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FISHERIES AND SEA-POWER

By GERALD S. GRAHAM

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WITHIN recent months the Royal Navy has occasionally revealed its doings in the headlines of our local press. Spectacular actions at Genoa, Tripoli, and Cape Matapan have lightened for brief moments the darkness which of necessity shrouds British naval strategy. Such episodes are dramatic and sometimes crucial in their importance; but ordinarily they belong among the lesser incidents of war. From the earliest times sea-power has been most influential when it has been least conspicuous, and this was especially true during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the days before iron hulls and steam power the merchant tramp, working its triangular route to the West Indies, or the fishing ship anchored off the banks, not only symbolized but controlled the effectiveness of British sea-power.

As Admiral Richmond has pointed out, no state can maintain in peace time the naval force needed in a great war; and that nation which wishes to have supremacy at sea must possess a mercantile marine not only to carry on trade, but as a source upon which the navy may draw for personnel.¹ The carrying trade was, and remains, therefore, a foundation of the navy, because the ability to take punishment depends largely upon the number of seamen and officers available from the merchant service.

In the eighteenth century, it was assumed that the admission of foreign vessels to the carrying trade would, by limiting the demand for British shipping, tend to destroy this source. Such an arrangement was, obviously, incompatible with the safety of the Empire in time of war. So far as possible, foreign competition was restricted in order that British overseas trade might be made an exclusive nursery for British seamen. If the principle of monopoly were seriously relaxed, the Vice-President of the Board of Trade asked the House of Commons in 1806, "where, in such case, will be found a nursery for raising seamen to man our fleets in future?"² The English navy, wrote Talleyrand a few years earlier, "is in every respect the offspring of their trade. To rob them of that, is to beat down their last wall and fill up their last moat. To gain it ourselves, is to enable us to take advantage of their deserted and defenceless borders, and to complete the humiliation of our only remaining competitor."³ In the days when a merchant-ship could readily be transformed into a war-ship, the important thing was experience at sea.

But there was a constant debate as to which of the trades provided the best training-ground. The West Indies' branch was frequently criticized on account of the tropical fevers which took a heavy toll from ships' companies. Aspersions were cast on the British North American route as providing, apart from the occasional equinoctial gales, too gentle an education. Indeed, there was unanimity on only one point. It was the general opinion—supported by many Board of Admiralty memoranda—that the

¹Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, *Sea Power in the Modern World* (London, 1934), 41.

²*Commons Debate*, June 17, 1806 (*Hansard*, 2nd series, VII, 686).

³Quoted, Anon., *British Traveller*, preface, p. xiv.

fisheries, and especially the Newfoundland fisheries, were best adapted to supply "a formidable marine." In 1761, the Board of Trade, in a comparative analysis of the resources of Canada, Louisiana, and Newfoundland, declared that "the Newfoundland Fishery as a means of wealth and power is of more worth than both the aforementioned provinces."⁴

To many West of England merchants in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Newfoundland fisheries represented a "mine of wealth" and little more. But the West Country merchants were not the government, and, to the best of my knowledge, their special demands rarely influenced the government. Quite apart from economic advantages, the exploitations of the Banks had profound political significance. In the sphere of international diplomacy the cod fishery stood for power. To share the Newfoundland fisheries with France or any other rival, as the government was forced to do in 1783, was more than a matter of sharing the trade; it meant the sacrifice of strategic advantages, and a diminution in the relative strength of Great Britain over her neighbours. It was important, according to an Admiralty memorandum of November, 1787, "to keep the French strictly to the articles respecting the Newfoundland fisheries, and encourage our own to enable us to command the fish markets . . . their fisheries being chiefly advantageous as raising seamen."⁵

In other words, the Newfoundland fishery was a significant element in the old European balance of power, as is proved by the great importance attached to fishery clauses in almost every treaty made with France up to 1814. Rivalry with France on the shores of Newfoundland was part and parcel of the rivalry for supremacy at sea; and during the eighteenth century at least, the training of seamen was considered as important as the extension of trade, if not more so.

