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The Staple Model Reconsidered: The Case of Agricultural Policy in Northeast Newfoundland, 1785-1855

THERE IS NO SHORTAGE OF THEORIES to explain Newfoundland's historical reliance on the cod fishery as the single support for its economy. An early historiographic school, dominated by L.A. Anspach and D.W. Prowse, suggested that a combination of West Country merchants and government officials long opposed settlement and agriculture in Newfoundland as a possible obstruction of their migratory fishery.[1] More recently, Keith Matthews' work has established that, far from opposing them, West Country merchants incorporated limited settlement and agriculture into a broader strategy in which merchants came to rely on a resident population to maintain fishing rooms and equipment. Gordon Handcock's studies of the demographic development of Newfoundland further demonstrate that this interdependent relationship between fish merchants and resident fisherfolk facilitated the peopling of Newfoundland's northeast coast, from Conception Bay to Fogo and Twillingate.[2]

Another approach, however, has emphasized the limited scope and quality of Newfoundland's natural resources. Harold Innis and Grant Head have argued that Newfoundland possessed neither the agricultural nor timber resources with which to stimulate internal trade and provide fish producers with local supplies of provisions and capital goods. As a result, the population remained dependent on the international fish trade, and on the truck system in which fishermen obtained goods from merchants on credit against the fishing season's yield. They could rarely leave truck-dominated cod production for agricultural production: even meagre agriculture often did not meet the family's subsistence requirements, let alone encourage

1 Lewis A. Anspach, *A History of the Island of Newfoundland* (London, 1819), and D.W. Prowse, *A History of Newfoundland from the English, Colonial and Foreign Records* (Belleville, Ont., 1972 [1895]). Full historiographic treatment can be found in Keith Matthews, "Historical Fence Building: A Critique of Newfoundland Historiography", *The Newfoundland Quarterly*, 74 (Spring 1979), pp. 21-9. I would like to thank Gregory S. Kealey, Rosemary E. Ommer, Daniel Vickers, Eric Sager, Carmen Bickerton, David Frank and the anonymous readers of *Acadiensis* for their criticisms of earlier drafts. An SSHRC doctoral fellowship provided funding for this paper's research.

2 Keith Matthews, "History of the West of England - Newfoundland Fishery", Ph.D. thesis, Oxford University, 1968, and W. Gordon Handcock, *So longe as there comes noe women: Origins of English Settlement in Newfoundland* (St. John's, 1989).

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specialization and local trade.[3] Gerald Sider, meanwhile, has employed the concept of merchant capital hegemony to advance a class-based explanation of Newfoundland's long domination by fish merchants. Resurrecting the assertion that merchants actively opposed agricultural development as a threat to their profitable monopoly of the fish trade, Sider suggests that through their influence over administrative authorities, merchants denied settlers their landed property rights, thereby making "settlers more dependent upon their merchant suppliers".[4]

Although the staple model offers the single most persuasive explanation for Newfoundland's dependence on the fishery, Newfoundland's 19th-century social development cannot be understood without considering the manner in which the island's comparatively restricted resource base influenced the development of class relations. In other parts of British North America, especially in Upper Canada, local resources supported a wide variety of economic activities in staple trades and mixed agriculture. This early industrial and petty commodity production, dominated as it was by merchant capital, nurtured the growth of a vigorous industrial capitalism. Newfoundland, on the other hand, had a soil and climate which barely supported fishing families' potato gardens. Without a flourishing agricultural base, or even other staple trades to complement the fishery, Newfoundland society was doomed to domination by merchant capital.

Throughout the late 18th and early 19th centuries Newfoundland fishermen had already been exploring ways, such as increasing household production of food and goods, to minimize the amount of provisions they had to secure on credit from merchants. Some West Country merchants worried that agricultural activity in Newfoundland might partially undercut their profits from the supply trade with the fishery. However, to interpret such initial hesitancy as continued and determined merchant hostility to agriculture in Newfoundland would be to ignore the evidence that both geography and distance led merchants and the state to accept cultivation of the soil by fishing families. Successive Newfoundland governors recognized that fishing families' agriculture supported the fishery, and West Country merchants, in the crisis of a post-Napoleonic Wars depression, fully agreed with the governors' sentiments. Although British policy officially discouraged farming in Newfoundland, neither local government nor merchants felt any need to constrain agriculture. They knew that the areas of Newfoundland settled by British fishing families could not support a population solely by farming, and certainly not by an internal trade which might lessen dependence on fish merchants. Neither British colonial officials in Newfoundland nor fish merchants opposed family-based exploitation of the northeast coast's limited agricultural resources. But these twin forces did oppose a third group pressuring for agricultural development: a growing St. John's-centred reform movement which sought to buttress its demands for representative government with the argument that Newfoundland could mature into a colonial society based on commercial agriculture. Although these dreams of an

3 H.A. Innis, *The Cod Fisheries*, 2nd. ed. (Toronto, 1954), pp. 481-3, and C. Grant Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland: A Geographer's Perspective* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 35, 78, 185.

4 Gerald Sider, *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 111-4.

agrarian economy never materialized, Newfoundland governors eventually came to support the reformers in an attempt to rid themselves of responsibility for extending relief to the families of the impoverished northeast coast.

Settlers originally came to Newfoundland to fish, not to cultivate the soil. Prior to 1775, Newfoundland's resident population, growing in the slow decline of the old migratory fishery, did not devote much attention to local agriculture, relying instead on food largely imported from New England. The fisherfolk who settled the northeast coast discovered that Newfoundland's frigid climate and meagre soil were hardly capable of supporting a resident population, not to mention an economy much diversified beyond the cod fishery.[5] The island's terrain is broken by many steep slopes, making extensive clearing and cultivation of the land difficult. Recent glaciation has left behind an acidic, shallow and stony soil. The small areas of land that do have agricultural potential are scattered widely throughout the Avalon and Bonavista peninsulas. Even in these places, Newfoundland's extremely variable and harsh weather further restricts agricultural potential.[6] Only the southern shore of Conception Bay, sheltered from harsh winds and having somewhat better soil and timber, has proved capable of sustaining much agricultural activity.[7] Methodist missionary Edmund Violet asserted that fish merchants themselves had evaluated the potential viability of agricultural activity under such conditions, but concluded that they could more easily make money at their "regular business, without cultivating rocks, or covering stones with earth", and fishermen realized that they could make more money by trading fish than trading potatoes.[8]

The potential for profit in the fishery continued to attract people to Newfoundland despite its severe environment, and the stimulus provided to the trade by the wars of the last quarter of the 18th century outweighed the agricultural challenges. The loss of American sources of food imports after 1775 forced many residents, particularly in Conception Bay, to turn to local cultivation, no matter how limited. At the same time, the war disrupted the migratory fishery, leading merchants to rely increasingly on residents for their articles of commerce.[9] The American colonies' successful establishment of independence further encouraged the growth of the resident population at Newfoundland by inhibiting out-migration to what had become the United States.[10]

5 J.H. McAndrews and G.C. Manville, "Ecological Regions, ca AD 1500", and "Descriptions of Ecological Regions", in R. Cole Harris, ed., *Historical Atlas of Canada, 1: From the Beginning to 1800* (Toronto, 1987), Plates 17-17A.

6 Peter Crabb, "Agriculture in Newfoundland: A Study in Development", vol. I, Ph.D. thesis, University of Hull, 1975, pp. 41-51.

7 Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland*, pp. 13-4.

8 Rev. Edmund Violet, "Memorandum on Agriculture in Newfoundland", Duckworth Papers, P1\5, MicroF. R5.5, M-3176, nd, F. 1153-7, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland Labrador [PANL].

9 Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland*, pp. 196-202.

10 Shannon Ryan, "Fishery to Colony: A Newfoundland Watershed, 1793-1815", *Acadiensis*, XI, 2 (Spring 1983), pp. 34-52.

The interruption of the French fishery by war in 1793 also contributed to the development of a resident society and economy. Not only was French production disrupted, but British production also dropped, probably because of merchant reluctance to invest capital during the uncertain times of the early war years. However, the increasingly resident fishery was not marked by prosperity, given the loss of some European markets in the early years of the war and American competition. Throughout the later war years, the prices for Newfoundland fish rose with the disruption of American competition by the War of 1812 and the opening of Iberian markets to British produce, further encouraging the growth of the resident fishery despite wartime inflation.[11]

The economic depression following 1815 began to undercut planters' wartime investment of capital in the fishery. By 1798 many fishermen, especially those from Conception Bay, were engaging in a migratory fishery to the waters between Quirpon and Cape St. John. War temporarily halted French fishing rights in the area, but the end of the war saw the return of the French, while fishermen from the northeast coast redirected their schooners to the Labrador coast. The less-profitable Labrador fishery, supplemented by the rapidly growing and much more profitable spring seal hunt, as well as by the inshore fishery, continued to provide a living to the people of the northeast coast.[12] The cod fishery generally languished throughout the first half of the 19th century, however, while the northeast-coast seal fishery steadily gave way to competition from St. John's merchants.[13]

The social relations of Newfoundland's northeast coast were dominated by the planters' and other fishing families' trade with merchants. As opposed to the old migratory bye-boat keepers, Newfoundland planters were simply settlers engaged in a resident fishery. Unlike other fishermen, planters were household producers who possessed all the property and equipment to process fish, as well as to cultivate gardens and build houses. Planters and fishermen both relied primarily on family labour and merchant credit for provisions and capital goods with which to prosecute their fishing voyages.[14] The northeast-coast fishery's social relations reflected the fishermen's desire for independence and merchants' desire for profit.

