into Wine*, p. 233.

⁵ Keith Matthews, *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland, 1500-1830* (St John's: Breakwater Books, 1988), p. 8.

⁶ Olaf U. Janzen, *War and Trade in Eighteenth-Century Newfoundland* (St John's: International Maritime Economic History Association, 2013), p. 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

to ensure the training of able seamen for England's navy.⁹ As will be explained shortly, this support for the migratory fisheries precluded support for settlement.

In conjunction with the expansion of the system of seasonal expeditions, several private attempts at formal colonization of Newfoundland occurred at the beginning of the 17th century. These included the Newfoundland Company's settlement at Cupid's Cove in 1610, Sir William Vaughan's settlement of New Cambriol in 1617, and Sir George Calvert's settlement of Ferryland in 1621, each located along the eastern Avalon Peninsula.¹⁰ As it quickly became clear that Newfoundland lacked major resources beyond the fisheries, these settlements were founded to compete with the seasonal expeditions by establishing a local presence near the fishing grounds. However, nearly every early plantation failed to generate enough revenue to both sustain themselves and satisfy their investors. Newfoundland's subarctic climate and poor soils prevented even subsistence agriculture, and any other attempts at industry, such as timber or fur trapping, were marginal and mainly confined to support of the fisheries. Thus, the plantations became dependent on expensive annual shipments of supplies from their backers in England, and often could not survive a bad season.¹¹ Moreover, these small, static settlements were easy targets for pirates, as exemplified by Peter Easton's harassment of Cupid's Cove in 1613, or by West Coast fishermen, who resented the competition of their landed counterparts and would occasionally the plantations' storehouses.¹² Nonetheless, despite the financial failures of these plantations, their inhabitants remained (often stranded due to the high costs of a return trip to England) and fractured

⁹ John P. Greene, *Between Damnation and Starvation: Priests and Merchants in Newfoundland Politics, 1745-1855* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), p. 19.

¹⁰ Pope, *Fish into Wine*, pp. 50-52.

¹¹ Gillian T Cell, "The Cupids Cove Settlement: A Case Study of the Problems of Colonisation," In *Early European Settlement and Exploration in Atlantic Canada*, edited by G. M. Story (St John's: Memorial University Press, 1982), pp. 110-111.

¹² Pope, *Fish into Wine*, pgs. 50, 65.

into smaller communities which remained deeply embedded in the fisheries. The example of these plantations demonstrated the difficulty and vulnerability of settled life on the island of Newfoundland, and dampened enthusiasm for colonization, especially with the more viable option of seasonal expeditions.

Owing to the failures of these settlements, the English state did not actively encourage settlement in Newfoundland. The general belief, lobbied by the West Coast merchants who dominated the trade, presented Newfoundland as a “Great English Ship moored near the Banks during the Fishing Season, for the convenience of the English Fishermen.”¹³ Furthermore, English commanders raised concerns that settlement on the island posed a threat to the ‘nursery of seamen,’ as seen in John Collins’ comments in 1680, when he complained of “1000 of our own men that stay’d there on shore in 1665 to avoid the service against the Dutch.”¹⁴ The government attempted to address desertion in multiple instances, such as with the Act of William II in 1699, specifically mandating the return of trained seamen to the home country after annual fishing expeditions, “in support of the nursery for seamen.”¹⁵ However, as Newfoundland lacked government institutions to locate and arrest deserters, the island’s reputation as a possible refuge for those avoiding naval service grew, attracting further settlers to the island, all of whom possessed experience at sea and most of whom held experience in the fisheries, thereby contributing to the growth of the local fisheries.

The most dramatic example of the English government’s attempts to curb settlement of Newfoundland came from the Committee for Trade and Plantations, which in 1676 ordered that

¹³ Janzen, *War and Trade*, p. 35.

¹⁴ Pope, *Fish into Wine*, p. 63.