This policy was not original in its emphasis. From the days of Elizabeth, British statesmen saw in the fisheries a national incubator for seamen, "a feeder of the fleet as unrivalled for the excellence of its material as it was inexhaustible in its resources." Lord Cecil, in an effort to counter the ill-effects of the Reformation which had led to the abolition of fast-days, pushed through the statute of 1563 whereby the English people were required, under a penalty of £3 for each omission, "or else three monethes close Imprisonment without Baile or Mainprise," to eat fish, to the total exclusion of meat, on Fridays and Saturdays, and to content themselves with "one dish of flesh to three dishes of fish on Wednesdays."⁶ And to avoid all risk of misunderstanding, a rider was attached to the effect that all persons teaching, preaching, or proclaiming the eating of fish, as enjoined by the Act, to be "of necessitee for the saving of the soul of man" should be punished as "spreaders of faulse news."⁷

Three centuries later, this association of fisheries with sea-power had not lost meaning. During the negotiations preceding the Treaty of Washington in 1871, Sir John A. Macdonald resisted the surrender of the Nova Scotia fisheries on more than economic grounds. "The value of the catch,"

⁴British Museum, Additional Manuscript, 35913, fol. 73, Report.

⁵Sir John Knox Laughton (ed.), *Letters and Papers of Charles Middleton, Lord Barham* (Navy Records Society, London, 1911, vol. 38), II, 280.

⁶Elizabeth, cap. 5; see also, State Papers, Domestic, Elizabeth, vol. XXVII, nos. 71 and 72.

⁷See J. R. Hutchinson, *The Press Gang* (New York, 1914), 95.

he wrote Sir Charles Tupper, "was of less consequence than the means which the exclusive enjoyment of the fisheries gave us of improving our position as a maritime power." If Canada pursued the exclusive system vigorously, he added with rare optimism, she might run a winning race with the United States as a maritime power.⁸

Until the end of the seventeenth century, the regulation of the Newfoundland fishery had been prescribed by charter from the Crown, and various private individuals had been given rights of trade and settlement. This intermittent system of private charters was abandoned in 1698, when the groundwork was laid for a truly national policy based on statute. The object of the Act—10 and 11 William III—was, in the words of the preamble, "the raising and maintaining a number of seamen for the speedy manning of our fleets in time of danger." The achievement of this policy depended, first, upon the yearly training of new recruits or greenmen (an arrangement for which the ship-owners were made responsible), and secondly, and most important of all, upon the prevention of settlement in Newfoundland, which meant the maintenance of English ports as bases for the fisheries, to the exclusion of a resident colonial fishery. The Island of Newfoundland, it was hoped, would become again "a great English ship moored near the Banks" during the fishing season for the convenience of British fishermen.

This official opposition to settlement in Newfoundland had no direct relation to the economics of the industry. The statute of 1698 was based on the thesis that the fishery carried on from Great Britain was the most effective training-school for seamen. Sailors who resided at a distance of three thousand miles, declared George Chalmers, even though subject to impressment, were of no use to Great Britain, because they could not be commanded when they were wanted most.⁹ If the fishing industry were to be transferred from Poole and Dartmouth to Bonavista and St. John's, so far as its usefulness to the Royal Navy was concerned it might as well be in Quebec. But in practice, the regulations forbidding settlement in Newfoundland were never observed, and the rule for the compulsory return of labourers at the end of the fishing season was constantly broken. Ships' masters and merchants continued to bring out these so-called "passengers" from England and Ireland, the majority of whom remained on the island. In 1718, the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations reported that "the Navigation of this Kingdom has suffered exceedingly ever since the Transportation of Passengers to Newfoundland has been connived at; and there can be no Doubt that it has been One of the principal Causes of the Want of Seamen for Your Majesty's Service."¹⁰ As the only remedy for

⁸Joseph Pope (ed.), *Memoirs of the Honourable Sir John A. Macdonald* (Ottawa, 1894), 91.

⁹*Opinions on Interesting Subjects* (London, 1784), 92. See also, Extract from a Representation to the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations to His Majesty relating to the Newfoundland Trade and Fishery, dated 29th April, 1765; enclosure, copy of Governor Palliser's Remarks on the Present State and Management of the Newfoundland Fishery, Dec. 18, 1765 (included in *Papers Relating to Newfoundland* in the library of the Public Archives of Canada at Ottawa).

¹⁰Copy of a Representation of the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations relating to the Newfoundland Trade and Fishery, dated Dec. 19, 1718, included in *Papers Relating to Newfoundland*. See also H. A. Innis, *The Cod Fisheries* (New Haven and Toronto, 1940), chap. vi, *passim*.

the situation, they suggested the removal of the inhabitants to Nova Scotia or some other parts of the British Dominions.¹¹

It is conceivable that, if the British government had taken a determined stand, even at that late date the progress of settlement might have been checked. With a little pressure, a good many of the inhabitants might have been prevailed upon to settle in Canada or Nova Scotia. But such a scheme would have required transports, land grants, and money for provisions and implements of agriculture, and the Walpole government was intent upon economy. Moreover, officials, ignorant of the spread of settlement in Newfoundland, were influenced by the illusory assumption that poor soil and a rigorous climate would of themselves discourage settlement, and prevent the island from becoming more than a very thinly populated outpost.

