FISHING IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE: Newfoundland and Labrador in the 21st Century

BY Melvin Baker

THE SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC HISTORY OF NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR HAS BEEN SHAPED AND INFLUENCED BY ITS FISHERIES, MORE SPECIFICALLY BY ITS SALT COD FISHERY. STYLING ITSELF AS BRITAIN'S OLDEST COLONY, NEWFOUNDLAND SINCE THE EARLY 1600S HAS BEEN SETTLED ON THE BASIS OF RESIDENTS BEING IN CLOSE PROXIMITY TO THE SEA AND THE FISHING GROUNDS, WITH THE EBB AND FLOW OF DAILY LIFE IN OUTPORT NEWFOUNDLAND DETERMINED BY THE DEMANDS OF THE FISHERY.



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By the mid-20-twentieth century Newfoundland had over 1,000 small settlements scattered along 10,000 miles of coastline. In 1990, historian Leslie Harris wrote that the Newfoundlander "hardly even thought of the land except as a convenient platform to exploit those underwater banks and shoals to which he did lay claim and whose feature he knew and named as farmers did their field and pastures." When Newfoundlanders speak of fish they historically mean cod, not any of the other species of fish to be found in local waters. The cod fishery was important to the diet of the aboriginal peoples who lived here prior to the arrival of settlers and fishers in the 16th century from Europe. For centuries, the cod was caught in the inshore waters by local fishers in small boats, dried onshore and exchanged to the local merchant in return for fishery supplies and household goods. This was essentially a cashless rural economy and the resultant 'credit system' left generations of fishers in debt to their merchants. The merchants found markets for the salt fish in Italy, Spain and Portugal, in the Caribbean and in Brazil.

The cod fishery remained critical to the economic and social lives of residents until 1992 when the Federal Government imposed a moratorium on the catching of cod off Newfoundland's east coast, disrupting the lives of 30,000 fishers and fish plant workers who had depended on the cod fishery for their livelihood. Today, the moratorium can be seen as representing an important watershed in the province's social and economic development for it removed the employment safety net which had kept rural communities alive for centuries. The movement of people to larger urban centers in the province and to the Canadian mainland, a rural-urban population shift so prevalent in the rest of North America during the past century, is now taking place in Newfoundland at an accelerated pace. In doing so, residents in the province have become resigned to the reality that their society has changed (and is still changing) and that the province's future economic prospects will depend more on the successful management of several major resource industries supplemented by employment in the service sector and the public service.

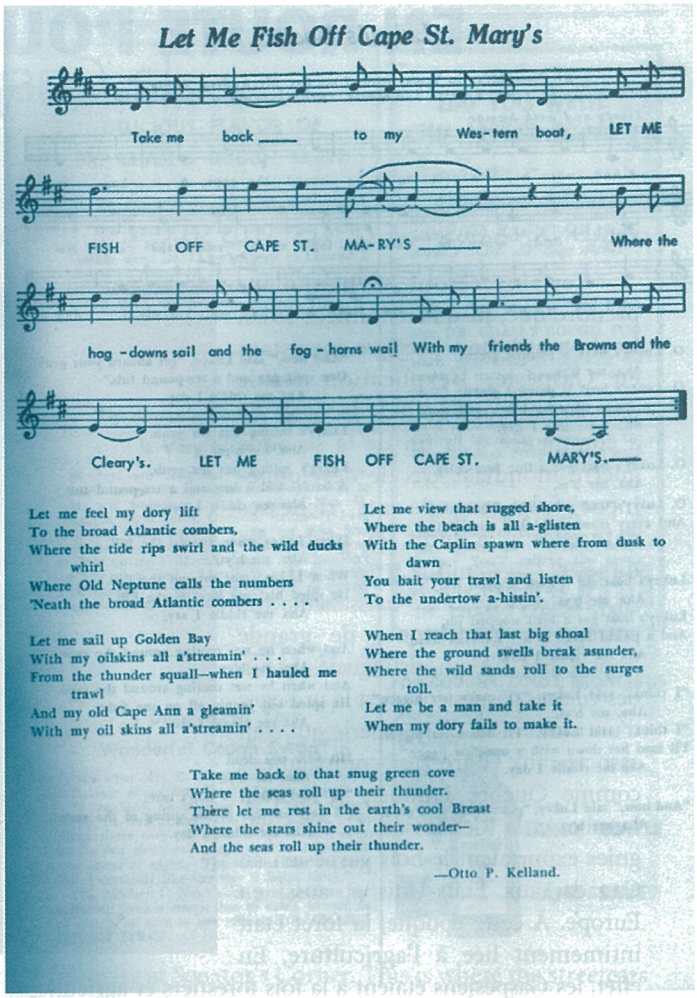
Since the late 19th century in particular, the Newfoundland fishery had been the employer of last resort. Successive governments attempted to find alternative sources of employment for a population whose demographic growth until the 1990s was greater than the ability of the economy to generate the required jobs. The historic problem faced by Newfoundland, economic historian David Alexander wrote in 1976, was "the burden" of having to "justify that it should have any people. From the Western Adventurers of the seventeenth century to Canadian economists in the twentieth, there has been a continuing debate as to how many, if any, people should live in Newfoundland. The consensus has normally been that there should be fewer Newfoundlanders – a conclusion reached in the seventeenth century when there were only some 2,000 inhabitants, and one which is drawn today when there are over 500,000." Historically, government policy has been directed to ensuring the survival of a strong inshore fishery as a large employer of labor, even if the politicians and bureaucrats personally recognized that it should be otherwise. In 1936, Sir John Hope Simpson, Commissioner of Government for Natural Resources, observed that "the

