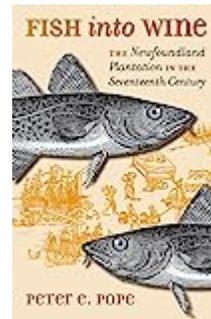




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From Periphery to Center and Back Again: Or, the Significance of Seventeenth-Century Newfoundland

Archaeologist-turned-historian Peter E. Pope has rescued Newfoundland's earliest English inhabitants from historical oblivion. While the importance of the North Atlantic fishery to English overseas expansion has never been doubted, historians have either dismissed or diminished the significance of Newfoundland's seventeenth-century settlements. The prejudice against these settlers stretches back to their contemporary struggles with migratory fishermen and imperial administrators. Merchants invested in the seasonal fishery called the settlers "some looser sort of people and ill-governed men" and labeled them "rude, prophane, and athisticall" (p. 2). These charges stuck, and subsequent historians have long treated those who braved Newfoundland's winters not only as unnecessary but also as possibly detrimental to the successful exploitation of the seasonal migratory fishery. Such was the state of scholarship until archaeologists took their spades to the Newfoundland's thin soils.

This old historiographical edifice has crumbled under the weight of evidence unearthed by archeologists. Just a few of the choicest artifacts suggest the great burden under which the old structure collapsed: a substantial stone

and mortar waterfront from the 1620s, a gilded mid-century baroque cross, a set of cufflinks befitting a gentleman. Long hidden from view, these remains and the more than one million pieces recovered by the Memorial University of Newfoundland Archaeology Unit unsettle much of what historians thought they knew about English expansion into Newfoundland. Seasonal migrants would not have sapped their strength on masonry. "Prophane" and "athisticall" fishermen would not have cherished a brass and iron cross. Nor would they have had the resources for such fine accessories. How did these objects land in Newfoundland? Who used them? And does their presence change our understanding of England's participation in the North Atlantic fisheries? Confronted with objects that challenged conventional treatments of Newfoundland's past, Peter E. Pope left the field and headed to the archives to contextualize the artifacts.

The result is a massive four-hundred-page tome that systematically overturns received wisdom. Each vigorously argued chapter takes issue with a piece of the reigning consensus. Slowly, a new portrait of seventeenth-century Newfoundland social organization emerges that

portrays the migratory fishermen, the sack ships, and the resident fisherfolk as interdependent parts of an intricate and evolving system. In addition, Newfoundland emerges as “neither isolated nor peripheral” but a “central node in an international network” (p. 80) joining England’s West Country, London, Iberia, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic islands, the Netherlands, New England, and New France. By studying the smallest of changes in a corner of the Atlantic world, Pope valuably contributes to the transnational story of European expansion. He balances micro and macro perspectives, and skillfully weaves together historical, archaeological, and anthropological analyses. The result is a stunning piece of Atlantic history which situates people’s lives in the matrix of the multilateral trade in cod and wine.

For Pope, the key turning point in Newfoundland’s seventeenth-century development occurs with the departure of the initial proprietors (including George Calvert, Lord Baltimore; and Henry Clary, Lord Falkland) and the arrival of more adventurous merchants willing to accept “risks, profits margins, and methods of operation” unacceptable to their gentry predecessors (p. 123). After failing to recoup their investments, the large merchant companies and gentry projectors abandoned their fledgling settlements and left their colonists to fend for themselves. As the proprietors fled, merchants who were already engaged in the wine or sack trade seized upon the fish trade to complement their growing business in Spain and the Atlantic Islands. Beginning with the arrival of Sir David Kirke in 1638, these mostly London-based merchants invested in permanent fishing stations to ensure a steady supply of cod for their vessels in what was an extremely competitive trade hitherto dominated by the Dutch. Although resident merchants facilitated settlement, the migratory fishermen whose voyages were sponsored by West Country merchants also benefited from the presence of an overwintering population. Settlers served as caretakers for migratory fishing crews protecting their infrastructure from scavenging native Beothuks and maintaining their claims to limited shore space. The settlement grew from two hundred persons in 1639 to a ceiling of two thousand in 1784. Organized into households, planters and servants earned their livelihood from the shore fishery and a local trade in meat, provisions, and wood products. Although they most certainly did live “without government, ecclesiastical or civil,” as contemporary documents charged, a chain of master-servant and patron-client relationships kept the peace. The unregulated settlements faltered and finally fell after the currency crisis in Spain in the 1680s disrupted their

trade and French military forces overwhelmed their defenses in the early 1690s. However, when the English reclaimed the Avalon Peninsula from the French at the beginning of the eighteenth century, settlers who had arrived during the previous century returned, forming the nucleus around which later settlement would cohere.