In the long run, therefore, Newfoundland, which was intended to be a rendezvous for "fishing ships" from the West Country, grew steadily as a plantation with its own resident fishery. By 1765 the population was in the neighbourhood of twelve thousand; and despite the restrictive regulations of the next few years, this rate of increase was maintained. Families of the third generation were growing up, and natives were already carrying on a large share of the fish trade with southern Europe. By the beginning of the Napoleonic Wars, almost every Act for the protection of the "nursery for seamen" had become a dead letter.

Yet the difficulty was this: how to induce a British government to adopt a policy which would take into account the changed situation. It is a curious characteristic of the Briton to go on year after year taking his deepest beliefs for granted, on the assumption, as Samuel Johnson put it, that what has been longest known has been most considered, and what is most considered is best understood. Back-benchers and Cabinet ministers still talked about the Newfoundland fishery as a "nursery for seamen" although the industry was now almost entirely in the hands of the island inhabitants. As late as 1806 a new Governor, Admiral Holloway, was commanded to examine the possibilities of salvaging the ancient system. His instructions reflect the perplexity of British ministers at this time.

And whereas it has been thought of highest importance to the Naval Power of Great Britain that the seamen and other persons employed in the Fisheries carried at Nfld. should return annually at the end of the Fishing Season to some part of our European Dominions for attainment of which object various Laws have been passed and Instructions given, but the same having failed to a great extent in producing the effect proposed,—you are to make the most attentive inquiries,—whether any measures could now be taken for the further encouragement and promoting the Return of every such Seaman and Fisherman to the part of our European Dominions to which he belongs. . . . And you are also to discourage and as far as you are

¹¹This plan was revived in 1793, when there was talk of sending Newfoundland settlers to Upper Canada to establish a sturgeon fishery on the Upper Lakes "as well as adding in the present moment [of the American Indian War] to the internal strength of the Country & the augmentation of the Army." See Charles Stevenson, former Deputy Quarter-Master of Upper Canada, to Sir John Graves Simcoe, June 18, 1793 (*Correspondence of Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe*, Toronto, 1923-31, I, 358); also, Public Archives of Canada, Series Q, vol. 66, 302, Stevenson to Dundas, May 16, 1793.

able, to prevent any of the Said Seamen or Fishermen from deserting to any Foreign Country or from going to reside and establish themselves in the Countries belonging to the United States or even to any of our Colonies in North America.¹²

* * *

British policy was still based on the assumption that the nation possessed a unique strategic advantage in the Newfoundland nursery. In peace time the fisheries were fostered by every kind of regulation; in war time they were expected to pay for this treatment in contributions of recruits to the Royal Navy. Yet, even during the eighteenth century, it is difficult to determine in what degree the Newfoundland fisheries fulfilled their intended purpose as a source of man-power. If the West Country merchants are to be believed, the contribution was a heavy one. The Colonial Office correspondence abounds with merchants' complaints about impressments, which seem to suggest that the British government was killing the goose that laid the golden eggs. Fishing interests which saw an end to their prosperity if conscription were pushed shouted loudly for protection, and proclaimed the doom of the ancient "nursery for seamen" unless exemptions were granted to their industry.

Here is a typical example—a memorial of the merchants of Dartmouth addressed to the Board of Trade in 1778.¹³ Following a report on the "alarming and distressed state" of the fishery as a consequence of impressments, the memorandum continues: "We should not trouble yr. Lordships at this critical time when men are wanted to man H.M.'s ships, if the existence of the Trade did not depend upon it, & we flatter ourselves that we shall stand excused by yr. Lordships when it is considered that unless we are permitted to send out our fishermen, we can have no fishery." On the whole, however, the Newfoundland fisheries were rarely granted important exemptions. The cod fishery was regarded as too valuable a source of man-power to be heavily protected. With the exception of skilled harpooners and whalers, who had special concessions suited to the peculiar conditions of their craft, the men employed in the taking or carrying of fish enjoyed such exemptions as were occasionally extended to the merchant marine in general.

At the same time, the summary impressment of fishermen by any captain who wanted to complete his crew in a hurry was never legally permissible. Under Cecil's Act, which established the extra Fish Days, no fisherman "using or haunting the sea" could be picked up without due process of law, and the legal process was normally a complicated one. In the first place, the Admiralty had to send press-warrants to the commanding officers of the ports. Then, the "Taker," as the press-leader was called, had to submit the warrant to the Justices of the Peace, who were empowered to select such able men as the warrant required. It is interesting to notice that this custom of civil endorsement, although at first only obligatory in regard to

¹²Public Record Office, Colonial Office, Series 194, vol. 46, Instructions and Questions sent by the Board of Trade to Admiral J. Holloway, copy; returned with answers, Jan. 23, 1807.