11 Ryan, "Fishery to Colony", pp. 134-48.

12 Shannon Ryan, *Fish Out of Water: The Newfoundland Saltfish Trade, 1814-1914* (St. John's, 1986), pp. 46-51, Ryan, "Fishery to Colony", p. 148, and Chesley W. Sanger, "Technological and Spatial Adaptation in the Newfoundland Seal Fishery During the Nineteenth Century", M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1973, pp. 12-53.

13 Shannon Ryan, "The Newfoundland Cod Fishery in the Nineteenth Century", M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1971, pp. 17-49.

14 Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland*, p. 223, and G.M. Storey, W.J. Kirwin and J.D.A. Widdowson, eds., *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Toronto, 1982), pp. 381-3. Gaspé planters appear to have been somewhat distinct from Newfoundland's northeast-coast planters in their early association with actual large-scale resident production through hiring labour. See Rosemary E. Ommer, *From Outpost to Outport: A Structural Analysis of the Jersey-Gaspé Cod Fishery, 1767-1886* (Montreal/Kingston, 1991), pp. 24-40. The northeast-coast planters' preference for family labour over wage labour is further explored in Sean T. Cadigan, "Economic and Social Relations of Production on the Northeast-Coast of Newfoundland, with Special reference to Conception Bay, 1785-1855", Ph.D. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1991, pp. 124-56.

Fishermen preferred the independence of household production rather than dependence on employment by merchants. The latter, in turn, found attractive the unequal exchange yielded by shifting the cost of production as much as possible onto the non-wage labour of the fishing household. Merchants recognized that the fishery prospered when they left production to family labour which could combine non-market and market production for its survival.[15]

Agriculture became the primary form of non-market production which supported the fishery of the northeast coast. As early as 1785, Governor John Campbell observed that fishing families coped with merchants' restriction of credit for provisions during depressions in the fish trade by resorting to cultivation. By minimizing the credit risks incurred by merchants, subsistence agriculture became essentially a subsidization of the mercantile fishery.[16] Through the war years British officials at Newfoundland recognized outport people's right to enclose land to raise crops and livestock, in order to supplant expensive provisions imported by merchants.[17] Governors such as Sir Erasmus Gower, and his successor John Duckworth, believed that the natural limits of agriculture in Newfoundland would confine it to a complementary role to the fishery: fishermen could raise some of their own foodstuffs, thus relieving merchants of the risk of extending provisions made increasingly costly by wartime inflation.[18]

By 1812, government officials in Newfoundland had come to accept that the resident fishery was there to stay, and that subsistence agriculture had made that fishery succeed under mercantile domination, given that merchants would not extend credit for provisions they felt fishing families could not afford.[19] But subsistence agriculture could not wholly meet the needs of residents, who faced starvation when merchants could not import provisions at sufficiently low prices. In June 1813, for example, Governor Richard Keats informed the British colonial

15 Patricia A. Thornton, "Dynamic Equilibrium: Settlement, Population and Ecology in the Strait of Belle Isle, Newfoundland 1840-1940", 2 vols., Ph.D. thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1979, pp. 1-112, 521-31. Thornton's "The Transition From the Migratory to the Resident Fishery in the Strait of Belle Isle", in Rosemary E. Ommer, ed., *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective* (Fredericton, 1990), pp. 138-66 further explores planters' developing reliance on household production. Women dominated northeast-coast fishing households' agricultural production. While the need for women's work in the curing of saltfish could disrupt their cultivation, the fishery's labour requirements served as only a very secondary consideration to resource constraints on northeast-coast agriculture. This is more fully explained in Cadigan, "Economic and Social Relations of Production", pp. 193-228.

16 Governor Campbell to Secretary of State Lord Sydney, 14 May 1785, MicroF. Reel B-676, 36, 1785-6, F. 13-5, Colonial Office Papers [CO] 194, Centre for Newfoundland Studies, MUN.

17 Governor William Waldegrave to the Duke of Portland, 30 October 1798, CO 194, B-679, v. 40, 1798, F. 137-8; C.W.M. Pole to the Duke of Portland, London, 12 January 1801, B-680, v. 43, 1801-3, F. 3; Thomas Skerrett to Lord Pelham, 22 September 1801, F. 189-99.

18 "Extracts from a letter from Brigadier General Skerrett", 26 October 1803, CO 194, B-680, v. 43, 1801-3, F.323; Governor Sir E. Gower to Earl Camden, 19 November 1804, v. 44, 1804-5, F. 26-33.

19 Gower to Earl Camden, 24 December 1804, CO 194, B-680, v. 44, 1804-5, F. 50-3; "observations on certain Parts of His Majesty's Instructions to the Governor of Newfoundland", 1806, B-681, v. 45, F. 61; Duckworth to Lord Bathurst, 2 November 1812, B-684, v. 53, 1812, F. 3-5.

secretary that Newfoundlanders had again experienced a winter of near-famine conditions due to the war's disruption of the American provisions trade. In many areas, residents were forced to eat seed potatoes when their flour ran out. Keats felt that cultivation had to receive official encouragement so that government could sidestep the burden of relief, but any such action would come too late for the approaching winter.[20] In the event, plentiful imports of supplies from Great Britain and Ireland in the fall averted Keats' expected catastrophe, and the governor also made limited grants of land in the St. John's area so that every fishing family might raise subsistence crops of potatoes, vegetables, hay and oats. In the outports, Keats continued to observe the local policy of allowing families to squat on Crown lands.[21]

The merchants' restriction of credit during the post-1815 depression led them and the state to look to fishing families' subsistence agricultural activities as a way to make up for provisions no longer available on credit. Worried about the costs of credit, and faced with increased competition from the Americans and French in European cod markets, merchants hoped that a family-based combination of fishing and cultivation would produce a commodity that would undersell the American and French product in such markets. After 1815, British merchants began to lose their dominance in the supply of salt cod to European markets and a consequent cod glut forced prices down. In Newfoundland, merchants began to restrict credit to planters, ruining many, causing much unemployment, and leaving people with little means by which they could pay for their winter's supply. By 1817, famine became a real prospect in the island.[22]

The spectre of relief again appeared before the eyes of British officials. Newfoundland authorities reluctantly resorted to government relief to stop rioting and store-breaking on the northeast coast during the winter of 1816-7, and both Governor Francis Pickmore and the Colonial Office debated the merits of forcibly removing people from the island, but decided that they had not the legal right or means to do so. The Colonial Office consequently decided to allow the governors to lease more small lots of land, cautioning that such land was to be used by fishing families for their own support. Merchants were not to be allowed to engross large amounts of land for their own purposes. The British government had finally

20 Governor Keats to Bathurst, 23 June, 20 July 1813, CO 194, B-684, v. 54, 1813, F. 3-5.

21 Keats to Bathurst, 18 December 1813, CO 194, B-684, v. 54, 1813, F. 160-6. There was no need to make land grants in the outports, since the surrogates there paid little attention to past regulations against cultivation. King William's Act of 1699 and Palliser's Act of 1775 recognized the governors' discretionary power in allowing families to possess and enclose land for agricultural purposes. As McEwen has pointed out, British officials confined their concerns about alienating land in Newfoundland to the uncontrolled possession of valuable fishing rooms — areas where boats could be landed and fish cured. See Alexander Campbell McEwen, "Newfoundland Law of Real Property: the Origin and Development of Land Ownership", Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1978, pp. 62-106

22 Anspach, *History of the Island*, pp. 258-76, and Prowse, *History of Newfoundland*, pp. 404-5.

accepted the resident fishery, with its local agricultural supplement, as a fait accompli.[23]