¹⁵ Gordon W. Handcock, *Soe longe as there comes noe women: Origins of English Settlement in Newfoundland* (St John’s: Breakwater Books, 1989), p. 85.

all settlements on the island be vacated.¹⁶ However, this order was never successfully carried out, owing in part to the lobbying of Sir John Berry, the naval commodore ordered to oversee the operation. Berry argued that, contrary to the assertions of West Country merchants, the residents of Newfoundland were not detrimental to the fisheries nor the English economy, as they remained deeply reliant on the English economy for supplies, but instead were detrimental only to the profits of English merchants. He further argued that should the English residents of the island be evicted, nearby French settlements located in Placentia Bay might spread to occupy the entire island, threatening English fishing capabilities.¹⁷ The French had certainly signalled their desire to do so, offering three years of supplies to any English settler who would desert to the colonies in Placentia Bay.¹⁸ Conflicted between their desire to prevent desertion and their desire to defend their claim to Newfoundland and its fisheries from the French, and furthermore facing pressure from the merchant class, the British Crown ultimately took an ambivalent stance towards settlement, neither encouraging nor banning it. Thus, in place of any significant government support, settlement of the island would instead take place gradually, independently, and slowly. In 1675, the permanent population of Newfoundland was a mere 1 490, and by 1700 had only risen to 3 773, albeit with a much larger seasonal population during the summer months.¹⁹

This gradual settlement occurred in several ways. After filling their hulls by the end of the summer, captains of fishing ships would usually leave behind some of their crew over the winter season to protect and maintain inshore storehouses for the following season.²⁰ This was to protect the contents of the storehouses from either other crews, roaming pirates, or local Indigenous

¹⁶ Pope, *Fish into Wine*, p. 66.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁹ Greene, *Damnation*, p. 21.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

communities. Additionally, maintaining these storehouses staked out the strip of land to be used by the crew the next season. Additionally, ships departing from Europe held significantly more space for men and supplies than they did returning, and more crewmen were generally needed to perform the summer labour than were needed to crew the ship on its return voyage.²¹ Other times crewmen might have been punitively marooned, or might have intentionally deserted in order to avoid continued service.

These processes by no means provided a significant flow of migrants, as labourers often returned to Europe the following season, but over time more temporary residents coalesced or were absorbed into the pre-existing communities of the island, particularly through into the onset of the 18th century. During the harsh winters of Newfoundland's subarctic climate, these migrant labourers were attracted to the relative comforts of the local communities, and sometimes developed attachments, which fixed them to the island the following season. Some labourers found employment in local communities and became integrated into the local fisheries, rather than the seasonal fisheries. In other cases, wintering labourers would spend all their wages and become indebted to local businessmen, preventing them from paying for the return trip to Europe. Cases such as these caused Governor Hugh Palliser in 1764 to complain of the residents that "they (a very few excepted) have no employment during the winter, but live a most Savage, Detestable, wick'd Life, spending their time in Idleness, Debaucheries and Excesses, and running in Debt on their next years wages."²² Newfoundland's lawlessness and 'debauchery' offered a further attraction for life on the island, as the lack of government, church, or familial oversight created an atmosphere of enjoyment for seamen. In 1726, the town of St John's held 46 taverns for a

²¹ Pope, *Fish into Wine*, p. 77.

²² Hancock, *Soe longe as there comes noe women*, p. 87.

population of 1 500, and by 1775 the town of St John's alone was importing 250 000 gallons of rum annually.²³ However, as the population of Newfoundland grew, and its communities began to resemble more of a settled colony than a seasonal camp for crewmen and labourers, several actors sought to assert control and order over the island's chaotic population.

Anglican ministers embedded in local communities frequently complained of the lawlessness and sin they observed, but possessed a relatively weak presence on the island at first, which prevented them from policing these behaviours effectively. Anglican ministers first appeared in Newfoundland in 1627 but were only able to establish a significant presence after 1698.²⁴ These ministers had difficulty raising donations, as "conditions within such areas discouraged the financial support of institutions which did not directly promote economic exploitation," and were further hobbled by the dispersed population of the island.²⁵ Nonetheless, as the population grew, Anglican ministers asserted more influence over the structure and morality of communities, slowly making the colony attractive to permanent, rather than seasonal, migrants.

Another challenge to this lawlessness came from St John's, which even by the mid 17th century had emerged as the largest centre of settlement on the island, becoming a focal point for local commerce through which much of the local fishery operated. In 1724, several merchants formed a quasi-governmental "association or Community for the preservation of peace," inspired by John Locke, which set about enforcing laws and executing punishments in the surrounding area.²⁶ The British government, fearing movements towards independence, quickly put a stop to

²³ Greene, *Damnation*, p. 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁶ Matthews, *Lectures on the History*, p. 100.

the organization and introduced government institutions in 1729.²⁷ Aside from this, governance and law were largely the realm of the military and commercial admirals and captains active in the area, who were increasingly influenced by local merchants as the 18th century progressed.²⁸ While it would take until 1832 for Newfoundland to be granted a colonial assembly, early attempts to assert order and structure to the island came almost entirely from the local population, which spurred government action in response.