¹³Public Record Office, C.O. 194, vol. 19, p. 29, March 24, 1778.

fishermen, was ultimately adopted as a legal preliminary in all impressment on land.¹⁴

Obviously, this procedure, if followed conscientiously, took considerable time, and news of the approaching press had a habit of leaking out before the warrants were issued. Hence the sober fisherman had a chance to hide himself as far as possible from his ship. Such a state of affairs was embarrassing to the Admiralty, and from time to time new plans were drawn up providing for greater secrecy in order that the authorities might pounce without warning.¹⁵

As a matter of fact, legal red-tape was always brushed aside in time of emergency. In 1799, when there was danger of Spain entering the war, the British government passed a measure which suspended for six months all exemptions from impressment into the Royal Navy, and gave the administration freedom to man the fleet from any classes, including fishermen's apprentices.¹⁶ Ten years later, the Admiralty proposed to close down the fisheries for a time, on the grounds that, while they offered "a nursery for seamen superior to anything our rivals can propose," they were a branch of trade that could "without much loss" be suspended, even if such a suspension entailed the maintenance of the fishermen's families.¹⁷ This suggestion was never carried out in practice, but the net of conscription was drastically tightened during the Napoleonic Wars. For instance, even persons whose only occupation was picking oysters and mussels from the sea-shore were declared to be fishermen under the law, and were impressed as "using the sea." There is little doubt, too, that Newfoundland fishermen were forcibly removed from their boats or vessels, regardless of the law, on grounds of urgent necessity. On some occasions, British naval officers stopped vessels entering and leaving Halifax, in order to recruit their ships' full complements, but the resulting public agitation was so great that the Governor was compelled to take a hand. In 1806, official orders were issued protecting Nova Scotia fishermen against seizure by impressment.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the colonial Governor, with the consent of his Executive Council, could issue press-warrants, as was done in England, but apparently this practice was rarely authorized. It discouraged trade and encouraged desertions to the United States.¹⁹ In the opinion of Richard Uniacke, the impressment of colonial fishermen, "far from adding to the Naval strength, diminished it by causing the Fishermen to emigrate."²⁰ "I learn from the

¹⁴Hutchinson, *Press Gang*, 96. No further special provisions for the protection of fishermen seem to have been made until 1729, when an exemption was granted which covered the master, one apprentice, one seaman, and one landsman for each vessel (2 Geo. II, cap. 15).

¹⁵*Barham Papers*, II, 304, Admiralty Memorandum, probably written between August, 1787 and July, 1789; see also Memorandum of Aug. 27, 1788 (rough draft), II, 313.

¹⁶19 Geo. III, cap. 73; see also, Lord Mahon, *History of England, 1713-1783* (3rd ed., revised, 1853), VI, 265. 41 Geo. III, cap. 21 gave protection to the fishermen, but could be suspended in time of emergency.

¹⁷*Baring Papers*, II, 304, Admiralty Memorandum, *op. cit.*

¹⁸Public Archives of Nova Scotia, vol. 54, p. 78, Wentworth to Castlereagh, Feb. 3, 1806; see also, W. R. Copp, "Nova Scotia and the War of 1812" (M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, Halifax, 1935), 79.

¹⁹Public Archives of Nova Scotia, vol. 214, p. 153, Council Minutes, May 18, 1805; see also, Copp, "Nova Scotia and War of 1812," 78.

²⁰Public Record Office, London, Minutes of the Board of Trade, Series 1, vol. 27, Observations on the Colonial Fisheries, submitted to the Board of Trade.

best information I can obtain," wrote Admiral Gower to the Board of Trade in 1804, "that . . . the annual transport of men from Europe to Newfoundland has furnished such opportunities of getting to the neighbouring Colonies and from thence to the U.S. that 1000's of men have been lost to the country by that means, while the number of seamen going to and fro has been comparatively small."²¹

Although no official figures are available, it is doubtful whether the Admiralty ever obtained more than about two hundred seamen annually from the Newfoundland and colonial fisheries. In comparison, the home fisheries were more productive. Yet according to Admiralty estimates, the press-gang at its best (which meant during the first years of the war) never furnished more than a total of twenty-two to twenty-three thousand men, a total which would not have manned half the line-ships then fit for service.²² "The impress service is become such a job of abuse from want of examination," wrote a high official in the Admiralty, "that I have calculated from my own office account an expense of at least £40 per man, notwithstanding very few of the numbers raised are seamen, and one half of those raised are not kept three months in the service. This is a most gross abuse, and requires strict examination."²³