standard of the average fisherman's life is deplorable, and things will not be right till we get the numbers fishing down by 50% and the production up by another 50%. When I argue on these lines, people think that I am mad. Fishing is the local fetish. The island has always lived on the fish & therefore must always so live. The methods adopted in the fishery are sanctioned by 300 years of use, and so have proved that they are inevitable and right – and so on." Following Newfoundland's confederation with Canada in 1949, the Federal Government in the 1950s realized the need to reduce the number of fishers involved in the fishery, but the political will to do so was lacking and federal programs such as unemployment insurance eligibility for fishers only served to preserve the integrity of a substantial labor force in the inshore fishery. Although the Federal and Provincial Governments by the 1960s did successfully change the fishery to one based on the catch and processing of fresh frozen cod for consumers in the North American market, it still contained more licensed fishers than the governments desired. The fishery of the 1960s also involved the construction of additional fish processing plants scattered all over the province employing thousands of seasonal workers whose livelihood depended on employment in the fish plants supplemented by their unemployment insurance benefits claims. The implementation of the 200-mile territorial limit in the 1970s further served to stimulate growth in the inshore fishery by giving fishers and fish-processing companies access to even larger stocks of fish, and cod in particular.

Out-migration traditionally has served as an outlet for those who could not fine employment in the fishery. Before 1949, this generally meant immigration to the «Boston States» and to the coal mines of North Sydney. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the Canadian industrial heartland of Ontario was the preferred choice. With the development of the oil tar sands in northern Alberta, western Canada then became the popular destination of choice. During the 1990s, the closure of the inshore fishery and the absence of alternative employment has denuded rural areas of much of its young people as high school graduates quickly follow the worn paths of their relatives and friends to the mainland in search of work. Rural Newfoundland is fast becoming the general reserve of those individuals who were born before confederation with Canada. Fewer residents has not meant, however, less demands on the delivery of public services; rather, an aging population has placed even greater demands on a limited public treasury for health and other social welfare services.

The fishery that survived the 1990s has developed into a more centralized and professional industry and dependent upon less traditional sources of species for production, namely crab and shrimp. Ironically, good market demands for both species has proven more valuable to the local economy than the cod had ever been. The creation of a professional fishery and related labor force mirrors developments generally in the provincial economy which is becoming more diversified as industries based on information technology, tourism and an emerging offshore oil sector have taken hold. "How well Newfoundland and Labrador fares in the twentieth-first century, and what the social and cultural ramifications of major economic change will be," Memorial University sociologist Douglas House recently has observed, "depend crucially on how its leaders manage the new oil and natural gas industries and their impacts."

The local folk song *Let me fish off Cape St. Mary's*, written in 1947 by Otto Kelland, still captures the feeling Newfoundlanders, both resident and expatriate, still have today for the place of the cod fishery in their heritage and the song evokes a strong emotional response whether the listener has ever fished or not. In 2001, when the only fish (or cod) Newfoundlanders can catch is through a limited recreational fishery held briefly each year, the emotional hold of fishing remains strong as people risk their lives to catch the small number of fish allowed under the federal government's quota. In doing so, a new seafaring tradition has been born in both song and lifestyle, even if the once abundant cod fishery is no more.



Let Me Fish Off Cape St. Mary's

Take me back ___ to my Wes-tern boat, LET ME
FISH OFF CAPE ST. MA-RY'S ___ Where the
hag-downs soil and the fog-horns wail With my friends the Browns and the
Cleary's. LET ME FISH OFF CAPE ST. MARY'S.___

Let me feel my dory lift
To the broad Atlantic combers,
Where the tide rips swirl and the wild ducks whirl
Where Old Neptune calls the numbers
'Neath the broad Atlantic combers . . . .

Let me sail up Golden Bay
With my oilskins all a'streamin' . . .
From the thunder squall—when I hauled me trawl
And my old Cape Ann a gleamin'
With my oil skins all a'streamin' . . . .

Let me view that rugged shore,
Where the beach is all a-glisten
With the Caplin spawn where from dusk to dawn
You bait your trawl and listen
To the undertow a-hissin'.

When I reach that last big shoal
Where the ground swells break asunder,
Where the wild sands roll to the surges toll.
Let me be a man and take it
When my dory fails to make it.

Take me back to that snug green cove
Where the seas roll up their thunder.
There let me rest in the earth's cool Breast
Where the stars shine out their wonder—
And the seas roll up their thunder.

—Otto P. Kelland.

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