

W. H. WHITELEY

Newfoundland, Quebec, and the Administration of the Coast of Labrador, 1774-1783

By the time of the Seven Years War the Labrador Coast both in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and “outside” the Strait of Belle Isle as far north as the “Baye des Esquimaux” (Hamilton Inlet) had been granted out in seignories by the French Crown. The concessionaires had erected a string of exclusive posts for sealing in the winter, whaling in the spring, cod and salmon fishing in summer, and trade with the natives.¹ At the Conquest, the Labrador posts came into the hands of English merchants recently arrived at Quebec, through grants from Governor James Murray, and by sale from the former French owners. On 7 October 1763, however, the royal proclamation which limited the western frontiers of Quebec also placed the Labrador coast under the authority of the governor at Newfoundland in order that an “open and free fishery” might be carried on there.² Commodore Hugh Palliser, the vigorous governor of Newfoundland from 1764 to 1768, was anxious to promote the fishery as a nursery of seamen for the navy and to extend the Newfoundland fishing laws to the Labrador coast. In 1765 he visited Labrador, declared that only ship fishers coming annually from Britain were to participate in the fisheries there, pronounced the land grants of the Quebec merchants invalid, and drove them from their posts.³ The outraged merchants appealed to the home government to be reinstated, and, led by William Bayne and Daniel Brymer, launched a series of prolonged law suits seeking compensation for their losses.⁴

By the early 1770s several interests were jockeying for advantage in the Labrador fisheries: the Quebec merchants and their French-Canadian allies, those merchants who came out from England each spring and returned home in the fall, and the British government and its naval governors in Newfound-

- 1 See James White, *Forts and Trading Posts in the Labrador Peninsula and Adjoining Territory* (Ottawa, 1926).
- 2 See G. O. Rothney, “L’Annexion de la Côte du Labrador à Terre-Neuve en 1763”, *Revue d’Histoire de L’Amérique Française*, XVII (1963), pp. 213-43.
- 3 W. H. Whiteley, “Governor Hugh Palliser and the Newfoundland and Labrador Fishery, 1764-1768”, *Canadian Historical Review*, L (1969), pp. 155-6.
- 4 See G. O. Rothney, “The Case of Bayne and Brymer: An Incident in the Early History of Labrador”, *CHR*, XV (1934), pp. 264-75.

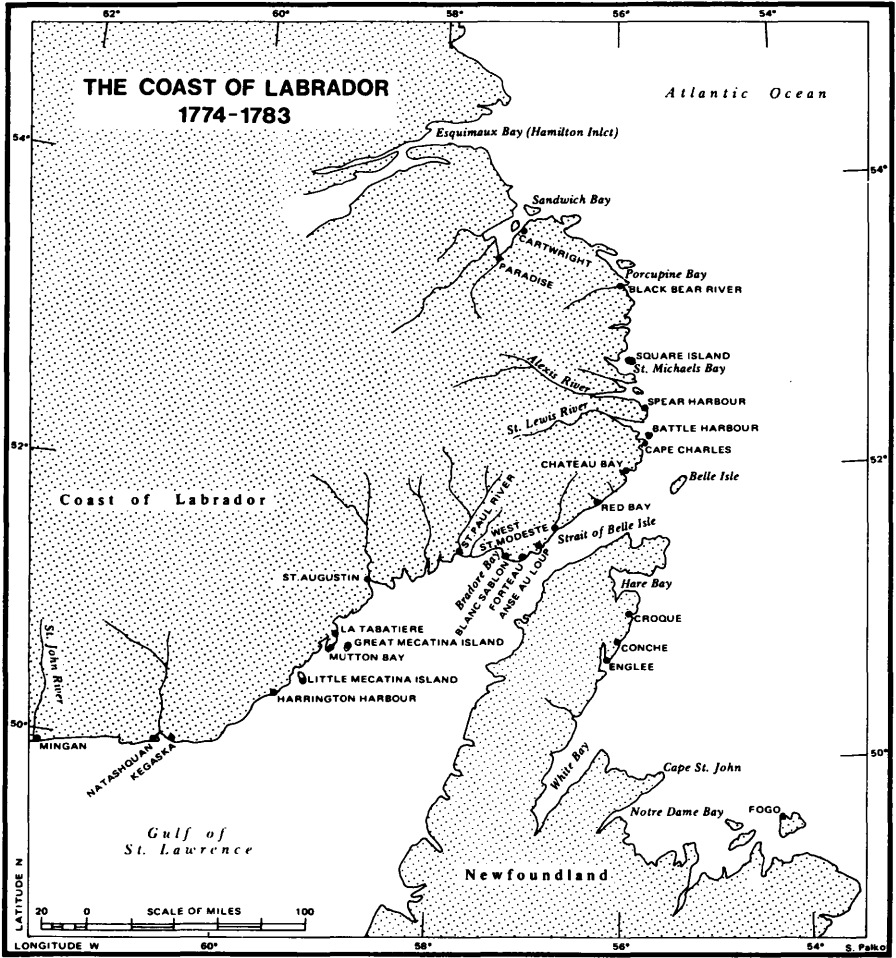
land. The Quebec merchants claimed valid title to their exclusive posts and wanted Labrador re-annexed to Quebec. They asserted that the Labrador fishery was chiefly for seals, and could not be carried on successfully under the Newfoundland fishing rules, which were designed essentially for the summer cod fishery. Each sealing locality was unique and required a heavy investment in specially constructed nets and gear which would not be justified if the post the following year could legally be taken over by some other merchant whose ship happened to arrive first.⁵ On the other hand, the British government, through its Newfoundland governors, continued to strive to build up the ship fishery in Labrador, encouraging fishing ships to come out annually from Great Britain to take posts on a "first come first served" basis. Although Palliser was forced to admit colonial fishermen to the coast, he continued to reject the idea of fixed property or leases and maintained the migratory ship fishers in a preferential position. In 1766 he built and garrisoned York Fort, a blockhouse at Chateau Bay, in the Strait of Belle Isle, to protect British fishermen from the Eskimoes, and, more importantly, from interloping colonial fishermen. Encouraged by Palliser, more English merchants took up posts on the Labrador coast, with the result that the number of fishing ships and the catches of salmon and cod mounted year by year.⁶ Commodore John Byron, who succeeded Palliser in 1769, was instructed by the Admiralty to continue this vigorous policy of safeguarding and developing a Labrador fishery carried on from Great Britain.⁷

The English merchants on the Labrador coast ceaselessly tried to undercut each other and continually lobbied the government for special favours. Nicholas Darby, of Bristol and London, established himself at Cape Charles, just north of Chateau Bay, and was followed there by George Cartwright, in partnership with Perkins and Coghlan of Bristol; the firm of Noble and Pinson (of Dartmouth and Bristol) built a station in Temple Bay, one of the arms of Chateau Bay; Jeremiah Coghlan moved north to exploit Alexis River. These merchants soon realized that a completely migratory fishery could not be carried on successfully, except for cod. They began to press for the right to employ French-Canadians, and for some rights of property in their posts. In 1773 the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Dartmouth, an evangelical Anglican with a particular interest in the Labrador coast and its natives, instructed the Governor, Commodore Molyneux Shuldham, that British subjects who established sealing or salmon fishing stations north of Belle Isle

5 "Case of the landholders in Canada, proprietors of seal fisheries on the coast of Labrador", 24 June 1772, British Museum [BM], Add. Mss. 35915.

