

RESEARCH NOTES/NOTES DE RECHERCHE

William Knox and the 18th-Century Newfoundland Fishery

THIS RESEARCH NOTE EXAMINES THE CAREER, the ideology, and the views of Newfoundland of William Knox, imperial official and sometime investor in the fishery.¹ A significant figure in the historiography of the American Revolution, and of British colonial administration, he is noted among Newfoundland historians for having referred to the island, in his testimony to a House of Commons committee examining the Newfoundland fishery in 1793, as “a great English ship moored near the fishing banks during the season.”² The phrase was repeated by many 19th- and 20th-century Newfoundland historians, and became, in Jerry Bannister’s words, “a hackneyed quotation.”³ Historians used it to sum up 18th-century British policy toward Newfoundland, often doing so without due attention to context or the shifts in policy. For 19th-century historians there was also an element of nationalism in the decision to repeat it, the phrase being taken to represent a desire on the part of some British officials to use the island for the benefit of the English while caring nothing for its residents. In 1848, for example, Patrick Morris, the Irish-born Newfoundland political reformer, referred to the passage as “the most graphic description of the transitory Naval system of government.”⁴ His aim was the same as many of those who followed him: to condemn the Royal Navy as an instrument of injustice and thus to criticise British policy toward the residents of Newfoundland.⁵ The late 19th-century historian D.W. Prowse’s prominent use of the quotation in the preface to his *History of Newfoundland* brought it into common use among his successors. He identified Knox as former undersecretary in the American Department, thus implying that he had insight into the official mind while making it clear that Knox was a “hostile witness” who represented the last gasp of the anti-settlement view.⁶

Many 20th-century historians sought to establish their professionalism by criticizing Prowse as amateur and nationalistic, but quietly used his book as a guide

1 Thanks to Jerry Bannister, Peter Pope, and the anonymous peer reviewers for their comments upon an earlier draft of this piece.

2 Great Britain, *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Sheila Lambert (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1975-1976), 90:173-93.

3 Jerry Bannister, “Convict Transportation and the Colonial State in Newfoundland, 1789,” *Acadiensis* XXXVII, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 116.

4 Patrick Morris, *A Short Review of the History, Government, Constitution, Fishery and Agriculture of Newfoundland: In a Series of Letters Addressed to the Right Honourable Earl Grey, Her Majesty’s Principal Secretary of State for the Colonies* (St John’s: J. Woods, 1847), 56.

5 Hatton and Harvey attribute the phrase to “an undersecretary.” See Joseph Hatton and Moses Harvey, *Newfoundland: The Oldest British Colony* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1883), 42-3.

6 D.W. Prowse, *A History of Newfoundland from the English, Colonial and Foreign Records* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1895), xix. The phrase “hostile witness” appears in D.W. Prowse, ed., *A Guide Book for Newfoundland and Labrador: 1905* (London: Bradbury, Agnew and Co., 1905), 24.

to sources (even when not citing him). In 20th-century historiography, attention to the 1793 inquiry into the fishery focused not so much on Knox's testimony but more on that of his fellow critics of settlement. Knox was also overshadowed by his contemporary John Reeves, an advocate of settled government, who famously commented to the parliamentarians "Newfoundland has been peopled behind your back."⁷ Reeves refuted the anti-settlement testimony of the other witnesses but made no reference to Knox, his colleague at the American Department. That same year Reeves also established the dominant historiographic tradition of seeing the history of the island through the lens of conflict between pro-settlement and anti-settlement forces, in his *History of the Government of the Island of Newfoundland*.⁸ Finally, in the mid-20th century, Keith Matthews broke with that tradition, and prepared the ground for subsequent historians to examine social and environmental factors in the island's history. He cited Knox's testimony to the parliamentary committee as an example of an outdated and impractical point of view, but agreed with Knox's conclusion that the anti-settlement legislation of 1775 had the opposite of its intended effect.⁹ More recently, Sean Cadigan used the testimony as a source to examine the effect the legislation had on servants' wages in Newfoundland. He identified Knox as a government official, and also as a "Newfoundland adventurer" – an investor in the Newfoundland migratory fishery – thus implying that Knox spoke for a class of English-based investors.¹⁰ We know that the settled fishery was stabilizing during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and that within fewer than 20 years of the 1793 inquiry the migratory fishery was replaced by a colonial one. Accordingly, historians have viewed the anti-settlement rhetoric of the migratory ship owners as out of touch with the reality of an emerging Newfoundland colony.¹¹ Each of these historians considered Knox's testimony in the context of the Newfoundland fishery, but none set it in the context of his whole career or his ideology.