Not all parties were content with this situation. Poole City merchants, fearful that some future provisions crisis might lead to more attacks on their stores, would have preferred that the government send Newfoundland's "excess" population out of the island, but they accepted government plans to encourage residents' use of farming to support the fishery. Testifying before a select committee of the House of Commons appointed in 1817 to investigate the Newfoundland trade, representatives, as well as merchants based in St. John's, stated that the way in which producers organized their labour in the resident fishery could not be supported by the trade now that the boom times of the Napoleonic Wars had ended. Merchants could not get a high enough price for fish to support planters and other fishermen. In this view the halcyon days of the past 20 years had led to an extravagant prosecution of the fishery. George Garland, George Kemp Sr. and Jr. (of Poole) and J.H. Attwood (of St. John's) suggested that the government continue to encourage family-based agriculture to maintain Newfoundland's population as a market for their capital goods and provisions, and as suppliers of fish for trade. These merchants all warned the government not to support agricultural colonization schemes because of the island's poor soil and harsh climate: such schemes would fail, causing more people to look to the fishery and merchants' stores for their subsistence. British authorities, unwilling to grant bounties to the fish merchants, accepted that merchants would not extend credit beyond any hope of return in the postwar depression. Anxious to minimize relief expenditures, the Colonial Office encouraged fish producers to provide for their own consumption as much as possible so that the fish trade would survive the current restriction of credit by merchants.[24]

Even as the Newfoundland government accepted a policy of encouraging fishing families to use small-scale farming as much as possible to provide their own sustenance independent of government relief or merchant credit, a political reform movement arose in St. John's, complaining that the British government should go further by sponsoring a full-fledged settlement scheme in the island. St. John's reformers felt that Newfoundland must be developed through systematic agricultural colonization and road-building under the direction of its own legislature.[25] As Keith Matthews has suggested, the reform leaders were only a small St. John's mercantile and professional elite fighting for Newfoundland's right to self-determination in an era in which most British colonies were doing the same. In this context, reformers such as William Carson and Patrick Morris created a political

23 Governor Pickmore to Bathurst, 12 June 1817, CO 194, B-686, v. 59, 1817, F. 82; Pickmore to Henry Goulbourn, 20 July 1817, F. 110-2; Pickmore to Bathurst, 22 December 1817, F. 110-2; Thomas Lock to Henry Goulbourn, 24 September 1817, B-687, v. 60, 1817, F. 28-9.

24 Report from the Select Committee on the Newfoundland Trade, 19 June 1817, Testimony of George Garland, CO 194, B-687, v. 60, 1817, F. 292-9; Testimony of J.H. Attwood, F. 300-1; Testimony of George Kemp Jr., F. 303-4.

25 Petition of the Inhabitants of St. John's, 1821, CO 194, B-688, v. 64, F. 49.

myth — that Newfoundland had a tremendous resource potential awaiting only their benevolent guidance under the institutions of colonial self-government.[26]

Not surprisingly, Newfoundland's new governor, Sir Charles Hamilton, objected to grandiose suggestions that commercial agricultural schemes were the salvation of Newfoundland, since he had constantly before him the necessity of relieving people who had been cultivating the soil to little avail for decades. Hamilton did not see the utility of putting faith in agriculture if Newfoundland's soil and climate could not support regular crops of potatoes. Agricultural schemes would draw labour from the fishery (the only means of paying for imported goods); they would also encourage further colonization and result in more mouths to feed.[27] Carson and Morris, however, argued that if people could survive through a combination of farming and fishing, great prosperity might be had by bringing Newfoundland's millions of unused acres into production. The labouring classes of Newfoundland could find their provisions locally, escaping the yoke of expensive imports.[28] Carson in particular felt that Newfoundland's future lay rather in combining fish production with "the cultivation of the lands in this country, and thereby creating and nourishing a numerous peasantry, than in purchasing the produce of agriculture at an enormous expense from our enemies".[29]

The reference to creating a peasantry was revealing because, while Carson wanted the fishery and agriculture to complement each other, he had no desire to see fishing families have rights of their own to property. Instead, Carson envisioned for Newfoundland a gentry of people like himself. Indeed, his own discontent with the Newfoundland governors about agriculture arose from Governor Keats denying him rent-free tenure to a large tract of land in the St. John's area in 1813.[30] In 1823 Hamilton refused a similar petition from William and Henry Thomas of St. John's for land to establish a commercial farm employing wage labour. Like other governors, this was not because he opposed the creation of a local gentry, but because he could not see how the island's unfavourable agricultural conditions could support such a class. It was a relative matter — in Newfoundland, soil and climate were barely able to support families at the best of times. In his view there

26 Keith Matthews, "The Class of '32: St. John's Reformers on the Eve of Representative Government", *Acadiensis*, VI, 2 (Spring 1977), pp. 80-94. For a criticism of Matthews which suggests that the reformers' goals were rooted in "long-established local conditions and practices" in Newfoundland see Patrick O'Flaherty, "The Seeds of Reform: Newfoundland, 1800-1818", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 23 (Fall 1988), pp. 39-59.

27 Governor Hamilton to Earl Bathurst, 4 December 1821, CO 194, B-688, v. 64, 1821, F. 121-3; Petition of the Inhabitants of St. John's to Hamilton, 24 October 1821, F. 129-30; Petition of the Inhabitants of St. John's to Hamilton, 6 May 1822, v. 65, F. 26; Hamilton to Bathurst, 6 May 1822, F. 22-5; "Report of the State of Newfoundland for the information of the ... Earl Bathurst", 1822, F. 213-21.

28 "Report of the State of Newfoundland for the information of the ... Earl Bathurst", 1822, CO 194, B-688, v. 65, F. 213-21.

29 William Carson, *Reasons for Colonizing the island of Newfoundland* (Greenock, 1813), pp. 13-5.

30 William Carson, *Distress in Newfoundland* (St. John's, 1817), pp. 358-60. More detailed, if very sympathetic, treatments of Carson's and Morris' careers can be found in Patrick O'Flaherty, "William Carson", and John J. Mannion, "Patrick Morris", *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. VII* (Toronto, 1988), pp. 151-6, 626-34.

was simply not enough hope of surpluses in agriculture to allow a gentry to thrive on the backs of a potential Newfoundland tenantry already established in the coastal fisheries, let alone on landed estates in the island's interior.[31]

Statistics gathered by the governors about the Newfoundland fisheries and population suggest that the northeast coast's growing fishing population explored subsistence-oriented agriculture without government opposition or the aid of constitutional reform from 1775 to 1833.[32] The total number of households listed in the governors' returns for each of the four regions of the northeast coast — Conception Bay, Trinity Bay, Bonavista Bay and Fogo-Twillingate — gradually increased from 686 in 1776 to 3,225 in 1833. Large gaps in the data do not allow any description of trends in the amount of land improved by households on the northeast coast. In keeping with descriptions of Conception Bay as having the best agricultural land in the region, its households averaged from a 1785 high of 8.3 acres per household to a low 1.3 per household in 1830. These averages are much higher than Trinity Bay's highest average of one acre per household in 1788 and its low of 0.1 acre per household in both 1790 and 1791. Bonavista enjoyed a larger high of 2.3 acres per household in 1785, generally having more acres per household than Trinity Bay, but still much fewer than Conception Bay throughout the period. Fogo-Twillingate, for the most part a series of barren islands, had only 0.2 to 0.4 improved acres per household, but often had so little that the governors' census returns listed the land as "some potato gardens".

Although agricultural development proceeded as best it could with government encouragement in parts of Newfoundland such as the northeast coast, the St. John's reformers kept up their pressure for constitutional change in Newfoundland by suggesting that the existing government was inhibiting farming as part of its continued opposition to their aspirations for reform. Carson and Morris began to emphasize more the necessity of having local representative government direct agricultural development as a support to the fishery to gain more Colonial Office support for their goals.[33] Such pressure increasingly appealed to British officials, who were growing weary with the constant provisions crisis in the fishery. The British government now fully believed that agriculture could solve Newfoundland's problems of too many fishermen catching too much fish for a glutted market — which was, moreover, shrinking as the dietary observances of Catholic Europe began to relax. Lower prices for fish only forced Newfoundland fishermen to try and catch more to make up for the shortfalls in their income. Unwilling to yield ground in fish markets to the French or Americans, but also reluctant to give any direct

31 Hamilton to Bathurst, 28 November 1823, CO 194, B-690, v. 66.

32 The unreliability of the CO 194 statistics upon which the following ratios of improved acres to households are calculated is discussed in W. Gordon Handcock's "English Migration to Newfoundland", in John J. Mannion, ed., *The Peopling of Newfoundland: Essays in Historical Geography* (St. John's, 1971), pp. 19-20. In keeping with Handcock's caution, these statistics are used here as only a crude measure of the progress of agriculture on the northeast coast. The tables from which the ratios are taken, as well as full citations of the governors' annual returns used, can be found in Cadigan, "Economic and Social Relations of Production", pp. 84-8.