Pope’s book offers more than a new narrative of Newfoundland’s development, and a succinct summary cannot capture the richness of his wide-ranging treatment of topics relevant to the broader Atlantic history project. He insightfully covers such diverse topics as women’s work, wage relations, environmental constraints, and transatlantic merchant networks. At the same time, he carefully draws comparisons between developments in Newfoundland and other resource-dependent Atlantic outposts. Even though his mastery of documentary records, material remains, and secondary works is beyond doubt, Pope approaches conclusions cautiously. Unlike some of his predecessors in North Atlantic maritime historiography, Pope treats the economic changes emanating from multilateral trade in fish and wine as evolutionary rather than revolutionary or transformative. As a result, the impressive theoretical and methodological implications of his work are far from straightforward. Three points deserve special consideration: the vernacular character of early modern economic development, the “precocious” consumerism of Newfoundland’s planters, and Newfoundland’s role in supporting English settlement of the North American mainland.

Pope consistently highlights the “vernacular” character of developments within Newfoundland and, more broadly, in the Atlantic trade. First, he asserts that the organization of the migratory fishery was “unplanned and undirected, that is ... vernacular” (p. 44). The “flexible specialization” of this fishery allowed it to serve “vernacular markets” across Europe (p. 31). Likewise, “migration to Newfoundland was ... predominantly vernacular,” as was the emergent planter fishery on the island (p. 62). Each piece—the migratory fishery, the sack trade, and the planter fishery—was part of “a resilient vernacular capitalism” (p. 110). Why the reliance on this adjective?

Although the fishery was a massive transnational enterprise, by emphasizing the vernacular, Pope views local initiatives as the locus of change within the system. He contrasts the vernacular with the directed industry or the centrally organized and controlled enterprise. He is not offering an either-or alternative but hypothesizing a “vernacular-directed continuum” (p. 31). Once the commercial and proprietary schemes, which he equates with

directed industry, failed, participation in the fishery was largely unregulated, and developments within its organization and structure were largely locally determined. Pope maintains that “like other successful early modern fisheries, English enterprise at Newfoundland in this period was financed, organized, and manned in atomistic vernacular modules” (p. 415). The capitalist system that emerged from these modules was composed of seasonal migrants, planters and their servants, and merchants in the sack trade. They each prospered, in part, because they were serving so many fractured, specialized markets. This was a world system in which the periphery shaped relations with the center as much as the center directed change in the periphery.

Although Pope identifies the fisheries centered at Newfoundland as “one of those nodes of capitalism” changing the world economy (p. 191), he also emphasizes that in its modes of production the fisheries remained proto-industrial. Newfoundland merchants, planters, and servants bound themselves together through the ancient but durable practices of clientage and service. Merchants provided the credit for planters to outfit and provision their operations. Planters provided the accommodations and rewards for servants drawn from the declining class of struggling English husbandmen. Generous doses of credit thereby facilitated the dispersal of small productive units or households across Newfoundland’s English shore. This clientage system not only financed production but also maintained the social peace “in the absence of formal political or religious institutions” (p. 207).

Patron-client relationships worked to benefit residents who could tolerate Newfoundland’s winters. Service in the fishery afforded husbandmen, facing downward mobility at home, opportunities abroad. Pope estimates that Newfoundland seamen made 150 percent more than the ordinary Atlantic seamen. This comparatively generous compensation drew many to the plantation in the hope of securing a foothold in the fishery as a resident planter. Further, Pope challenges several historians who have argued that modern wage relations developed in the North Atlantic fisheries. Rather than privileging the emergent wage system, he emphasizes the persistence of shares through the second half of the seventeenth century. Shares were an incentive to fishermen who sought to increase their productivity and thereby their profits. While Pope recognizes that there was a more general trend with wages replacing shares, he resists viewing compensation practices in Newfoundland as the equivalent of wages in modern capitalism. The persistence but declining significance of the shares sys-

tem kept fishermen invested in their ventures, and even the movement toward wages was deflected by the relatively high disposable incomes among skilled fishermen.