6 H. A. Innis, *The Cod Fisheries* (Toronto, 1954), p. 196.

7 Instructions, 23 May 1769, Admiralty [Adm] 2/95, pp. 88-103. All references to Admiralty and Colonial Office files are to the originals in the Public Record Office in London.



Strait were to be protected in their possessions, as long as they annually fitted out from Great Britain one or more ships for the Labrador cod fishery.⁸

In August 1773 Governor Shuldham proceeded in his flagship "Aldborough" to Chateau Bay to proclaim the new fishery regulations. During the summer the carpenters and seamen of the sloop "Otter" were kept busy repairing and refurbishing York Fort and the other facilities of the British base at Chateau Bay. Doubtless at the urging of Lord Dartmouth, Shuldham despatched a "very sensible officer" in the armed schooner "Sandwich" to explore the northern coast of Labrador and visit the Moravian mission at Nain. The officer in question was Lieutenant Roger Curtis, a bright ambitious young man, who had come to the attention of those in authority after he compiled in 1772 a 35 page manuscript account of Labrador, dedicated to the Earl of Dartmouth. Since he had then probably been no further north than Cape Charles, his first-hand knowledge of the coast was limited, leading him to say that "the whole country is nothing more than a prodigious heap of barren rocks".⁹ On 14 July 1773 Curtis sailed for the north from Chateau Bay, with an Eskimo pilot on board. Charting the coast as he went, he investigated Davis's Inlet, visited Nain, and reached an Eskimo settlement in latitude 58° 10' before returning to Chateau on 26 August, where he reported directly to Governor Shuldham.¹⁰ Curtis, who strongly believed that Labrador should remain under the government and laws of Newfoundland, argued that many excellent seal and salmon fisheries could be established on the coast, as well as sea-cow (walrus) fisheries in the extreme north in winter, and Shuldham sent home a detailed report from Curtis on the resources of the coast.¹¹

In the latter part of 1773, and early in 1774, as the North ministry moved towards a large scale reorganization of the governmental structure in America,

8 Dartmouth to Shuldham, 9 March 1773, Colonial Office [CO] 5/251.

9 Roger Curtis, "A Short Account of the Territory of Labradore, its Inhabitants and Productions", CO 197/30, p. 158. Extracts from this account, dealing with the geography, animals and native peoples of Labrador, and updated somewhat by Curtis's explorations in 1773, were read before the Royal Society on 24 February 1774. See, "Particulars of the Country of Labrador", Royal Society *Philosophical Transactions*, vols. LXIV, XL, pp. 372-388. Opinions differed on the value of his observations. Thomas Pennant, in his *Arctic Zoology*, stated that the Labrador coast "so admirably described by that honored name, Sir Roger Curtis . . . is barren past the efforts of cultivation" (quoted in A. M. Lysaght, *Joseph Banks in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1766: His Diary, Manuscripts and Collections* (Berkeley, 1971), p. 444). George Cartwright, on the other hand, charged that Curtis pirated his chart of the coast and invented most of his description of the country. He maintained that there was good soil and many very large trees in many parts of Labrador (*ibid.*).

10 Journal of "Otter", 14 July - 26 August 1773, Adm 52/1387.

11 Curtis to Shuldham, 25 August 1773, Adm 1/470, p. 166; "Remarks upon the northern parts of the Coast of Labrador", enclosed in Shuldham to Dartmouth, 15 September 1773, CO 194/31, p. 43.

the behind the scenes debate on the future of the Labrador coast reached a climax. Governor Guy Carleton of Quebec, whose advice was heavily relied upon, wanted the entire coast restored to Quebec. Carleton believed that since the sedentary fisheries were the principal ones on the coast and were carried on with the use of special equipment prepared at great expense for particular spots, if the Labrador coast was not kept separate from the Newfoundland migratory fishery and disturbances of any kind prevented, the seals and walrus would be frightened away from the nets. This was also the view of the Quebec merchants, who argued that if Quebec was not restored to its former limits east and west, the fur trade and the winter seal fishery would be "forever lost not only to this Province but to Great Britain, as neither can be carried on to advantage, but by the inhabitants of Canada".¹²

Others, however, felt that Labrador was best administered from Newfoundland, although with some modification of the Newfoundland fishing laws. Lieutenant John Cartwright, a younger brother of George Cartwright, who could write with the authority of having served five years on the Newfoundland station in the 1760s, argued that instead of Labrador being transferred to the "Governor of Canada", the Newfoundland Governor should be empowered to grant land in Labrador for fishing posts. To Lord Dartmouth, Cartwright set out very succinctly why Labrador should remain united with Newfoundland: the various businesses of Labrador were almost entirely carried on by English and Newfoundland merchants and fishermen, with ships going back and forth from spring until winter, while there were only a few Canadians in sealing posts in the Strait of Belle Isle, totally ignorant of what was happening at Chateau Bay and the other heavily travelled parts of the coast. The merchants in Labrador could easily contact the Newfoundland governor and his naval officers, stationed all the way from Chateau Bay to St. John's, whereas merchants having to apply to Quebec for redress would undergo a long voyage through dangerous waters.¹³

By 1774 the administration of Lord North had developed a new scheme of government for an enlarged province of Quebec which included the Labrador coast. Lord Dartmouth, who took most of the decisions in the drafting of the proposed legislation after consulting with Guy Carleton and Lord North, introduced the Quebec Bill into the House of Lords in May 1774. The preamble stated that certain parts of Canada, where sedentary fisheries had been

12 "Memorial from Quebec to Lord Dartmouth", 31 December 1773, in A Shortt and A. G. Doughty, eds., *Documents relating to the Constitutional History of Canada, 1759-1791* (Ottawa, 1918), pt. I, p. 501.

13 John Cartwright to Lord Dartmouth, 13 January 1773, Dartmouth Papers, vol. VIII, no. 2408, Public Archives of Canada [PAC], MG 23 A1; "Considerations on the Rights and Interests of Adventurers in the Labrador Fisheries", enclosed in Cartwright to Dartmouth, 23 March 1774, *ibid.*, vol. XIII.

established, had been annexed to the Government of Newfoundland and thereby subjected to regulations inconsistent with the nature of those fisheries.¹⁴ Clause one of the Bill simply annexed to Quebec, besides the isolated French-Canadian settlements of the Ohio country, all “territories, islands, and countries, which have, since the 10th of February 1763, been made part of the Government of Newfoundland”.¹⁵ The Bill was designed as a tidy administrative arrangement which would bring the “lost” French settlers under regular government and appease the British merchants by the extension of the fur trade in the west and recognition of their seal fisheries claims in the east.¹⁶ But the opposition in Parliament tied in the Quebec Bill with the Coercive Acts against the Thirteen Colonies, and a number of Whigs opposed the re-annexation of the Labrador coast on the principle that the territory and its fisheries would simply be turned over to an illiberal regime favouring Catholic French-Canadians. After the Quebec Bill passed the Lords without opposition, it was brought into the House of Commons on 26 May, and received its third reading on 13 June after nine days of debate in a thinly attended House.