Natural growth through marriage and birth developed slowly, owing mostly to a persistent gender imbalance, but exerted a stabilizing influence over time. Many labourers chose to remain on the island due to the relationships they developed with the island's population through marriage, especially over the winter months, leading one colonist, Richard Routh, to comment in 1786 that most new residents of Newfoundland chose to stay "on account of the Connection they form in marriage."²⁹ Newfoundland's female to male ratio was consistently small, even into the late 18th century, with females representing 12% of the population in 1677, 16% by 1780, 28% by 1805, and 33% by 1830.³⁰ While the employees of the migratory fisheries had been almost exclusively male, many women had arrived with the earliest plantations, providing some opportunity for natural demographic growth, some came later in the 18th century, attracted by employment in the increasingly prominent local fisheries and still others came as wives, daughters, or domestic servants of the growing political and commercial administration.³¹

²⁷ Jerry Bannister, *The Rule of the Admirals: Law, Custom, and Naval Government in Newfoundland, 1699-1832* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 66.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 281.

²⁹ Hancock, *Soe longe as there comes noe women*, p. 87.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

One of the key factors for growth in the colony, beginning in the 18th century, was the influx of Irish migrants to the island. Up to the 1720s, British participation in Newfoundland's fisheries had largely been confined to West Country merchants and labourers, whereas after this point, ship captains increasingly drew on Southern Irish labour pools from ports such as Waterford, Cork, and Youghal, especially after the 1760s.³² Irish migration differed from previous English migration in several ways. Firstly, Catholicism was much more successful in spreading to the island than Anglicanism had been, as Catholic bishops could act more independently. The oversight of these bishops created much more stability in the transient labourer communities than the Anglicans had been able to achieve at first.³³ Another important distinction was the large number of Irish women and families who migrated to Newfoundland along with their husbands or fathers working in the fisheries, attracted by the growing local opportunity. This closer demographic balance contributed to a much healthier population growth within the Irish community in Newfoundland, which formed a substantial portion of the island's population by the mid-19th century.³⁴

It is worth observing that the relationship between European newcomers to Newfoundland and the Indigenous inhabitants of the island was extremely poor, owing largely to the aggression of the former, which provided a continuous deterrent to European settlement. As opposed to elsewhere in British North America, where Indigenous peoples were valued either as trade or military allies, the Beothuk and Mi'kmaq were considered only as a hindrance to the British fisheries by European settlers. Neither group practiced fishing on the scale that Europeans did, and all other trade goods, of which there were few, were subsidiary to the fishing economies of the

³² Philip A. Buckner, and John G. Reid, *The Atlantic Region to Confederation: A History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), pp. 108-109.

³³ Greene, *Damnation*, p. 7.

³⁴ Handcock, *Soe longe as there comes noe women*, p. 90.

island. Furthermore, these Indigenous groups understood ownership to be dependent on active use, rather than the abstract European understanding of property. This led many Indigenous communities to loot unguarded storerooms or harbours. As one resident testified, “They frequently come in the night into harbours to pilfer what they can get, to supply their necessities.”³⁵ The theft of iron tools and supplies caused friction and resentment between Indigenous and newcomer communities, causing several instances of violence – including looting, kidnapping, and murder – directed towards the Indigenous, and particularly Beothuk, population.³⁶ Meanwhile, elsewhere in North America, the French were more successful in securing relationships with Indigenous peoples, and used their alliance with the Mi’kmaq to threaten British settlements on the island, furthering the resentment.³⁷ Over the course of the 18th century, the Beothuk population dwindled as a result of settler hostility and disease, with the last known Beothuk, Shanawdithit, succumbing to tuberculosis in 1829. Thus, settlers and settled communities involved in the fisheries unfortunately understood the Indigenous peoples as a threat to settlement, and correspondingly took independent action to remove them and create a homogeneously European space, oriented almost entirely around the fisheries.