Even as their compensation packages harkened back to early modern practices, fishermen flush with cash became “precocious” consumers, “experimenting with a new kind of economy” (p. vii). Drawing upon his archeological expertise, Pope details the profligate habits of Newfoundland residents and their predilection for large quantities of tobacco and wine. Encamped on the rocky shores of the Atlantic, residents did not invest their earnings on better housing. Instead, they attended to the “little hearths” provided by alcohol and tobacco. While their “landlubber social peers” expressed demand for novel goods more slowly, seamen enthusiastically enjoyed the commodities provided by the multilateral trade serving Newfoundland. Pope builds upon this insight to suggest that “the pattern of demand epitomized in the exchange of fish for wine exemplifies the strategic role played by maritime communities in the development of a consumer society” (p. 350). The novelty of these little luxuries “was one of the ways resource peripheries like Newfoundland were modern places” (p. 438).

Pope’s evenhandedness with evidence leads him away from extravagant claims about transformation emanating from the North Atlantic fisheries around Newfoundland and, instead, toward embracing a model of gradual change slowly brought about as local actors responded to domestic and international markets. The result was not a “breakthrough from medieval conceptions of trade to modern capitalism in seventeenth-century Newfoundland” (p. 191), or even, in the parlance of early Americanists, a transition to capitalism. Pope understands change within this complex system as so many transitions within capitalism that never amounted to “anything we would recognize as modern industrial capitalism” (p. 192).

Finally, Pope re-orientes scholarship on colonial North American merchant networks during the first half of the seventeenth century. The role of New England merchants in integrating the early English Atlantic through their trade has long been known, but Pope suggests that Newfoundland played a more active role in facilitating Massachusetts Bay’s rise to prominence than previously suggested. He argues that the earliest trade between the island and New England “was an extension of metropolitan investment in Newfoundland, grown in the matrix of a West Country commercial network” (p. 160). Essentially, Massachusetts merchants entered the Atlantic

trade through Newfoundland. Only after 1650 did Newfoundland become part of a “greater New England,” when ambitious New England merchants quickly seized control of inter-colonial trade. By the second half of the seventeenth century, planters worked in New England-built barks and ketches, and Massachusetts merchants generously extended credit to provision the island.

Pope rightfully points to the centrality of Newfoundland in the development of New England’s earliest independent commerce, but the chronology also suggests that the rise of New England trade corresponded with the increase in Newfoundland’s year-round population. The flight of the proprietors in the 1630s and the arrival of sack merchants like Sir David Kirke in 1638 coincided with Massachusetts Bay’s first efforts to establish a trade independent of the English ships carrying new migrants. With the end of the Great Migration, an independent trading fleet became a necessity and merchants, with the support of the colony’s government, quickly built vessels and entered the multilateral trade in wine, wood, animal flesh, and fish. Newfoundland was one of the first stops for New England vessels because the island’s increasing English population demanded wood and provisions. Massachusetts Bay’s merchant fleet facilitated the growth of Newfoundland’s resident fishery during its years of greatest demographic expansion, just as the multilateral trade in Newfoundland ushered New England into the Atlantic World. Pope might have better focused on this early independency than attempt to catapult Newfoundland’s role to primacy. Thus qualified, however, Pope makes the important point that New England’s merchants could so easily enter the transatlantic trade because Newfoundland had long been a hub in the multilateral trade.

Once ignored or assigned a minor role in the development of a “greater New England,” English activity in seventeenth-century Newfoundland can now be seen as “a central node” in the transnational miracle that turned fish into wine. Although cod does not shine like silver, the late sixteenth-century European trade in Atlantic Canada “exceeded, in volume and value, European trade with Gulf of Mexico, which is usually treated as the American center of gravity of early transatlantic commerce” (p. 13). The North Atlantic trade in fish was big business, and Pope consistently reaffirms the significance of English settlements at Newfoundland to this massive transnational industry. The vernacular capitalism that flourished there reshaped the world economy just as much as it was shaped by distant markets. Newfoundland’s merchants, planters, and servants reformulated old practices of production and remuneration, and in the process made the island an early laboratory for the evolution of consumer society. Finally, favored by geography, Newfoundland became a gateway for migrants to the North American mainland and a staging ground for New England merchants venturing into the Atlantic trade. Once a dimly understood periphery, Pope’s illumination has brought early seventeenth-century Newfoundland out from the shadows of its later decline, making it central not only to English expansion in the early seventeenth century but to the modern practice of Atlantic history more generally.

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