At the Committee stage, however, annexation of Labrador to Quebec was opposed both by the Whigs and by the “Navy” interest in the Commons, concerned for the future of the British fishery on the coast. On 3 June Captain Constantine Phipps, member for Lincoln and a friend of Sir Hugh Palliser, whose spokesman he may have been, protested that not enough evidence had been submitted and that the sedentary fishery, which was apparently in the hands of French-Canadians, would “destroy the fishery of this country”.¹⁷ The main debate on the Labrador fisheries took place on 6 June, when the Commons dealt with the new boundaries of Quebec. The opposition to the proposed re-annexation was led by Sir Charles Saunders, who had commanded the fleet at the siege of Quebec in 1759, had served as First Lord of the Admiralty in the 1760s, and was another close personal friend of Sir Hugh Palliser. Saunders’ words carried great weight; as the Solicitor General admitted, it was extremely difficult to argue against a member “to whom it may, perhaps, be very truly said, that this country owes all the fishery it has upon the coast of Newfoundland”. In blunt language the aging naval hero de-

14 R. Coupland, *The Quebec Act; a Study in Statesmanship* (Oxford, 1925), pp. 208-9.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 210; Shortt and Doughty, *Documents relating to the Constitutional History of Canada*, pt. I, p. 548.

16 V. T. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire, 1763 - 1793* (London, 1964), vol. II, p. 700.

17 H. Cavendish, *Debates of the House of Commons in the year 1774, on the Bill for making more effectual provision for the Government of the Province of Quebec* (London, 1839 [Reprint 1966]) [hereafter *Debates*], p. 77.

clared that the transfer of the coast to Quebec would hand over the fishery to the Americans and the French. In his view the "liberty of fishing" should remain under the surveillance of the Newfoundland governor as a guarantee of national security: "Sir, the fishery is worth more to you, than all the possessions you have put together. Without that fishery your possessions are not safe; nor are you safe in your own country . . . God knows, how much you'll find the want of seamen, whenever this country finds it necessary to equip its fleets". In reply, Lord North stressed that the re-annexation of the coast was based on justice to the Canadian merchants who held valid grants for sealing and walrus posts and on the peculiar nature of those fisheries, which competition from the migratory fishermen had almost destroyed. But Saunders pointedly asked where fishery disputes were to be settled. The Labrador posts were so far from Quebec city that the loss of time and expense would ruin any fishery in the world, whereas the governor of Newfoundland could settle disputes very quickly. "I never knew a trial to last half an hour in my life", the former commodore at Newfoundland proclaimed.¹⁸

The Government had plainly been thrown on the defensive and the Solicitor-General, Alexander Wedderburn, wound up the debate with conciliatory words. Although he emphasized that the sedentary fisheries and the cod fishery were separate and were carried on at different times of the year, while the Newfoundland governor stayed only until the close of the summer fishery, he promised that in a Labrador that was part of Quebec there would be magistrates settling disputes on a year-round basis. Since the cod fishery was "perfectly distinct", he suggested adding the proviso that "nothing shall extend to take from the powers of the Governor of Newfoundland, during the season of the fishery, all persons concerned in the cod fishery; but that they be extended to the cod fishery in the territories last before mentioned."¹⁹ Constantine Phipps, however, brushed aside the proposed amendment as ineffectual, arguing that the residents carrying on the sedentary fisheries, having possession of the land, would have an unfair advantage in the cod fishery. He concluded contemptuously: "My learned friend holds out a plausible protection to the cod fishery, and at the same time cuts it up by the roots".²⁰ While the clause providing for the simple retrocession of the Labrador coast to Quebec went through in its original form, the North administration had been made aware of the importance of the migratory cod fishery and rapidly moved to bring about by executive action the protection it had envisaged in the proposal of the Solicitor-General. Even before the Quebec Bill became law, the government had formulated a compromise for

18 *Debates*, pp. 203, 198, 199 - 201.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 204.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 205.

the administration of the Labrador fisheries and Lord Dartmouth was issuing fresh instructions to the Admiralty and its commander-in-chief at Newfoundland.

On 16 June 1774 Lord Dartmouth sent a despatch to the Admiralty which was to form the basis for the involvement of the Newfoundland commodore in the affairs of the Labrador coast for the next thirty years. When the Quebec Act came into force on 1 May 1775, all authority on the Labrador coast exercised by Lord Shuldham in his capacity as governor would cease, but in his capacity as commander-in-chief of the squadron employed to protect the fisheries, Shuldham was to continue to superintend those on the Labrador coast, as well as those of Newfoundland. In particular he was to "give all possible encouragement and protection, as well to the seal and sea cow fisheries, as to the cod fisheries carried on by the King's Subjects from this Kingdom, on such parts of the coast, as are not claimed as private property, under regular Canadian titles; and that he do also protect and countenance, as much as in him lays, the Establishments, formed under the King's Authority, by the Society of the Unitas Fratrum to the westward of the Straits of Belle Isle."²¹ Under these instructions the Newfoundland commodore would continue to play a major role in supervising the fisheries on the Labrador coast.

With the Quebec Act due to take effect on 1 May 1775, alterations in the instructions of the governors of Quebec and Newfoundland were obviously necessary. Lord Dartmouth despatched new instructions early in January 1775 to Guy Carleton, whose authority as governor of Quebec now included the coast of Labrador and the island of Anticosti.²² The property rights of Canadians possessing grants in Labrador were safeguarded but their claims were held to cover only a small portion of the coastline. Clause 36 was the key one. Where there were no Canadian possessions and where the cod fishery might be carried on, the governor was to make the interests of "Our British Subjects going out to fish there in ships fitted out from Great Britain the first object of your care, and, so far as circumstances will admit, to establish on that Coast the regulations in favour of British fishing ships" contained in the Fishing Act of 1699. Moreover, no new properties were to be acquired or new sedentary fisheries established on the coast except by ship fishers annually fitting out from Great Britain.²³ These instructions remained standard for the Quebec governors down to the end of the eighteenth century.

In 1775 Rear Admiral Robert Duff replaced Lord Shuldham as governor of Newfoundland and commander-in-chief of the squadron there. At the end of

21 Dartmouth to Admiralty, 16 June 1774, Adm 1/4129.

22 Instructions for Guy Carleton, 3 January 1775, CO 43/2, pp. 207-77.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 254.