The failure of the press service was chiefly responsible for the adoption of new practices, and towards the end of the eighteenth century the Admiralty began to experiment with bounties. Ship-owners or fishing communities were permitted to purchase immunity. For example, in 1780 the men of Worthing contributed £40 cash to pay the cost of hiring five seamen. Such a bargain covered the fisherman not only in his fishing grounds but while carrying the produce to market. In similar fashion, the Nova Scotia Assembly of 1806 set aside £500 for distribution to seamen who signed up voluntarily with the sloop-of-war then in process of building in the dockyard.²⁴

This small-scale experiment, while not entirely pleasing to the fishing interests,²⁵ slowly but surely pointed the way to new methods of enlistment. In 1810, George Rose, Treasurer of the Navy, introduced a bill to increase the number of seamen by establishing naval seminaries on the coasts, where boys might be trained for four or five years. The recruits were to be taken from among the parish paupers, whom Rose estimated to be in the neighbourhood of ninety thousand. They would not, he assured the government, cost more than £5 each, and would guarantee an accession of seven thousand seamen annually.²⁶ The Rose scheme, which was fundamentally the method used today, namely, a professional training-school for the Royal Navy, was not immediately adopted, but its acceptance in principle as a consequence of Sir James Graham's admiralty reforms in 1830-4 marked

²¹Minutes of the Board of Trade, Series 6, vol. 94, Report of 1804; see also, Colonial Office, Series 194, vol. 39, Admiral Waldegrave to Chief Justice Coke, Aug. 27, 1797.

²²*Barham Papers*, II, 313, Memorandum of Aug. 27, 1788 (rough draft).

²³*Barham Papers*, II, 4, Middleton to Sandwich, 1779.

²⁴Public Archives of Nova Scotia, vol. 54, p. 78, Wentworth to Castlereagh, Feb. 3, 1806; see also, Copp, "Nova Scotia and War of 1812," 79.

²⁵Minutes of the Board of Trade, Series 1, vol. 8, Merchants interested in the Greenland and Davis Streights fisheries to Lord Hawkesbury, Lloyd's Coffee House, Feb. 12, 1793.

²⁶*Edinburgh Annual Register*, I, 160; quoted William Smart, *Economic Annals of the Nineteenth Century, 1801-1820* (London, 1910), 232.

the end of the impressment service. After 1815, it was still legal to summon all the sea-faring population for the defence of the realm, but such a provision was never enforced during the nineteenth century.²⁷

The decline of the press-service barely preceded the government's final recognition of Newfoundland as a settled colony. In the nineteenth century, policies of plenty were to supersede those of power, and the doctrine of monopoly lost its former appeal. But quite apart from the fact that the new middle class of the Industrial Revolution was beginning to repudiate the old conception of empire, the cod fishery had already surrendered its unique position as a buttress of the Royal Navy. By the end of the War of 1812, Newfoundland had become a colony with its own garrison, courthouse, churches, private property, administrative buildings, and poor-house. Three years later, the island received a full-time Governor in place of the transient fishing admiral. In the early dawn of competition and free trade, it was a happy coincidence for Britain that the introduction of steam power, the development of the iron-clad and the establishment of a professional navy should have followed so closely the official death of the Newfoundland "nursery for seamen."

DISCUSSION

IN reply to questions, *Mr. Graham* said that, in the mind of the members of the Admiralty, Newfoundland had stood first as the "nursery for seamen" although more recruits came from the herring and the Greenland fisheries. He agreed that the Newfoundland fisheries had been much more important in the earlier days, although he had found no evidence to justify the excessive favour in which they were held.

Mr. Adair and the *Abbé Maheux* pointed out that there was a similar tradition in France about the importance of the Newfoundland fisheries in providing a training ground for seamen. In reply to a question by *Mr. Martin*, *Mr. Graham* said that while the strategic significance of the cod fishery was undoubtedly recognized, the New Englanders were chiefly interested in the commercial exploitation of the Banks; the Republic was too young to have developed much naval consciousness, and he knew of no such constant repetition of a phrase like "nursery for seamen" in connection with New England fisheries.

²⁷Admiral Sir R. H. Bacon, *The Life of Lord Fisher of Kilverstone, Admiral of the Fleet* (New York, London, 1929), I, 273-5.