33 Petition of the Inhabitants of St. John's to the House of Commons, 1824, CO 194, B-691, v. 68, F. 467-8.

support to the fishery through bounties as those countries had done, the British government insisted it was essential that Newfoundland production not drop. Newfoundlanders, the Colonial Office argued, must help themselves by making saltfish cheaper to produce through subsidizing labour costs with cheap American provisions and local agricultural production. This would also serve to lessen the burden of relief on government. In the end, the Colonial Office recommended that all restrictions be lifted from agriculture so that fishing families might be more fully employed in year-round activities.[34]

The reformers' demands fell on increasingly more sympathetic ears at the Colonial Office. Pressure for reform of the British Empire's structure by colonial reformers such as Edward Wakefield, Joseph Hume, Charles Buller and Sir William Molesworth led the Colonial Office to place more emphasis on an "informal" structure for the Empire. These colonial reformers suggested that the lack of self-government in the colonies exposed British subjects to the despotic and capricious rule of colonial governors, and also incurred unnecessary expenses for the British government.[35] In response to increasing complaints from Newfoundland reformers about the arbitrariness of judicial and government authority in Newfoundland, the Colonial Office in 1824 oversaw the passage of the Newfoundland Judiciary and Fisheries acts. Together, these acts established a judiciary independent of the governors' authority, removed any remaining restraints on the real property rights of Newfoundlanders both in agriculture and the fishery, and empowered the governors to lease, sell and dispose of any land already not so used. The Colonial Office limited the duration of these acts to five years, but extended them to 1832 until it could decide what further steps to take in amending the Newfoundland constitution.[36]

In 1825 the Colonial Office sent out Newfoundland's first civilian governor, Thomas Cochrane, to implement the new policy. Cochrane began to take an active role in encouraging agricultural pursuits by Newfoundland fishermen and, during

34 "Inquiry into the present state of the trade and fisheries of Newfoundland", nd, [1824?], CO 194, B-691, v. 68, F. 78-80.

35 There still exists no study of the manner in which Newfoundland attained representative government. Gertrude E. Gunn's *The Political History of Newfoundland 1832-1864* (Toronto, 1966) begins with representative government established without much analysis of its foundation. Inferences about British Colonial Office policy here are drawn from a number of sources: Helen Taft Manning, *British Colonial Government After the American Revolution 1782-1820* (New Haven, 1933), pp. 474-542, Klaus E. Knorr, *British Colonial Theories 1570-1850* (Toronto, 1944), pp. 251-371, A.G.L. Shaw's introduction to his edited collection *Great Britain and the Colonies 1815-1865* (London, 1970), p. 7, Peter Burroughs, ed., *The Colonial Reformers and Canada: 1830-1849* (Toronto, 1969), pp. xxiii-xxiv, 24-5, 73-97, Peter Burroughs, *British Attitudes Towards Canada 1822-1849* (Scarborough, 1971), pp. 20-35, 120-49, and C.A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World 1780-1830* (London, 1989), pp. 193-247. Two works are helpful in understanding Colonial Office rule over the colonies: Paul Knaplund, *James Stephen and The British Colonial System 1813-1847* (Madison, 1953), and John W. Cell, *British Colonial Administration in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: The Policy-Making Process* (New Haven, 1970).

36 McEwen, "Law of Real Property", pp. 106-8, Newfoundland Law Reform Commission, *Legislative History of the Judicature Act 1791-1988* (St. John's, 1989), pp. 1-18.

the next five years, tried to lessen the economic problems of the colony by undertaking road works and encouraging people to raise crops and livestock for the local market. Despite Cochrane's personal opposition to a representative assembly for the island, his improvements, along with continual pressure by reformers and the British government's desire to let a Newfoundland government deal with the burdensome problem of the fishery, ultimately encouraged the British government to grant representative government to the colony in 1832.[37]

Cochrane's support for agriculture stemmed from his belief that no citizen should be receiving free government relief. Like most previous governors, Cochrane had to deal with the problem of winter supply, especially at Bonavista, where conditions were very bad. Continuing depression in the fish trade caused planters to curtail their employment of servants, and the combination of low fish prices, lack of credit and unemployment forced people to consume their entire garden produce before the end of fall in 1825.[38] George Coster, a clergyman at Bonavista, asked the government for a supply of seed potatoes so that the area's residents might have something to plant in spring. Cochrane agreed only on condition that recipients pay for the seed potatoes in spring with fish or potatoes. Coster cautioned that people would starve unless the government sent relief provisions, which he felt might be paid for by cutting wood. Between them Coster and Cochrane arranged a means by which families received small amounts of coarse bread, flour, potatoes, olive oil, peas and molasses through two local merchants. Cochrane would not authorize the provision of meat for relief, stating that Bonavista residents would have to look to the sea for this part of their diet. Relief recipients believed that they were receiving these goods on credit, and would have to repay that credit in spring with potatoes, timber and fish.[39]

Cochrane's policy of relief, road-building and continuing to allow small leases at nominal rents did not satisfy Newfoundland's reformers. Correspondents to the *Public Ledger*, a newspaper which began publishing in St. John's in 1820, demanded that the British government remove any rent stipulations on land enclosure. "X" wrote in 1829 that farming was an essential support to Newfoundland's fishing families, and should not be impeded by any government regulation. "X" had no illusions as to Newfoundland's agricultural capacity: "no practical man here, conversant with agricultural pursuits, will deny that one half the land occupied here, if offered to a farmer in England gratis, for clearing,

37 J.D. Rogers, *A Historical Geography of the British Colonies, Vol. V-Part IV: Newfoundland* (1911) (Oxford, 1931), pp. 171-84, A.H. McLintock, *The Establishment of Constitutional Government in Newfoundland, 1783-1832: A Study of Retarded Colonisation* (London, 1941), pp. 145-92, Charles Pedley, *The History of Newfoundland* (London, 1863), pp. 342-88, and D.W. Prowse, *History of Newfoundland*, pp. 421-34.

38 Archdeacon George Coster to Chief Justice Tucker, 23 September 1825, CO 194, B-692, v. 70, 1825, F. 182-5.

39 E.B. Brenton to Archdeacon Coster, 11 October 1825, CO 194, B-692, v. 70, 1825, F. 186; "Extract of a letter from the venerable Archdeacon Coster to E.B. Brenton", 15 October 1825, F. 188-91; George Coster to E.B. Brenton, 18 October 1825, F. 192-6.

fencing, and cultivation, would be rejected; and much better land has been thrown altogether out of cultivation there within the last seven years".[40]

By 1832, Governor Cochrane's continual reliance on relief to buttress the weakness of local subsistence agriculture in Newfoundland meant that he no longer believed that the northeast coast had the soil or climate to promote a successful combination of fishing and cultivation. Although disillusioned about the colony's agriculture, Cochrane attempted to use road work as able-bodied relief to find better agricultural resources.[41] This attempt did not, however, stop the reform movement from slowly gaining a momentum which would persuade succeeding government officials to accept the notion that Newfoundland had agricultural resources which a cabal of non-resident merchants and officials had purposely left underdeveloped. Conception Bay merchants began to support this view. In 1831 Thomas Ridley of Harbour Grace and Robert Pack of Carbonear organized local support for the St. John's reformers' demands for representative government. Pack made the reason for his support clear by publicly thanking Carson "for his persevering exertions in the cause of our country, and for advocating the usefulness of agriculture as an auxiliary to the fisheries during a period of twenty years".[42]

Believing in the reformers' promise that a legislature providing the funds for the colony's internal improvements would be advantageous, the British government saw a way to absolve itself of responsibility for Newfoundland's revenues.[43] Reformers' attacks on the supposedly arbitrary and financially unaccountable government in Newfoundland received more and more support from British parliamentary reformers anxious to allow colonies enough self-government to tax themselves.[44] Although representative government arrived in Newfoundland in 1832, Cochrane had to continue to spend much time pleading with the British government to finance relief of fishing families. The winter of 1831-2 had been unusually severe and long, forcing the government to again issue more seed potatoes to avert famine. In Conception Bay, crowds had begun to loot merchant stores for bread and other foodstuffs.[45] Throughout 1833 and early 1834 Cochrane

40 *Public Ledger* (St. John's), 28 July 1829.

41 Cochrane to Bathurst, 30 January 1826, CO 194, B-693, v. 72, 1826, F. 87.

42 *Public Ledger*, 14, 21 March 1831.

43 Prowse, *History of Newfoundland*, p. 429.

44 Leslie Harris, "The First Nine Years of Representative Government", M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1959, pp. 7-15, Keith Matthews, *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland*, (St. John's, 1988), pp. 142-8, and J.M. Ward, *Colonial Self-Government: The British Experience 1759-1856* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 126-8. Phillip A. Buckner's *The Transition to Responsible Government: British Policy in British North America, 1815-1850* (Westport, Conn., 1985) is a recent addition to the historiography on British policy towards the colonies in this period.