April Lord Dartmouth sent to the Admiralty Board extracts from Carleton's instructions relating to the Labrador fisheries, and emphasized that "no material alteration should be made in the Regulations, which had been wisely adopted for the encouragement and advantage of the fisheries carried on there, whilst they remained parts of the government of Newfoundland".²⁴ Fortified with this information, the Admiralty lords, of whom Palliser was one, set to work to draft their orders to Rear Admiral Duff, instructions which were to be repeated virtually unaltered to following commanders at Newfoundland down to 1809. While Duff was governor only of the island of Newfoundland and the Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, his authority as naval commander was as full and ample as that of Palliser or Shuldham had ever been. Appointed commander-in-chief of the royal ships "employed about the Island of Newfoundland, the Islands of Madelaine and Anticosti, and upon the Coast of Labrador from the River St. John to the entrance of Hudson's Straits", by the key 7th clause of his instructions, Duff was ordered to "settle and guard the fishery not only at Placentia and St. John's but as far to the northward upon the coasts of Newfoundland and upon those of the Continent of Labrador as your command extends". The Admiralty pointed out that the Labrador coast was now part of Quebec but stressed that Canadian claims covered only a small part of the coast, and that everywhere else British ship fishers were to have priority.²⁵ Although the coast of Labrador was now officially part of the territory of Quebec, the Quebec and Newfoundland governors were thus given what amounted to conjoint powers of administration over the fisheries on the ungranted portions of the coast. Both were to encourage the traditional ship fishery, essentially based upon the British Isles and carried on according to the fishing laws of Newfoundland.

The Quebec Act was fully in effect by the end of 1775, but during the war years from 1776 - 1783, the Newfoundland governors continued to be also commanders-in-chief of the warships at Newfoundland, the islands of Madelaine and Anticosti, and on the coast of Labrador from the St. John River to Hudson's Straits.²⁶ Rear Admiral John Montagu, Rear Admiral Richard Edwards, and Vice Admiral John Campbell were given instructions almost identical to those first issued to Commodore Duff in 1775. The Newfoundland admirals were ordered to protect, encourage, and report on the cod and other fisheries, especially those carried on from the British Isles under the Fishing Act of 1699. At the same time the Quebec governors retained their legal

24 Dartmouth to Admiralty, 28 April 1775, CO 5/121, p. 90.

25 Instructions for Rear Admiral Robert Duff, 22 May 1775, Adm 2/99, pp. 408-32.

26 See for example Admiralty to Rear Admiral Richard Edwards, 8 March 1779, Adm 2/106, pp. 330-1.

powers over the Labrador coast and the instructions Dartmouth had given Carleton in 1775 were repeated by Lord George Germain to Frederick Haldimand when he became governor in 1778.²⁷ The Quebec governor, while safeguarding the properties of Canadians on the Labrador coast, was to foster the migratory cod fishery and allow no new fishing posts to be established except by ship fishers annually fitting out from the British Isles. In fact, as the years passed, the Newfoundland governor assumed more and more of the responsibility for protecting merchants in their property on the Labrador coast. In 1777 William Thomas, a Poole merchant, asked the Board of Trade for protection for the fishing posts he had occupied during the last two seasons and Lord George Germain consequently told Admiral Montagu to instruct the commander of the warship visiting the Labrador coast in the coming season to protect Thomas in his fishing stations as long as he continued to fulfill the conditions laid down in the regulations of 1773.²⁸

The tangled affairs of Jeremiah Coghlan, English merchant at Fogo and Twillingate, as well as on the coast of Labrador, well illustrate how the Newfoundland governor became involved in mercantile rivalries on the coast in the later 1770s. In 1777 Coghlan asked Governor Montagu for help in controlling his fishing crews on the Labrador coast. He claimed that through the encouragement of “my very respected good friend Sir Hugh Palliser”, he had been the first Englishman to establish a seal fishery at Chateau Bay as far back as 1765. He was now heavily involved in fishing and furring operations stretching from Spear Harbour, at the mouth of the Alexis River, as far north as Porcupine Bay, near Hamilton Inlet, and in the 1777 season employed 100 men in the seal and cod fisheries and 40 men in the salmon and furring business, using two ships cleared out of England for the coast of Labrador.²⁹ Coghlan complained that one of his chief salmon catchers, John Peaton, being “divested of every sensation of gratitude”, had persuaded all Coghlan’s salmon catchers and furriers on the Alexis and Black Bear rivers to leave his employ and take over the streams, although no one had any rights of possession or residence there except those who brought out annually ships from Great Britain. Coghlan therefore implored Montagu to order his one-time servants to evacuate the settlements.³⁰ Admiral Montagu replied from St. John’s that the reannexation of the Labrador coast to Quebec “puts it out of my power as Governor to render you any service” in regard to fishermen employed in Labrador, but ordered Lieutenant Isaac Schomberg, commander

27 Instructions for Sir Frederick Haldimand, 13 April 1778, CO 43/2.

28 Germain to Montagu, 18 March 1777, CO 194/33, pp. 126-7.

29 Coghlan to Montagu, 30 August 1777, Department of Colonial Secretary, Series I [GN2/1], vol. 7, p. 53, Public Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador [PANL].

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 57-8. Black Bear River was just south of Porcupine Bay.

of the schooner "Labrador", to give any assistance he could to Coghlan on the Labrador coast.³¹ Lieutenant Schomberg arrived at Fogo on 15 September and conducted an inquiry which convinced him that Coghlan's malcontents had committed "not only a breach of trust, but a most illegal proceeding".³² Coghlan sent crews back to the posts of which he had been dispossessed, accompanied by an order issued by Schomberg in his capacity as surrogate to Montagu. Schomberg pointed out that Coghlan had followed all the regulations made for the coast of Labrador "for the benefit and increase of His Majesty's Marine" and that he had incurred great costs in carrying on fishing and furring operations using ships and crews brought out yearly from Great Britain. He therefore forbade anyone to take possession of any salmon rivers, sealing posts, furring paths, or fishing harbours on the Labrador coast that had been first discovered and occupied by Jeremiah Coghlan.³³

The Newfoundland governor and his surrogates were obviously anxious to do what they could to bolster the position of the ship fishers on the Labrador coast, of whom Jeremiah Coghlan was one of the most favoured. Coghlan was the justice of the peace and customs officer for Fogo, calling himself "the Senior Officer on this Coast". He assisted the governor's surrogate by gathering statistics on the outport fisheries and by collecting the Greenwich Hospital Money (a tax for the support of disabled seamen). Coghlan was also in charge of military recruiting on his part of the coast and hoped that at the end of the fishing season he would succeed "as well as I did in volunteers, to defend Quebec under General Carleton".³⁴ Grateful for Schomberg's aid, he assured Montagu that he would ever retain

a just sense of your Excellencys good intentions towards my operations on the former [Labrador] coast, the same being at a very great distance from those parts claimed by His Majesty's Canadian Subjects, and never occupied or discovered by any British subjects before myself, or rather, the people employed by me at a very great expense, and conformable to such, I look upon myself with His Majesty's most gracious protection, as a supporter of a British fishery, with ships lawfully cleared from England for the use of such.³⁵

During these same years, the involvement of the Quebec governor in the Labrador fisheries was much more tenuous. Soon after the passage of the

31 Montagu to Coghlan, 4 September 1777, *ibid.*, p. 59.

32 Schomberg to Montagu, 27 September 1777, *ibid.*, p. 71.

33 Order of Lieutenant Isaac Schomberg, Fogo Harbour, 19 September 1777, *ibid.*, p. 76.

34 Coghlan to Montagu, 23 September 1777, *ibid.*, p. 78.

35 Coghlan to Montagu, 25 September 1777, *ibid.*, p. 80. Unfortunately Jeremiah Coghlan eventually went bankrupt in 1782, despite the efforts of the Newfoundland governor to preserve the credit of his firm.