Knox's career has been considered in an unduly fragmented way by historians. While his is a familiar name among historians of the late 18th-century British policy toward the American colonies, United States historians have paid little or no attention to his investment in the Newfoundland fishery. In reality, however, Knox's comments on Newfoundland were neither those of an ingenuous commentator nor an example of the unique constitutional position of the island; but they were consistent with his views toward the Americas more generally. A continuum existed in British policy, in that Newfoundland was not in a category of its own but in London was considered part of the Americas. Furthermore, attention to Knox's investment in the fishery after 1788 reminds us of the extent to which he was

7 John Reeves, *Mr. Reeves's Evidence Before a Committee of the House of Commons on the Trade of Newfoundland* (London: J. Sewell, 1793), 95.

8 Keith Matthews, "Historical Fence Building: A Critique of the Historiography of Newfoundland," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 143-165 [orig. *Newfoundland Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Fall 1978): 21-30].

9 Keith Matthews, "A History of the West of England-Newfoundland Fishery" (PhD diss., Oxford University, 1968), 242.

10 Sean T. Cadigan, *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay: Merchant-Settler Relations in Newfoundland, 1785-1855* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 86.

11 Shannon Ryan, "Fishery to Colony: A Newfoundland Watershed, 1793-1815," *Acadiensis* XII, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 34-52.

advocating for his own financial interests as well as remaining consistent with his long-held mercantilist view of the empire. In this context, it is worth considering the extended quotation, and his other comments on Newfoundland, as also exercises in rhetoric. The historical sociologist George Steinmetz suggests that within each imperial power different factions compete for influence over the range of colonial activities and the wealth generated by them. This competition frequently takes the form of claims to knowledge of any given colony, and thus each faction presents policy recommendations that are as much bids for power vis-à-vis its competitors within the imperial state as they are reasoned assessments of colonial problems.¹² Knox was an ideological warrior in London whose chosen battlefield was the British Americas policy. His weapons were pamphlets and advice to government. To establish his credentials to speak about Newfoundland, he cited his political experience in the colonies and in London and his first-hand knowledge of the fishery. Rather than framing his words as those of an impartial witness, or as representing an act of ventriloquism for West of England ship owners, we might usefully consider them as part of Knox's own quest for influence.

William Knox had been born in 1732 in Monaghan, Ireland, of Scots-Irish ancestry.¹³ The son of a physician, he likely attended Trinity College, Dublin, and then sought a public career at a time when there were limited appointments for the Irish-born in Ireland. After some involvement in local politics, during a period of difficult relations between the Irish Parliament and the English-dominated executive, he moved on to a wider stage. He married an Irish woman who had a large fortune, and then took advantage of an opportunity to advance his career that arose when another Monaghan native, Henry Ellis, was appointed acting governor of Georgia in 1756. The 24-year-old Knox accompanied him as acting provost-marshal of that colony, a position that allowed him to gain administrative experience as a member of the colonial council and to acquire wealth in land and slaves. An ambitious man in a small colony with few opportunities, he moved to England in 1762 as the colonial agent for Georgia. We can glimpse something of his view of his time in that colony from his later comment that "Unless serving well in America was made a step to some office in England, it would be cruel and impolitick to oblige an Officer to continue his whole life in Exile."¹⁴ As noted by a biographer, Leland J. Bellot, Knox's Georgia experience led him to believe that a balance of power between the governor, the executive council, and the legislature could best be attained when the power of the legislature was limited. He was convinced that legislative overreach in the colonies was the greatest threat to harmony in the empire.¹⁵

12 George Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwestern Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

13 See Leland J. Bellot, "Knox, William (1732-1810)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15793>. See also Patrick M. Geoghegan, "Knox, William," in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, ed. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), <http://dib.cambridge.org/quicksearch.do>.

14 Quoted in Thomas C. Barrow, "A Project for Imperial Reform: 'Hints Respecting the Settlement for our American Provinces,' 1763," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 24, no. 1 (January 1967): 119.

15 Leland J. Bellot, *William Knox: The Life and Thought of an Eighteenth-Century Imperialist* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1977), 41.