45 Tucker to Goderich, 19 June 1832, CO 194, B-534, v. 83, 1832, F. 96-104; Tucker to Goderich, 2 August 1832, F. 124-7; memorial of Joseph Mullowney to President Tucker, F. 156-8; Vice Admiral E.G. Colpoys to George Elliot, 21 June 1832, B-535, v. 84, 1832, F. 10; Benjamin Lester to Viscount Goderich, 24 April 1832, F. 220-2; Memorial of the Merchants of Poole to Goderich, 30 January 1832, F. 325-6; Governor Cochrane's first address to the first session of the House of Assembly, 1832, v. 85, 1833, F. 9-25.

repeatedly asked the British government to grant more funds for relief. The governor constantly pointed out that Newfoundland's government income rested almost solely on customs revenue, which had fallen with the fishery's decline. Reformers' demands that no rents be taken in exchange for land alienation meant that the government would lose its only other possible local source of earnings.[46]

In response, Cochrane received many expressions of displeasure from Colonial Office officials who had believed the reformers' promises about the ability of a Newfoundland legislature to minimize relief through the encouragement of agriculture. Colonial Secretary E.G. Stanley informed Cochrane that reform demands for a legislature had been granted because reformers had promised that locally controlled economic development would lessen, not increase, expenditures on relief, as well as pleas for more financial aid.[47]

Plagued by more store-breaking and food riots through 1832 and 1833, this time in Bonavista Bay, but reminiscent of those in Conception Bay in 1816-7,[48] Cochrane was recalled by the Colonial Office in 1834 in part because of his intensifying debate with the reformers (by then popularly known as Liberals), and possibly because he could not lead the colony to independence from British financial support, given its reliance on relief. Yet the Legislative Council, dominated by conservatives, again petitioned the Crown for money to supplement the revenue. What was worse, the Council held out no hope of future improvement, telling the Colonial Office that agricultural diversification would never be successful, and demanding a bounty on Newfoundland fish.[49]

The message sent by Cochrane's summons to England was clear: the Newfoundland government could no longer look to the Colonial Office to foot the bill for its relief problems. With reformers in the new legislature, Cochrane's successors, particularly Governors Sir John Harvey and John Gaspard LeMarchant, continued to encourage opening access to waste lands through road-building. As more land became available at low rent from the colonial government, merchants such as Robert Pack began to encourage fishing families to find better ways to raise potatoes, hay, oats and barley. The enthusiasm of many for the encouragement of agriculture eventually would lead a number of St. John's residents to form the Newfoundland Agricultural Society in 1842. This society distributed seed potatoes, grain and grass seed, and agricultural information. It also encouraged the

46 Cochrane to Goderich, 18 February 1833, CO 194, B-535, v. 85, 1833, F. 76-87; Cochrane's report accompanying the Blue Books, 1832, F. 207-9; Cochrane to Hay, 5 November 1833, F. 336-7; Address of the Legislative Council of Newfoundland to the King in Council, 3 April 1834, B-536, v. 87, 1834, F. 84; Cochrane to E.G. Stanley, 7 July 1834, B-537, v. 88, 1834, F. 11-2; Cochrane's report accompanying the Blue Books, 1833, F. 15-7.

47 E.G. Stanley to Cochrane, 28 May 1834, Cochrane Papers, Reel 971.8C7, Reel 7, MSS 2734, # 13-4, PANL.

48 Petition of Edmund Joseph Mullowney to R.A. Tucker, 23 July 1832, Box 1832, vol. May-August, F. 338-9; H.J. Fitzgerald to Governor Cochrane, 2 May 1833, Box 1833, vol. II, F. 112-21, GN2\2, Incoming Correspondence of the Colonial Secretary's Office [Col. Sec. In. Corr.], PANL.

49 *Public Ledger*, 15 April 1834.

raising of purebred Ayreshire cattle and organized agricultural exhibitions.[50] Optimism about the growth potential of agriculture was the order of the day, as the Newfoundland House of Assembly adopted Cochrane's policy of using road work as a public relief measure and a means to give fishing families access to land that could be cultivated around their communities.[51]

The government of Newfoundland had begun to accept the reformers' claims about the colony's agricultural potential because administrators were not willing to admit that, given the merchants' unwillingness to extend credit for provisions, fishing families could well starve if they relied on their cultivation efforts alone. The fruits of such "encouragement" to agriculture which grew from the northeast coast's poor soil and harsh climate were harvested by fishing families in the winter of 1838-9, when reports of famine in Conception Bay began to surface in the local press.[52] From Trinity Bay, men left their families to walk across the barrens to Harbour Grace to report that their families were starving as winter dragged on.[53] A petition from 142 residents of the north shore of Trinity Bay in 1839 for a grant of seed potatoes to relieve threatened starvation forced the House of Assembly to grant relief. Further information from Mr. Jacob, a justice of the peace at Port de Grave, suggested to the House that Conception Bay fishing families required similar aid.[54] The assembly resolved itself into a "committee on seed potatoes" so that it might press the governor to purchase 325 pounds of seed potatoes to distribute throughout Trinity and Conception Bays, as well as Ferryland on the southern shore. Following the Cochrane-Coster plan, the assembly instructed the governor to secure repayment in the next fall from recipients of seed relief.[55]

Despite reports of a good cod harvest in the summer of 1839, the winter of 1839-40 proved to be another season of food shortages. Neither the fishery nor local cultivation sustained people well through the winter. The *Carbonear Sentinel* began to support the assembly's road bills as a means by which it hoped people in remote outports might be able to come to large centres like Carbonear to exchange their produce for cheaper provisions than they might get in their own communities.[56] Over the next ten years the use of road work as relief for crop and provisions shortages would become a constant part of life on the northeast coast. Roads, many hoped, would open up some new, undiscovered agricultural Eldorado in the lands which lay beyond the shores of the coast's bays. Faced with the merchants' restriction of credit, a series of crop failures and constant demands for relief, the Newfoundland government turned to agriculture as the panacea for the colony's troubles. In 1843 the House of Assembly received more petitions for relief from

50 Crabb, "Agriculture in Newfoundland", pp. 70-1, and Patrick Morris, *A Short Review of the History, Government, Constitution, Fishery and Agriculture, of Newfoundland* (St. John's, 1848), pp. 72-82.

51 *Carbonear Sentinel*, 3 August 1837.

52 *Carbonear Sentinel*, 26 February 1839.

53 *Carbonear Sentinel*, 12 March 1839.

54 *Journal of the House of Assembly* [*JHA*], 2, IV, 1839, p. 6.

55 *JHA*, 2, IV, 1839, p. 15.

56 *Carbonear Sentinel*, 2 July 1839, 17 March 1840.

Fogo, Tilting Harbour, Moreton's Harbour, Trinity and Bonavista.[57] The assembly formed a select committee to find some solution to the problem of agricultural relief. At the same time, Governor Harvey decided that the government should give every encouragement to the Newfoundland Agriculture Society in its attempts to encourage the cultivation of grains, turnips and better potatoes.[58]

From 1844 on, a combination of unusually severe winters and potato blight undercut popular optimism about the potential of agriculture. By the mid-19th century, subsistence standards ebbed and flowed almost as much with the success or failure of the potato as they did with the fishery. Potatoes were the fishing families' main subsistence crop; they were also the main source of feed for the few pigs and other livestock families might keep.[59] Newspapers continued to advise people to take more care in their cultivation of the root, and to eat as little as possible. The government gave out small amounts of relief, but scarcely enough to meet the needs of the northeast coast's population.[60] By 1847, acknowledging that government relief did not leave people with enough provisions to avoid eating their seed potatoes, the *Weekly Herald* was advising fishermen to feed their families on fish offal. Manure had become food:

> Many a poor family during the course of the past spring was obliged to put up with — nay considered themselves fortunate in procuring — a morsel of stale seal or a rusting herring, who, had they been more provident over what is regarded by too many in this country as the refuse of the voyage; viz:- the nutritious head of the cod fish, the tongues and other internals, would in all probability have felt but little of the distress which they were forced to experience.[61]

Continued potato blight led one "Investigator" to suggest that fishing families try planting grains instead of potatoes to provide for their own subsistence, but cautioned them against thinking that agriculture could solve their problems:

> I am not one who dreams about making this an agricultural country. With an immense and unrivalled corn growing continent within a few days sail of us, it would be the height of folly to attempt any separate division of labour of that sort as to lead the people to expect that they would, or could, derive any advantage from a competition with their

57 *JHA*, 3, I, 1843, pp. 51-2,

58 *JHA*, 3, I, 1843, pp. 115, 368-70.