Quebec Act Carleton had appointed Nicholas Coxe his Lieutenant-Governor and Superintendent of the fisheries at Gaspé, on the southern shore of the St. Lawrence. The opening of the American War made the Quebec merchants trading to Labrador even more desirous of government protection and they complained in 1778 that since the Labrador coast had reverted to Quebec, no steps had been taken to protect and encourage the fisheries. Because there was no superintendent to prevent or settle disputes, the produce of the fisheries was only a third of what it had been a few years ago.³⁶ George III and Lord George Germain both supported the idea of a Labrador superintendent and subsequently an order in council was issued declaring that an office of Lieutenant-Governor or Superintendent of Fisheries on the Coast of Labrador was to be established, at an annual cost of £200, to be paid out of the revenues of the province of Quebec.³⁷ In fact, a separate post was never established and in 1779 Coxe, still superintendent at Gaspé, was also appointed Superintendent of the Trade and Fishery of Labrador.³⁸ Significantly, Coxe's authority was to extend only to the Labrador fishery "within the Province of Quebec", and he was to obey the directions of the Newfoundland as well as the Quebec governor. It is doubtful that Coxe ever exercised effective authority on the Labrador coast. For one thing, he lacked suitable transportation. The governor at Quebec did not have available to him a squadron of warships and Coxe was reduced to sending the Secretary of State an estimate of costs for a small schooner with which he could visit the Gaspé and Labrador coasts.³⁹ There is no evidence that his modest request was granted.

During the American war the defence of the Labrador coast was a matter of pressing importance and the governor at Quebec could do little. The naval governor at Newfoundland from the beginning disposed of a powerful squadron of ships, and, in practice, reported directly to the Admiralty in London. The Quebec governor, on the other hand, began the war with no substantial naval forces directly under his command. The warships operating in the western parts of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and in the river itself came under the orders of the Commander-in-Chief of the North American squadron, whose headquarters during the war years shifted between New York, Boston,

36 R. Hunter, J. Mather, D. Watson and D. Strachan to Germain, 3 July 1778, CO 42/37, p. 659.

37 "Order providing for establishment of a Lieutenant-Governor or Superintendent of Fisheries on the Coast of Labrador", 12 August 1778, in Great Britain Privy Council, Judicial Committee, *In the matter of the boundary between the Dominion of Canada and the colony of Newfoundland in the Labrador Peninsula . . .* (London, 1927), *Joint Appendix*, vol. III, p. 1172.

38 Order of Lord George Germain, 16 March 1779, CO 324/44, p. 203.

39 Coxe to Germain, [1779?], CO 42/38, p. 260.

and Halifax. The local naval commander at Quebec was simply the senior captain who happened to be in the river at the time. Indeed, in the early stages of the war the province of Quebec was almost lost, and Governor Carleton only regained his freedom of action when the siege of Quebec city was raised after the arrival in May 1776 of the relief expedition headed by the frigate "Isis". In June Admiral Lord Richard Howe, the Commander-in-Chief of the North American squadron, issued general instructions to Captain Charles Douglas of the "Isis", or to the "Commanding Officer for the time being of His Majesty's Ships stationed at Quebec, and in the River St. Lawrence".⁴⁰ The fleet in the St. Lawrence was firstly to support the military operations of Governor Carleton, and, secondarily, to visit and protect the sedentary fisheries on the coasts of Quebec and Nova Scotia which lay on the western side of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. But Howe emphasized that the needs of Carleton's army took priority.

As the American War escalated and rebel privateers became more numerous and daring, demands mounted from the Quebec governor and merchants for additional protection. In the summer of 1778 James Collins, commander of the rebel privateer "Cumberland", visited several of the fishing posts of William Grant of Quebec, destroying facilities for the seal fishery. He claimed that he had not touched the houses and provisions of the residents, having, unlike the British, no desire to harm poor innocent people.⁴¹ Grant, however, furiously reported that at his posts at Great Mecatina, Little Bradore, and Mutton Bay, west of the Strait of Belle Isle, Collins had left only one house standing and very scanty provisions. The stations at St. Augustine and Natagarniou were also gone, as well as some fisheries of Adam Lymburner and Simon Fraser.⁴² At the same time the rebel privateer "Minerva", Captain John Grimes commanding, had done "much mischief in the lower part of the coast, beyond the limites of the Province, burned some ships, carried off and destroyed all that was valuable there".⁴³ In November 1778 Haldimand complained to Lord Sandwich, the First Lord of the Admiralty, that although two frigates and two sloops had wintered at Quebec, and were kept cruising about during the open season, American privateers had swarmed in the Gulf all year, taking many prizes. The winter fishery on the north shore had been almost entirely annihilated, and many would not venture upon the fisheries there next summer unless their property was protected. He urged that measures be taken in 1779 to prevent a repetition of the attacks.

40 13 June 1776, Adm 1/487.

41 Collins (Little Mecatina) to Grant, 23 August 1778, Haldimand Papers, vol. 42, p. 56, PAC, MG21 G2.

42 Grant to Haldimand, 3 November 1778, *ibid.*, p. 60.

43 Haldimand to Sandwich, 19 November 1778, *ibid.*, p. 61.

The Royal Navy, however, was now stretched to the utmost to meet all its commitments, especially after the entry of France into the war in 1778. The Commander of the North American squadron, Lord Gambier, reported early in 1779 that the difficulty of guarding adequately the American coastline and complying with the numerous needs of the army was inconceivable to any but those on the spot.⁴⁴ Sir George Collier, the senior naval officer at Halifax, complained to his successor of a lack of sloops and small armed vessels to combat the numerous shoals of rebel privateers which infested the coasts of Nova Scotia.⁴⁵ In the middle of June 1779, in spite of Haldimand's representations of the previous year, not a single warship had yet arrived, although American privateers were already in the Gulf plundering the remaining fishing stations.⁴⁶ Lord Sandwich sadly acknowledged that the naval forces deployed in the Gulf of St. Lawrence were by no means adequate, but declared that they were all that could be spared, with Britain itself daily expecting a French invasion.⁴⁷ Rebel privateers apparently roamed almost at will during the summer of 1779, devastating both shores of the St. Lawrence River and Gulf, so that the fisheries were nearly annihilated, and "the people engaged therein, everywhere retiring into the interior part of the country".⁴⁸ If the province was left as bare next year, wrote Haldimand bitterly to Germain, the fisheries might well be abandoned. Except for the sporadic arrival of warships on convoy duty, the entire naval strength at Quebec consisted of a small sloop and a provincial armed schooner and Haldimand's requests that at least one of the convoy frigates winter at Quebec were repeatedly rejected by the senior naval officer of the river, pleading Admiralty orders.