A final but key factor in both the demographic growth of the colony as well as its increasing control over the fisheries was European warfare. Unfortunately, while the British government was enthusiastic about extending its protection over migratory fishing expeditions, it was less active in protecting the settled population, with the Committee of the Privy Council remarking in 1675: “Tis’ needless to have any such defense against Foreigners, the Coast being defended in the winter

³⁵ Thomas Thorner, ed., *A Few Acres of Snow: Documents in Pre-Confederation Canadian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 158.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

by Ice, and in the summer by your Majesties Subjects, for that place will always belong to him that is superior at Sea.”³⁸

When the British did intervene in settlement to secure its claim over the island, its efforts were largely ineffective. In the aftermath of the War of the Spanish Succession, the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht extinguished the French claim to Newfoundland, although many French residents and fishermen remained active well into the 18th century. In 1714 and 1716, the British sponsored surveyors to explore the newly vacated areas of former French settlement, and attempted to encourage hesitant English residents of the island to relocate there to cement their new authority in the region.³⁹ However, a French presence remained, such as at the settlement of Codroy, which was only fully evacuated in 1755 as part of the greater French expulsions.⁴⁰ Even after the expulsion of the French, their Mi’kmaq allies clustered in the peninsula of Burin, nearby the French possessions of St Pierre and Miquelon, to maintain trade with them, making the area still undesirable for British settlement.⁴¹

Furthermore, the disruption to the fisheries of the War of the Spanish Succession, and a subsequent slump in the fishing market due to changes in fishing migrations, devastated the fisheries, both in the West Country and locally, leading one observer to comment that the island’s population was “Worse off than negroes and slaves.”⁴² However, this depression forced the local populations to adapt and invent new technologies which allowed them to expand their operations

³⁸ Janzen, *War and Trade*, p. 36.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, , p. 17.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

beyond the coastlines of the island and into deeper waters, allowing them to control a greater share of the fisheries.⁴³

Wars accelerated demographic growth by isolating the island. Because seasonal migrants had greater difficulty leaving the island due to the dangers and high prices of travel during wartime, they had sustained periods of time in which to establish roots on the island, whether through marriage, employment, or debt. By the end of the Seven Year's War, the island's population had swelled to 40 000, compared to a population of 4 000 decades earlier in 1702.⁴⁴

Finally, the dangers of warfare cut off the traditional migratory fisheries from safely accessing the island. This created economic vacuums during which the local communities could greatly expand their control over the fisheries, and develop the internal infrastructure needed to market the industry effectively. By 1769, the fisheries were producing 600 000 pounds of cod annually, making them an appealing target for the Americans during the Revolutionary War, with raids occurring in 1778, just as the French had done under the command of Admiral Ternay in 1762. While this had a devastating effect on residential communities, it was even worse for the West Country merchants, who slowly withdrew from fishing operations by the beginning of the 19th century.

By then, control of the fisheries had passed almost entirely to residential communities, and in 1805, 90% of cod production came from the island itself.⁴⁵ This correlated with a steady natural growth on the island over the 18th century, maintaining a population of 4 000 in 1702, 16 000 in 1764, 40 000 in 1815, and 60 000 in 1827.⁴⁶ Once this economic and demographic success was

⁴³ Handcock, *Soe longe as there comes noe women*, p. 81.

⁴⁴ Greene, *Damnation*, p. 21.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

realized, Great Britain was forced to recognize Newfoundland as a viable colony, granting it official colonial status in 1825 and an assembly in 1832.

During negotiations in 1761, Britain and France both believed that the “Newfoundland fishery was more valuable than Canada and Louisiana combined, ‘as a means of wealth and power.’”⁴⁷ Despite this, Great Britain rarely took an active or effective role in the settlement of the island, instead preferring to support the seasonal migrant industry based in England’s West Country. Regardless, settlement of Newfoundland did occur, albeit slowly, over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, as a gradual accumulation of labourers, deserters, and other settlers who either saw Newfoundland as a refuge from the law, established connections with other settlers, were attracted to employment in the fisheries, or simply could not afford to leave. These small collections of dispersed settlers came to form established, orderly, European, attractive communities organically, and eventually asserted a monopoly over Newfoundland’s fisheries, increasing their attractiveness even more. Only because of the actions of these communities, and the growth they generated, did Great Britain eventually designate Newfoundland as a fully-fledged colony in the 19th century.

⁴⁷ Janzen, *War and Trade*, p. 18.

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