59 *Carbonear Sentinel*, 2 July 1839, *Weekly Herald* [Harbour Grace], 29 January, 14 May, 11 June, 26 November 1845.

60 *Weekly Herald*, 8 April, 5 August, 1846; 27 January, 17 February, 3 March, 5, 19 May, 2 June 1847; C. Cozens to James Crowdy, 18 January 1847, F. 29-31; John Noad, president of the Newfoundland Agricultural Society, to James Crowdy, 25 March 1847, F. 163-5, GN2\2, Col. Sec. In. Corr., PANL.

61 *Weekly Herald*, 16 June 1847.

> more favoured neighbours. As well might you attempt to establish a rival cod-fishery among the Alleghaney [sic] mountains.[62]

Through 1848, as popular demands for relief increased, the government sent out barrels of oats to see if they might prove an adequate substitute for the potato; they were not.[63]

Governor LeMarchant, only in the first year of his duties, learned that merchants in the Newfoundland trade would not risk their credit on winter supplies for fishing families, nor were they likely to issue provisions as charitable relief.[64] Unable to see how the government could commit itself to the long-term relief of fish producers, LeMarchant also turned to the icon of agriculture. With some government support through seed potatoes and road work relief, and the work of the Newfoundland Agricultural Society, Newfoundland families could be taught to look to their own resources to provide for their own subsistence. Government relief and encouragement to cultivation would serve as a means by which even more sweat of effort could be squeezed from fishing families to keep the fish merchants in business.[65]

LeMarchant felt that his duty was clear: the government in Newfoundland would have to continue the official policy of encouraging land cultivation which had began with Governor Keats. By 1848, LeMarchant decided that he would encourage the agricultural settlement of Newfoundland's wasteland interior as an auxiliary to the fishery. The governor suggested that Newfoundlanders ought to experiment with better grains, fruits and livestock breeds in order to find the best means of pursuing agriculture. In short, LeMarchant thought that plans put forward by the Newfoundland Agricultural Society were the key to Newfoundland's economic diversification.[66]

This renewed agricultural orientation by LeMarchant, as Harvey's before him, appears to have defied previous official experience with the northeast coast's limited soil and climate. The British imperial milieu may explain the governors' policies. A commitment to "agrarian patriotism" dominated imperial officialdom of the period; a confidence that if colonies could only acquire the agrarian class structure of England through local agricultural improvement they could be more easily integrated into the structure of empire.[67] A spirit of improvement, marked by the commitment of gentry-backed agricultural societies to spreading English agricultural reform to allegedly ignorant and backward colonial farmers, was common in British North America during the first half of the 19th century. Under the patronage of colonial administrators such as New Brunswick's Sir Howard

62 *Weekly Herald*, 19 January 1848.

63 *Weekly Herald*, 19 April, 17 May 1848.

64 Petition of the Merchants of Poole connected with the Newfoundland Trade, to Earl Grey, 29 November 1847, CO 194, B-561, v. 128, 1847, F. 221-7.

65 Governor LeMarchant to Earl Grey, 1 May 1848, CO 194, B-561, v. 129, 1848, F. 108-13.

66 LeMarchant to Earl Grey, 4 May 1848, CO 194, B-561, v. 129, 1848, F. 128-49.

67 Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, pp. 155-60.

Douglas,[68] and supported by governments which thought a better agriculture could revive flagging colonial economies, the societies had little actual impact on the manner in which rural households engaged in production in British North America.[69] Imperial sentiment, not a solid assessment of local resources, often lay behind agricultural schemes in the colonies.

While Harvey had come to Newfoundland as a governor experienced in official beliefs about colonial improvement as a result of his tenures in Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick, Governor LeMarchant arrived fresh out of the military, and with no colonial administrative experience.[70] LeMarchant himself made it clear that his commitment to Newfoundland's agricultural improvement stemmed from his belief that the impoverished residents of Newfoundland must look to their own resources, not those of the state, when the fishery could not provide their sustenance. The Newfoundland government had previously issued limited relief in the form of seed potatoes to northeast-coast communities as a supplement to private charity and merchant credit in the belief that it was assistance only to the most destitute, and would quickly re-establish fishing families' own cultivation capabilities.[71] But by the time LeMarchant became governor in 1847, the Newfoundland government could not keep up with the "frightful" demands for relief by the island's residents.[72] The government's revenues could no longer support increasingly popular demands for relief, despite the years of encouragement to local agriculture. Under LeMarchant's stewardship, the Newfoundland government began to restrict relief expenditures on roads and corn meal. LeMarchant declared that Newfoundland fishing families could no longer put their faith in government relief, but rather must look "to their own exertions" alone in the "increased cultivation of the Land" for sustenance.[73] After another summer of poor fishing and potato crops, the government declared that it simply could not provide any greater level of relief

68 D. Murray Young, "Sir Howard Douglas", *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, IX* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 218-22.

69 Graeme Wynn, "Exciting a Spirit of Emulation Among the 'Plodholes': Agricultural Reform in Pre-Confederation Nova Scotia", *Acadiensis*, XX, 1 (Autumn 1990), pp. 5-51.

70 Phillip Buckner, "Sir John Harvey", *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, VIII* (Toronto, 1985), pp. 374-84, and P.B. Waite, "Sir John Gaspard Le Marchant", *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, X* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 438-9.

71 Provincial Secretary James Crowdy to James Power, JP, Rev. H.G. Fitzgerald, J. Cummins and W. Fawkner, 20 April 1842, vol. 44, 1842-3, F. 78; Crowdy to Richard Barnes, 11 November 1842, F. 212; Crowdy's "Circular" to the magistrates, May 1845, vol. 45, 1843-6, F. 289; Crowdy to Benjamin Sweetland, 4 July 1845, F. 323; Crowdy to Rev. B. Smith, T. Waldron, and J. Smith of King's Cove, and David Candow, Thomas Mullowney and John Sheers of Tickle Cove, 29 October 1846, vol. 46, 1846-7, F. 85, GN2\1\A, Colonial Secretary's Outgoing Correspondence [Col. Sec. Out. Corr.], PANL.

72 Crowdy to Thomas Ridley and John Munn, 16 March 1847, vol. 46, 1846-7, F. 172, GN2\1\A, Col. Sec. Out. Corr., PANL.

73 Crowdy's "Circular" to the magistrates of Newfoundland, 14 May 1847, vol. 46, 1846-7, F. 242-4; see also Crowdy to Charles Cozens, JP, and the Revs. George Canter, D. Mackin and J.S. Addy of Brigus, 25 March 1847, F. 177; Crowdy to William Sweetland, JP, Rev. J.M. Wood. Mr. Scalan and Jabez Ingham, 3 April 1847, F. 188, GN2\1\A, Col. Sec. Out. Corr., PANL.

"as it would be quite impossible for the most flourishing Revenue to sustain the majority of the population in which it is collected".[74]

As an alternative to relief LeMarchant determined that he would spend money on model farms which would excite the people of the northeast coast to a spirit of agricultural improvement in the cultivation of grain and livestock.[75] When the Harbour Grace justice of the peace Robert Pinsent ignored the government's order to minimize relief to fishing families, LeMarchant, warning Pinsent that the Newfoundland government faced "ruin" by such expenditure, reiterated that the Newfoundland government could no longer afford relief, and proclaimed that the colony must look forward to a day when it could supply all of the grain foodstuffs required by its population. Declaring that "the idea formerly entertained of the utter barrenness of the soil is erroneous", LeMarchant charted a course of agricultural improvement for Newfoundland similar to that which developed in the neighbouring British colonies.[76]

Outport people, struggling to survive the potato failures, could find little comfort in the Newfoundland Agricultural Society of St. John's when it spoke of establishing model farms in the outports to show inhabitants how good agriculture might be practised. Observers in the outports felt that such schemes were a waste of time: "for how is it possible that an indigent fisherman, without food, without clothing, without implements of husbandry, and under every other conceivable disadvantage, can follow the plans or imitate the example of those who have every convenience at their fingers' end, and who would have the best piece of land to be found in the whole locality at their disposal?"[77] Another correspondent scoffed at the society's plans to exhibit fattened purebred cattle. Reflecting on the cattle scheme a year later, this writer suggested that, for all the good it could do in an island where not enough crops could be raised locally to feed people, the Newfoundland government might as well send "for 15 of the biggest Devonshire men to be found, high or low; every one of them with as many chins on him as there are spots on the nine of spades; and so distribute them about among the poorest parts of Newfoundland — as models for the inhabitants. Every man that *wont* [sic] grow in 6 months as fat as the Devonshire model, must get no more Government *male*!"[78]

The *Weekly Herald* agreed with these sorts of criticisms, suggesting that fishing families would be best served by packing away fish offal during the season to help provide their winter diet. The paper advised people not to look to merchants for provisions on credit, when they threw away good food through the trunk-hole of a

74 Crowdy to Rev. James England, 13 October 1857, vol. 46, 1846-7, F. 367-8, GN2\1\A, Col. Sec. Out. Corr., PANL.

75 Crowdy to Benjamin Sweetland, JP, and the magistrates of Bonavista, 21 October 1847, vol. 46, 1846-7, F. 378-9, GN2\1\A, Col. Sec. Out. Corr., PANL.