Finally, in September 1779, the Admiralty did despatch Captain Thomas Young in the frigate "Hind" to winter at Quebec and become the senior naval officer there. Early in 1780 Haldimand placed two armed brigs, the "Polly" and the "Liberty", as well as other provincial warships under Captain Young "to attend his cruise for the protection of the posts and trade in the lower parts of the province".⁴⁹ With this added strength, Young was able to mount a more effective naval patrol in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in the summer of 1780. In August he sent the "Polly" and the "Liberty" to the Strait of Belle Isle to protect the fishing posts there until the end of October.⁵⁰ By September Young had sent three privateers into Quebec city. Nonetheless, the Labrador

44 Gambier to Admiralty, 3 April 1779, Adm 1/489, p. 236.

45 Collier to Barkley, 7 March 1779, *ibid.*, pp. 237-8.

46 Haldimand to Sandwich, 18 June 1779, Haldimand Papers, vol. 54, p. 104.

47 Sandwich to Haldimand, 7 August 1779, *ibid.*, vol. 49, p. 86.

48 Haldimand to Germain, 13 September 1779, *ibid.*, vol. 54, p. 141.

49 Haldimand to Young, 10 May 1780, *ibid.*, vol. 140, p. 113.

50 Young to Haldimand, 28 August 1780, *ibid.*, vol. 140, p. 142.

fisheries continued to receive only sporadic protection, especially from Quebec. In October 1782 some of the chief merchants of Quebec “concerned in the fisheries and Indian Trade on the Labradore Coast” addressed a lengthy petition to the Admiralty Board, through Haldimand, detailing the losses they had suffered during the war years and asking for more effective protection.

These merchants estimated that the privateers “Cumberland” and “Minerva” in 1778 had destroyed or taken away property and vessels worth £15,000 as a result of their raids on the posts of Quebec traders from Mingan in the Gulf to Cape Charles north of Belle Isle. In 1779 privateers took several vessels coming from the Labrador fisheries, with cargoes valued at £7,000. In both 1780 and 1781 the Quebec traders suffered losses reckoned at £3,000 and in 1782 five Quebec vessels had been destroyed or carried off with property worth £10,000. The Quebec traders complained that the warships that came out with the convoys arrived so late that the privateers had plenty of time to carry out their raids before the frigates got down to their stations. In 1782, for example, the five Quebec vessels had been taken long before the “Daedalus” arrived in the Gulf. The merchants told the Admiralty that small armed vessels, two small brigs or cutters and a 20 gun sloop, would form the best protection. These armed ships should have no convoy duties, should patrol the Labrador coast from Cape Charles south to the Manicouagan Shoals in the St. Lawrence River, and should winter at posts on the coast, under the command of Captain John Schank, the then senior commanding officer at the port of Quebec. They would be of more real service than frigates, “as they might without risk follow the privateers, which have always been small, into the little harbours where they take refuge from the frigates, who from their great draught of water dare not follow them”.⁵¹ However, in his covering letter to the petition, Governor Haldimand recommended that if the Admiralty did assign some small warships to the Labrador coast, they should “be under the command of the Admiral or Officer Commanding at Newfoundland, who must be better judges of what is fit and necessary than Captain Shranks [sic] or any other officer, whose duty obliges them to reside at Quebec or elsewhere within this Province”.⁵² Clearly Haldimand did not consider the defence of the Labrador coast to be his responsibility or that of the naval commander in the St. Lawrence.

In fact, from the beginning of the war the governor of Newfoundland assumed primary responsibility for the protection of the Labrador coast. Early in the war the Secretary of State for the Colonies increased the size of the

51 Petition of W. Grant, T. Dunn, P. Stuart, A. and M. Lymburner *et al.*, 18 October 1782, Adm 1/2485.

52 Haldimand to Keppel, 22 October 1782, Haldimand Papers, vol. 55, p. 223.

Newfoundland squadron because “there are many new objects to which the attention of the Commander-in-Chief of that Squadron is now to be directed”.⁵³ The Newfoundland commodore had to protect not only the fisheries of the island of Newfoundland, the coast of Labrador, and the Grand Banks, but also those carried on in the eastern parts of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Moreover, he “could not be too watchful” to prevent attempts by the Continental Congress to get European supplies through St. Pierre and Miquelon, or from French vessels engaged in the Newfoundland fishery.

The Newfoundland Commander-in-Chief in 1776, Admiral Montagu, commanded a squadron of 4 frigates, 3 sloops, and 6 schooners carrying a total of 1,325 men, a powerful independent naval force which included several smaller warships especially useful in hunting down privateers.⁵⁴ When the faithful Jeremiah Coghlan at Fogo reported in 1776 that 4 rebel armed schooners were in the Strait of Belle Isle, Montagu was able to reassure him that 2 warships were cruising in the vicinity, on the lookout for the intruders, and the Labrador fishery was apparently carried on much as usual that year.⁵⁵ Eleven British ships, manned by 240 men, came out to the Labrador and carried away to foreign markets 9,000 quintals of fish and over 1,000 tierces of salmon.⁵⁶ The following year the Newfoundland squadron was increased to a total of 15 warships, 5 frigates, 3 sloops, 6 schooners and an armed brig, manned by 1575 men, while only an old sloop and an armed brig were stationed in the St. Lawrence.⁵⁷ The Newfoundland commodore regularly sent warships to look in on the Labrador settlements, with commanders who possessed at least limited judicial powers. For example, in June 1777 Montagu ordered Captain Harvey in the frigate “Squirrel” to visit the northern Treaty coast to settle any disputes there, and then “to proceed to the Coast of Labrador for the like purpose, with the English Adventurers in the Salmon fishery”, and Lieutenant Schomberg was sent to Fogo in September to support Coghlan against his refractory Labrador crews.⁵⁸

The pressures on the Newfoundland commodore increased with the entry of France into the war. Noble and Pinson had asked for a warship to be stationed on the Labrador coast to protect the fisheries and to convoy the fishing ships to their markets after the season was over. The Admiralty asked Montagu to “appoint such ship or sloop of your squadron as you shall judge sufficient for the purpose and can be best spared from the more important

53 Germain to Admiralty, 23 February 1776, CO 5/123, p. 591.

54 Disposition of Ships, 1 August 1776, Adm 8/52.

55 Montagu to Coghlan, 28 September 1776, GN2/1/6, p. 120.

56 Scheme of the Newfoundland Fishery, 1776, CO 194/33, p. 38.

57 Disposition of Ships, 1 August 1777, Adm 8/53.

58 Journal of Montagu, 1 June 1777, Adm 50/17.

services entrusted to your care”.⁵⁹ From his new 64 gun flagship at Spithead, Montagu rejected Noble and Pinson’s request on the grounds that he had too few ships for the various assignments he had been given.⁶⁰ In point of fact, Montagu’s squadron was now more powerful than ever before. Besides his own formidable flagship, he had at his disposal 4 frigates, 3 sloops, 5 schooners, and 2 armed brigs, manned by almost 2,000 men.⁶¹ His refusal to spare a vessel for Labrador was to cost the merchants there dearly.

Admiral Montagu himself did not reach St. John’s in 1778 until 25 July, by which time reports were flowing in of depredations committed by privateers on the Newfoundland coasts, especially to the south of the capital. Montagu disposed his warships as best he could to protect the fisheries “from any further insults”, but complained of the lack of small armed vessels, “the properest for annoying the small American privateers”.⁶² On 22 August he received word from Thomas Kelling, Noble and Pinson’s agent at L’Anse au Loup in the Strait of Belle Isle, that Captain John Grimes in the “Minerva” had attacked Chateau Bay on 13 August, plundering the stores of Noble and Pinson and taking away 3 ships, whose crews had deserted to the rebels. Grimes had been able to man and arm a brig and some smaller craft to assist him in destroying the remaining fishing stations on the coast.⁶³ Montagu immediately ordered Captain Robert Linzee in the frigate “Surprize” to the coast of Labrador. The very next day a message from Coghlan at Fogo, dated 19 August, revealed that Grimes had been into his posts at Alexis River. Fearing an attack on Fogo itself, Coghlan summoned a meeting of the principal merchants to plan the defence of the harbor “but it was with great difficulty he could get even the voice of one Englishman, who would engage to stand by him, although there were 250 able men, capable of bearing arms”.⁶⁴ Montagu now ordered the armed schooner “Penguin” to accompany the “Surprize”, and both sailed for the north on the morning of 24 August. They reached Chateau on 2 September and were into Spear Harbour the following day.⁶⁵ They were too late. After plundering Chateau Bay, Cape Charles, and Alexis River, the “Minerva”, piloted to her prey by former servants of Cartwright, who had deserted first to Pinson and then to the

59 Admiralty to Montagu, 2 May 1778, Adm 2/104, pp. 412-3.

60 Montagu to Admiralty, 5 May 1778, Adm 1/471, pp. 194-5.

61 Disposition of Ships, 1 August 1778, Adm 8/54. The North American squadron at this time numbered 93 ships carrying 16,850 men, and the total strength of the navy had risen to 309 ships and 75,667 men.

62 Montagu to Admiralty, 29 July 1778, Adm 1/471, pp. 227-8.

63 Journal of Montagu, 22 August 1778, Adm 50/17.

64 *Ibid.*, 23 August 1778.

65 Journal of “Surprize”, 24 August - 9 September 1778, Adm 51/950.

Americans, had continued northwards along the coast, descending upon George Cartwright's posts in and around Sandwich Bay on 27 August. Grimes proceeded to loot Cartwright of his ships, stores, furniture and 900 quintals of dry fish, to the value of £6,000.⁶⁶ He finally departed on 30 August and made his way back to Boston, although he must have narrowly missed the royal cruisers in the Straits.

The season of 1778 was disastrous for the British fishery in Newfoundland and Labrador. No fishery had been possible on the west coast of Newfoundland, or on the south coast, except at Harbour Breton, "and that in a great degree destroyed by the American privateers". The fishery on the coast of Labrador carried on from Britain and Jersey had also "in a great degree, been destroyed by the American privateers". As for the Labrador fishery carried on by Canadians, there had been "No fishery this year, or least no return made", reported Admiral Montagu.⁶⁷ But in 1779 the home government bestirred itself to take steps for the better protection of the Newfoundland and Labrador fisheries. Several merchants had offered to embody their employees and throw up defences at the chief fishing settlements, if the government would but supply arms and ammunition. Lord George Germain accordingly arranged for the shipment of 700 muskets to Newfoundland, and for the distribution of 40 iron cannon already on hand in St. John's.⁶⁸ Moreover, the Labrador fisheries now received the naval protection that had been denied in 1778. The Navy Board arranged with Noble and Pinson that their ship the "Pinson", carrying 18 guns and 70 men, would be employed, after delivering her cargo to Labrador, as a patrolling cruiser until 31 October, under the command of a naval officer.⁶⁹ Even before Governor Edwards reached St. John's, the veteran sloop "Martin", Captain Thomas Durell commanding, was already watching over the Labrador fisheries. The "Martin" had wintered at Trinity in Newfoundland and reached Temple Bay by the middle of July.

Once arrived in St. John's, Admiral Edwards put in motion the full plan for the defence of the Labrador posts that year. Captain Thomas Drury, in the sloop "Cygnet", was ordered to load the rifles and ammunition to be distributed to the Labrador posts, and to proceed to Temple Bay to join Captain Durell. A mini-squadron composed of the "Martin", "Cygnet", and "Pinson", under the command of Durell, would cruise for the protection of the Labra-

66 Cartwright to Joseph Banks, 14 September 1778, in Lysaght, *Joseph Banks in Newfoundland and Labrador*, p. 268; Geo. Cartwright, *Journal of Transactions and Events on the Coast of Labrador* (Newark, 1792), vol. II, p. 363; Montagu to Germain, 5 October 1778, CO 194/34, pp. 34-5.

67 Scheme of the Newfoundland Fishery for 1778, Adm 1/471, p. 277.

68 Germain to Edwards, 2 April 1779, GN2/1/7, pp. 170-1.

69 Admiralty to Edwards, 2 June 1779, Adm 2/107, p. 119.

for fishery until the end of August. If no enemy privateers had appeared by then, Durell was to leave the "Cygnet" to protect Alexis River and the "Pinson", Temple Bay, until 31 October. The two ships would then rendezvous at Temple Bay and the "Cygnet" would return to St. John's with the Labrador trade.⁷⁰ According to plan, the "Cygnet" joined the "Martin" and the "Pinson" in Pitts Harbour, within Chateau Bay, on 2 August. After Drury delivered 120 muskets to Noble and Pinson, the squadron attempted to sail for the north on 7 August but unfortunately the "Pinson" was lost at the tricky harbour entrance. The two sloops finally got away on 16 August. The "Cygnet" delivered 200 guns to Coghlan at Spear Harbour; the "Martin" went on further north, reaching Cartwright's settlement at Isthmus Bay, near Sandwich Bay, on 20 August. The "Martin" left Isthmus Bay on 23 August for St. John's, stopping at Fogo on the way, to convoy any trade that was ready there. The "Cygnet" remained at Spear Harbour until 7 October, when she sailed for St. John's, calling at Temple Bay en route. She reached the capital city on 20 October, with 3 brigs under convoy.⁷¹ The difference between adequate and inadequate protection was reflected in the annual fisheries report for 1779. At least eight British ships, carrying over 200 men, had been on the coast, and had caught almost 9,000 quintals of fish, as well as about 760 tierces of salmon. Edwards did not report on any of the Labrador fisheries south of Forteau, nor strangely enough, on Cartwright's operations in Sandwich Bay.⁷²