76 Crowdy to the Harbour Grace Commissioners of the Poor, 18 December 1847, vol. 46, 1846-7, F. 437-40; for LeMarchant's exchange with Pinsent see Crowdy to Pinsent, 26 October, 9 November, 17 December 1847, F. 382-3, 397-8, 434-5, GN2\1\A, Col. Sec. Out. Corr., PANL.

77 *Weekly Herald*, 24 May 1848.

78 *Weekly Herald*, 9 May 1849.

splitting table.[79] Again and again, from 1849 through the end of 1854, the potato crop or the various fisheries failed. Time and again, the *Weekly Herald* provided the same suggestions as to how people should cope: use economy, eat fish offal, work hard, and make do on sparse government relief.[80]

While many fisherfolk did survive by working hard and eating fish offal, Governor LeMarchant continued to advocate agricultural development even while famine persisted. Ignoring the reality that people in the outports could hardly feed themselves as the potato crops failed, LeMarchant recommended that they look forward to the day when a road might allow them to visit the society's annual fall shows of "stall fed oxen, fat sheep and Hogs", and perhaps compete for a prize at the yearly exhibitions.[81] Rather than accept the responsibility for relieving the victims of merchant capital exploitation in the fish trade, LeMarchant chose the fantasy of agricultural potential in Newfoundland: if the potato failed, bring in wheat; if that failed, try barley or oats; and if they in turn did not take to the climate or soil, then some type of better-bred livestock was the answer. There was always a disappointment for the government in its agricultural policy, and always another panacea. The government could not accept either what merchants or producers had long known about Newfoundland's agricultural resources — they were at best only a poor supplement to the fishery.

Census data collected by the government of Newfoundland after 1832 support the conclusion that agricultural improvement schemes had little impact on the expansion of agriculture on the northeast coast. Conception Bay still had the most improved acres, at 0.8 per household, but this had decreased from the high of 6.1 acres per household in 1832 during the years of Cochrane's sponsorship of land alienation and agriculture. Bonavista Bay followed with 0.3 per household, and Trinity Bay with 0.4 acres per household.[82] Nine years later, Fogo-Twillingate (omitted in the 1836 census) had the lowest ratio of improved acres to households, 0.6 acres per household, on the northeast coast. Conception Bay increased from 1836 to two acres per household in 1845, and Trinity Bay followed suit with 1.1 acres per household. Most dramatic was the increase registered by Bonavista Bay, a place where food shortages and potato famine led to a concerted government encouragement of agriculture which culminated in LeMarchant's failed demonstration farm in 1847:[83] 7.7 acres of improved land existed per household.[84] By 1857 this ratio of improved acres to households had dropped to 1.1. Conception Bay's improved acreage ratio increased to 2.3 acres per household as out-migration began

79 *Weekly Herald*, 28 June 1848.

80 *Weekly Herald*, 24 July, 25 September 1850; 4 June 1851; 27 October 1852; 13 July, 31 August, 7 September, 5 October 1853; 22 February 1854.

81 LeMarchant to Earl Grey, 14 April 1851, CO 194, B-661, v. 134, 1851, F. 51-9; LeMarchant to John J. Packington, 12 April 1852, B-662, v. 136, 1852, F. 157.

82 Government of Newfoundland, *Population Returns, 1836*, pp. 2-8.

83 Michael Carroll to James Crowley, 3 May 1848, GN2\2, Col. Sec. In. Corr., PANL. It is always possible that such an unusual fluctuation is the result of observation error.

84 Government of Newfoundland, *Census, 1845*, pp. 2-13.

to relieve demographic pressure on local resources,[85] Fogo-Twillingate's followed at 0.9, and Trinity Bay's stayed at its 1845 level.[86]

The only solution many fishing families could see in the face of the constant failure of agriculture was to leave Newfoundland altogether.[87] Tired of the constant struggle to make a living in the fishery, many of Conception Bay's most prosperous planters began to consider the attractiveness of taking up farms in Wisconsin. There Newfoundlanders could find land which required little fertilizer and grew much more than potatoes.[88] Such fishermen gave up on any hope of the fishery allowing them independence from merchants, or of reducing reliance on mercantile credit for subsistence by resorting to cultivation.[89] These emigrants were people who no longer believed that subsistence agriculture could provide an adequate substitute for the long restriction of merchant credit which had begun in 1817.

Fishermen who wished to do more than grub a living from the soil could see no improvement in their lot in Newfoundland. Many who could scrape together the money for passage fare left Newfoundland for the possible better prospects of owning a real farm in the United States.[90] Some of these emigrants, such as Edward Pynn of Conception Bay, wrote letters to the *Weekly Herald* advertising their success in establishing 200-acre farms, and raising wheat and livestock.[91] A Mr. Hayward of Carbonear wrote to state that Newfoundlanders settled together in Washington County, Wisconsin, establishing family farms on which they could raise most of their needs independent of any merchant, and sell surpluses for goods they could not produce at home.[92] Any fisherman who had experienced reasonable success, and had a little property, often found the prospect of emigration far more appealing than staying in Newfoundland and falling further in debt to merchants.

Others remained behind and survived. In Newfoundland the combination of subsistence agriculture, the fishery and meagre government relief allowed the extensive growth of a population which subsisted on household production. Fish merchants, unable to carry such a population on the credit they advanced to the fishery, took advantage of fishing families' apparent ability to scrape together a living on potatoes, small amounts of goods bought from merchants and, when necessary, the refuse of their own catches. Merchants obtained the fish they needed at lower costs without risking their own failure through the overextension of credit for winter supplies.[93]

85 Michael Staveley, "Population Dynamics in Newfoundland: The Regional Patterns", in Mannion, *Peopling of Newfoundland*, pp. 49-76.

86 Government of Newfoundland, *Census, 1857*, pp. 13-63.

87 *Weekly Herald*, 24 May 1848.

88 *Weekly Herald*, 24 January 1849.

89 *Weekly Herald*, 7 February 1849.

90 *Weekly Herald*, 4, 11 April 1849.

91 *Weekly Herald*, 5 September 1849.

92 *Weekly Herald*, 9 January 1850.

93 This is not to argue that northeast-coast fish merchants had previously used credit as a sort of charity to fishing families which could be withdrawn when convenient. Merchants did use price

The usefulness of the staple model in understanding whether or not merchants took an active role in contributing to underdevelopment lies not in the earlier emphasis on linkage analysis and the role of international markets in colonial development, but rather in a consideration of the influence of the resource base on the shaping of social relations of production in particular colonial settings. To appreciate the use of the staple approach, historians must move beyond unedifying debates about whether the staple model is an example of commodity fetishism or technological determinism — debates which ignore the internal class dynamic of regional social development.[94] By attributing the problems of Newfoundland's underdevelopment to the conservatism of merchant capital, scholars such as Gerald Sider have actually side-stepped the question of why Newfoundland's social relations should have differed so greatly from those in a colony like Upper Canada, which became a centre of industrial capitalist development and regional power within British North America.

Recent work on merchants in early North American colonial development suggests that merchant capital played a fairly ambiguous role, having no inherent hostility to economic and social diversification which might challenge the merchants' domination of the staple trade. Merchants, in some areas, promoted freer local market relations between wage labour and capital, while in other areas they remained "parasitic and static with no transforming effect on labour".[95] In colonies such as Upper Canada, which had the resources to support petty production in agriculture, farming households could produce a wide range of goods to meet their own subsistence requirements and minimize what they needed to take on credit from merchants. Surpluses of these goods allowed such households a measure of independence, as Douglas McCalla has shown.[96] Instead of being dependent on expensive imports, family farms could rely instead on initial independent domestic production, using marginal surpluses to provide earnings to meet consumption needs the farm itself could not provide. The cumulative effect of trade in such surpluses was the household's specialization in market production, curtailing subsistence production in favour of the purchase of consumer and capital goods, much of which could be produced from raw materials yielded from the very

manipulations through truck to profit from the fishery. Yet the use of credit was not without risk of overextension, particularly in the context of post-Napoleonic depression in the cod trade. The problem of overextension of credit is most succinctly explained in Ommer, *Outpost to Outport*, p. 39, and "The Truck System in the Gaspé, 1822-77", in Ommer, *Merchant Credit*, pp. 49-72. The risks borne by Newfoundland merchants are hinted at in Matthews, "West of England-Newfoundland Fishery", pp. 174-9, and Handcock, *Soe longe as there comes noe women*, p. 233.