Even before Admiral Edwards led his squadron out again in 1780, he was taking measures for the defence of Labrador. He ordered Captain Thomas Marshall in the sloop "Atalanta" to convoy several merchantmen bound for Quebec through the Strait of Belle Isle and then to return to Temple Bay and patrol the Labrador coast for the rest of the season, "agreeable to the applications of the merchants for the protection of the trade and fishery of Messrs. Noble, Cartwright, Coughlan, etc."⁷³ Marshall reached Belle Isle towards the end of July with seven victuallers but unfortunately the "Amphitrite" ran aground near Wreck Cove on 9 August and became a total loss. He saw the remainder of his charges safely into the Gulf of St. Lawrence and by the latter part of August was patrolling the coast from Temple Bay to Spear Harbour, recruiting volunteers, and taking firkins of butter and other pro-

70 Edwards to Drury and Durell, 29 July 1779, Letter-books of Admiral Richard Edwards, PANL (microfilm).

71 Journal of "Cygnet", 29 July - 20 October 1779, Adm 51/4153; Journal of "Martin", 16 July - 23 August 1779, Adm 51/581.

72 Scheme of the Newfoundland Fishery for 1779, CO 194/34, p. 89.

73 Edwards Letter-books, 4 May 1780.

visions out of fishing ships caught plundering the “Amphitrite”.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, Edwards in St. John’s was rounding up the cannon to be supplied the Labrador merchants. Coghlan got four 6 pounder guns for the defence of Fogo, and three 6 pounders for Spear Harbour. Cartwright’s agent, Elias Sparks, picked up two 9 pounders for Sandwich Bay.⁷⁵ Lieutenant Joseph Nunn was ordered to proceed to Fogo in the hired armed ship “Charlotte” to deliver Coghlan’s cannon, from thence sailing to Temple Bay to join Captain Marshall. The “Charlotte” made rendezvous with the “Atalanta” on 31 August and the two warships visited Alexis River together. The “Atalanta” then made her way down to St. John’s via Fogo, collecting homeward bound fishing vessels on the way. The “Charlotte”, left behind to protect Chateau Bay and adjacent ports until 20 October, did not return to St. John’s until the 28th, the day Admiral Edwards set sail for England.⁷⁶

Thus, during the American War, the commander-in-chief at Newfoundland appears to have treated the coast of Labrador as an integral part of his domain. For the better protection of the spring fisheries, some warships were wintered in Newfoundland harbours, with spruce boughs placed around their sides to keep the ice away from their copper bottoms. The sloop “Cygnet”, for example, after wintering in St. John’s harbour in 1780-1, was out cruising off the Newfoundland coasts in April and May. After escorting a Quebec convoy into the St. Lawrence, she sailed up the west coast of Newfoundland and crossed the Strait of Belle Isle, mooring in Temple Bay on 18 August. The sloop patrolled the fisheries there until October, when she escorted the laden fishing ships down to join the convoys departing for England and Portugal.⁷⁷ Although the Labrador coast was legally part of the province of Quebec, that government lacked the means, and perhaps the will, to exercise its authority effectively; the Labrador coast was too sparsely populated to warrant a separate government such as George Cartwright urged; the commander-in-chief of the Newfoundland squadron alone was in a position to supervise and protect the fisheries of the coast.

74 Journal of “Atalanta”, 23 July - 25 August 1780, Adm 51/75; Edwards to Admiralty, 28 September 1780, Adm 1/471, p. 438.

75 Edwards to Edward White, Ordnance Storekeeper, St. John’s, 7 August, 24 September, 14 July 1780, GN2/1/9, pp. 28-9, 110-1, GN2 1/8, pp. 142-3. Although the cannon were to be returned “to H.M.’s Store upon commencement of a peace”, at least one was apparently still being fired at Cartwright in the 1920s on the occasion of visits by governors and lord bishops. See Henry Gordon, *The Labrador Parson*, ed. by F. Burnham Gill (St. John’s, 1972), pp. 170-204.

76 Edwards to Nunn and Marshall, 10 August 1780, Edwards Letter-books; Journal of “Atalanta”, 31 August - 1 October 1780, Adm 51/75.

77 Journal of “Cygnet”, 26 November 1780 - 23 October 1781, Adm 51/223; Edwards to Admiralty, 28 September 1781, Adm 1/471, p. 525.

Particularly in the vital matter of defence the Quebec governor could provide only very limited protection, even to settlements on the Gulf coast of Labrador, and it was the Newfoundland naval governor who regularly provided sloops of war to visit the fishing posts and escort home the laden fishing ships. It was he who supervised the distribution of small arms and iron cannon to the Labrador traders in 1780 and 1781 and the Quebec governor himself admitted in 1782 that warships protecting the Labrador fisheries would be best placed under the commanding officer at Newfoundland. Moreover, many merchants in the fisheries on the Atlantic coast of Labrador also had extensive trading interests in northern Newfoundland, and both sides of the Strait of Belle Isle formed one natural economic unit. The Newfoundland commodore was naturally drawn into the disputes of these merchants, especially since the fishing regulations enacted for Labrador before 1774 remained generally in force. His officers also collected the Greenwich Hospital money from fishing crews at Labrador as well as in Newfoundland. When merchant vessels such as the "Amphitrite" were wrecked on the Labrador coast, the Newfoundland governor laid down salvage guidelines and invoked the jurisdiction of the St. John's Vice Admiralty Court.

In the debates on the Quebec Act, opponents had forecast that the annexation of Labrador to Quebec would mean delivering over the Labrador fishery to the French-Canadians. Yet the ship fishery continued to maintain itself in the years after 1774. Eleven large British fishing ships came to the Labrador coast in 1774, carrying over 500 men, and catching over 12,000 quintals of cod. In 1776, during the early stages of the American War, eleven British ships were at the Labrador fishery, manned by 240 men and carrying away 9,000 quintals of fish and 1,000 tierces of salmon. Even after the disastrous privateer raids of 1778, eight vessels, carrying over 200 men, came out in the following year. The British Labrador fishery probably suffered far more from the attentions of rebel privateers than from competition from Quebec. In practice, the Quebec and Old Country merchants roughly divided the Labrador coast between them. The fisheries on the Gulf coast west of the Strait of Belle Isle, where old French grants were numerous, were exploited by Quebec merchants, under the protection of the Quebec Act, but the fisheries of Atlantic Labrador continued to be carried on by English and Jersey firms, watched over by the Newfoundland warships. These firms concentrated on the annual summer cod fishery, but also left crews for winter sealing and furring. The division of coastal Labrador between Quebec and Newfoundland at the Strait of Belle Isle, officially enacted in 1825, was essentially a reality fifty years earlier.