94 Marxists such as David McNally feel that this either/or quality in the writings of staple adherents distorts the history of regional development by suggesting that economic growth in peripheries can best be understood in terms of technological capacity to produce local diversification through backward, forward and final demand linkages. See David McNally, "Staple Theory as Commodity Fetishism: Marx, Innis and Canadian Political Economy", *Studies in Political Economy*, No. 6 (Autumn 1981), pp. 38-9. McNally was particularly critical of M.H. Watkins' "A Staple Theory of Economic Growth", in W.H. Easterbrook and M.H. Watkins, eds., *Approaches to Canadian Economic History* (Toronto, 1967).

95 This is one of the general themes which emerges from the essays collected in Ommer, *Merchant Credit*, but see in particular Ommer's "Introduction", pp. 9-10.

96 Douglas McCalla, "Rural Credit and Rural Development in Upper Canada, 1790-1850", in Ommer, *Merchant Credit*, pp. 255-72.

same agricultural activities. In effect, such changes underwrote the creation of domestic market stimuli for capitalist development, differentiation between town and country, and the establishment of market relations between capital and labour as commodities.

Newfoundland's resources did not provide similar means for fish producers to escape from dependence on merchant capital through industrial capitalist development. While in Upper Canada petty producers could find in their own productive activity the means by which to escape the hegemony of merchant capital, petty producers in the cod fishery could not. People cannot live by cod alone, although it seemed at times that they might have to in Newfoundland — despite the strongest possible support for agriculture by merchants and the state. While many fishing families remained to struggle in the fishery, those with greater capital resources often left for the agricultural frontier of the North American midwest because of the lack of economic alternatives to restricted merchant credit in cod production.[97] Newspaper correspondents, such as Carbonear's "Delta" in 1849, knew that the island did not possess the agricultural resource endowment which in other parts of America proved to be the fertile soil in which industrial capitalist social relations germinated:

> America is an agricultural country, giving extensive employment to an endless variety of artizans in the manufacture of the raw material produced by different branches of cultivation, and so extensive as to afford an area amply sufficient for the investment of capital, and the development of industry and talent. There, no man need be idle who is inclined to labour, and all labour insures a reasonable remuneration. On the contrary, this Island can never become an agricultural settlement: here, no raw material is produced to call forth the genius, and reward the industry of the people, who are so pent up along the sea shore that the land already casts out its inhabitants. Besides, the employment generally is so connected with the sea that our native population know little or nothing of agriculture....[98]

97 Edward V. Chafe has explored in greater detail how Newfoundland's steadily worsening economy encouraged many people to emigrate to the United States during the mid-19th century. Chafe's study, primarily of skilled and semi-skilled St. John's tradespeople, found that many emigrants preferred the employment opportunities of Boston and the surrounding industrializing areas of New England. See Chafe, "A New Life on 'Uncle Sam's Farm': Newfoundlanders in Massachusetts, 1846-1859", M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1982, pp. 14-8, 59-61. Some evidence suggests that the petty producers of Conception Bay preferred the farming opportunities of the American midwest. Besides those planters who left for Wisconsin, Philip Henry Gosse, a merchants' agent in Carbonear, related that, in the 1830s, members of his social circle (well-off planters and small merchants) avidly read the work of Catharine Parr Traill on settlement in Upper Canada. Some of these Carbonear residents, including Gosse himself, abandoned what they felt to be Conception Bay's forbidding environment for agricultural settlement on Lake Huron in Upper Canada. See Edmund Gosse, *The Life of Philip Henry Gosse* (London, 1890), pp. 85-6. I would like to thank Jeff Webb for drawing this to my attention.

98 *Weekly Herald*, 11 April 1849.

In Newfoundland, then, it is not so much the case that merchant capital prevented producers from challenging its hegemony as it is that, unable to develop alternatives to mono-staple merchant capital enterprises, producers who possessed the means to do so simply left for a more hospitable environment.

Class struggle is not always a matter of exploiters and exploited duelling it out until one or the other is overcome. Emigration can also be an outcome of class struggle.[99] Thus the editorials of the *Weekly Herald* complained that the best of Newfoundland's "mechanics, fishermen and labourers" chose to leave the island behind for better prospects in the United States. They left for reasons having to do with the problematic interrelations of the fishery and cultivation in Newfoundland.[100] This meant that Newfoundland remained "in the hands of monopolists, who fix an arbitrary valuation on both exports and imports", but that no one could blame the colony's most successful producers for leaving.[101] "Alpha", a correspondent of the *Weekly Herald*, wrote that merchants could make money from the trade in fish and oil, provisions, and goods, but that merchants were, like most capitalists, in the business for their own profit not the welfare of the community. For the actual catchers of fish, Newfoundland provided little means of improving themselves: "we have increasing evidence that she was never designed for aught other than a summer residence for itinerant fishermen or a hunting ground for Red Indians".[102]

The development of the social relations of production on the northeast coast of Newfoundland in the 19th century must be understood in terms of the interaction of people and resources. Newfoundland's resources narrowed the channels in which class development might move. From 1784 to 1855 Newfoundland society and economy remained dominated by the cod fishery. More particularly, the fishing people of Newfoundland remained tied to fish merchants by the exploitative bonds of truck. The lasting quality of this relationship in part reflected merchants' unwillingness to risk much of their capital in provisioning production. They tried to extend as little credit as possible to fish producers, particularly in the case of supplying winter provisions. Merchants had to supply some capital equipment, including nets and hooks, if fishermen were to provide the staple commodities of their trade, but merchants could and did cut back on the amount of food they were willing to give fishing families. British authorities on the island cooperated with merchants by allowing families to cultivate what land they needed to provide for their winter subsistence.

99 Two widely differing perspectives on emigration as a form of class struggle are Giovanni Arrighi and Fortunata Piselli, "Capitalist Development in Hostile Environments; Feuds, Class Struggles and Migrations in a Peripheral Region of Southern Italy", *Review*, X, 4 (Spring 1987),pp.649-751, and Marcus Rediker, "Good Hands, Stout Hearts, and Fast Feet: The History and Culture of Working People in Early America", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 10 (Autumn 1982), pp. 123-44.

100 *Weekly Herald*, 7 September 1853.

101 *Weekly Herald*, 12 October 1853.

102 *Weekly Herald*, 9 November 1853.

Merchants in the Newfoundland fishery, whether from the West Country or St. John's, accepted the agricultural activities of fishing families but knew such activity could not allow them freedom from reliance on merchant capital. Before 1832, the Newfoundland governors opposed only the grandiose agricultural schemes of the Newfoundland reformers. After 1832, the governors began to cooperate with the agriculture development schemes of the reform-dominated House of Assembly because they saw no other alternative to the continual provision of relief. From 1832 to 1855, despite the emphasis given to such projects, government saw little alleviation of its relief obligations. Even in the better-endowed region surrounding St. John's, where some commercial agriculture did develop, farming remained restricted by soil and climate. Farms remained small family affairs supplying garden vegetables and dairy products to St. John's through the intensive cultivation of land, without being able to approach meeting the needs of that town, let alone those of the rest of the colony.[103]

In Newfoundland, as in the other British North American colonies of the time, a combination of both market and non-market activities by families provided the staple commodities so important to British commerce. But unlike these other colonies, Newfoundland had only the fish trade, and the production of cod required very little processing. While the fishery did have some potential for linkage development, and hence could have created some opportunities for economic diversification, Newfoundland's resources were not rich enough to support planters' accumulation of capital in a challenge to fish merchants' economic hegemony. While not all fishing families sunk into pauperism, the constant fear of starvation endured by northeast-coast residents in the first half of the 19th century testifies to the region's limited agriculture, despite government encouragement. Merchants supported the state's encouragement of subsistence agriculture in Newfoundland because they knew it could not sustain diversification, specialization or a gentry. Consequently, the internal social relations of Newfoundland in this period were defined not by capitalist production but by domestic commodity production.

103 Robert A. MacKinnon, "The Growth of Commercial Agriculture Around St. John's, 1800-1935: A Study of Local Trade in Response to Urban Demand", M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1981, pp. 2-9, 79-89. MacKinnon's work is accessible in his "Farming the Rock: The Evolution of Commercial Agriculture around St. John's, Newfoundland, to 1945", *Acadiensis*, XX, 2 (Spring 1991), pp. 32-61.