Informed by his experience in America, Knox's view was heard in London as the British considered what to do with the continent in the wake of the 1763 Treaty of Paris. His overriding principle was mercantilist. As he put it, "The British Colonies are to be regarded in no other Light, but as subservient to the Commerce of their Mother Country; the colonists are merely Factors of the Purposes of Trade, and in all considerations concerning the Colonies, *this* must be always the leading Idea."¹⁶ Knox opposed allowing settlements in America to expand westward. He argued that if America was fully settled then Britain would no longer be able to control the colonies, since the lands of North America were so much more extensive than the lands of Great Britain. Accordingly, Britain would be justified in limiting the settlement of America. Furthermore, he believed Great Britain had another compelling reason to limit settlement. The principal advantage of having an empire was the increased wealth that came from the colonists' consumption of British-manufactured products. Colonists living near the coast would ship bulky materials to England, and in return purchase English-made goods that the Americans would not produce themselves. People living in the interior, however, would find shipping bulky commodities to Britain too expensive and would therefore turn to manufacturing their own items. In that event, not only would the colonists' consumption be lost to Britain but the colonies themselves would compete damagingly with the parent country. Knox also suggested that limits be placed on purchasing land from Indigenous peoples so as to limit the growth of settlement. Native people should be left to hunt game, he advised, so they would not become a burden on Great Britain, while settlers should be prohibited from hunting. If, Knox believed, Natives were allowed to remain independent and in a relationship with the Crown rather than the colonial administrations, then their western presence could keep the colonists in line. Colonists' fear of "savages" would entice them to allow troops in their colonies, and those troops in turn would buttress British policies.¹⁷ His unambiguous view, as early as 1763, was that expansion of the settlement of America was antithetical to Britain's best interests.

While still in the employ of the colony of Georgia to look after its affairs in London, and later adding a sinecure from New York, Knox hitched his career to influential men of the day. He not only lent his labour as an administrator to public officials, but also used his literary talent as a pamphleteer to promote both his own ideas and the policies of his patrons. His 1765 pamphlet, *The Claim of the Colonies*, defended Parliament's right to pass the Stamp Act, although its publication resulted in his losing his position as agent for Georgia. His most financially successful pamphlet, *The Present State of the Nation* (1768), also made his case for taking a hard line with the American colonies. In it, he outlined a framework in which colonies worked for the greater good of the empire and contributed to the cost of imperial defense. He followed with other topical pamphlets, including a well-known defence of slavery, and had the distinction of having had his fellow Irishman Edmund Burke publish a refutation of his imperial policy recommendations. Knox was appointed as one of two undersecretaries to the American Department in 1770, and served for 12 years under several prime ministers. In the estimation of the historian Jack P. Greene, Knox "played a significant role as an architect of American

¹⁶ Bellot, *William Knox*, 49.

¹⁷ Barrow, "Project for Imperial Reform," 108-26.

policy,” and, furthermore, “few people in power in Britain thought more seriously or more deeply about the quarrel with the colonies at any stage of its development.”¹⁸ A considerable part of the income upon which he maintained the social life that was essential to his ambitions came from his American investments. Ironically, they became vulnerable to the effects of the uncompromising British policy he advocated.

The American Revolution was pivotal to Knox’s fortunes. At the beginning of the revolutionary war he lost his plantation in Georgia, leaving him financially strained despite a pension from the British government and a commission for organizing support to Britain’s Indigenous allies. His financial losses, however, were balanced by enhanced political influence, and he played an important role in formulating Lord North’s policies toward America.¹⁹ At the war’s outbreak, he was one of those who advocated excluding Americans from the Newfoundland fishery. He also recommended opening it up to the Irish, and even advocated that the Irish government provide bounties to the Newfoundland fishery. With the fall of Lord North’s administration, Knox was dismissed as undersecretary in the American Department, and became “a political advisor for hire.”²⁰ By the fall of 1783 he had largely given up on public life except to continue to press for compensation for his losses in Georgia. He had succeeded in removing his slaves to Jamaica, where he hired them out, and he purchased an estate in Wales where he intended to pursue the life of a country gentleman. A labour glut in Jamaica, however, and damage from two hurricanes left his slaves destitute and unemployed. Knox sold them in North Carolina at a loss, and by 1787 he reported being “mortgaged up to the teeth.” Partial compensation for his American losses saved him from bankruptcy in 1788, and allowed him to invest in the Newfoundland fishery.²¹

It is unknown as to why Knox chose to invest in Newfoundland, but in his capacity as undersecretary he had read the annual reports on the trade and it was his pen that issued directives to authorities on the island. He was as familiar with the fishery as an official who had not visited the island could possibly be. It is difficult from surviving evidence to account satisfactorily for his choice of financial speculations, but the migratory Newfoundland fishery was as close to the ideal of a mercantilist colony as existed in the Americas. Knox built a wharf in the Welsh port of Milford Haven and outfitted four bankers for Newfoundland waters.²² For all that, it was not an auspicious time to invest in the fishery. He entered the trade at the point when the migratory fishery hit its peak in numbers of vessels and men employed, but the resulting oversupply of fish in the markets depressed prices. While large numbers of English-based vessels continued to participate in the trade during the next few years, their profits suffered and planters on the island of Newfoundland were growing in number. That prompted Knox to complain to his friend Lord Hawkesbury – who, as president of the Board of Trade, occupied a powerful position

18 Jack P. Greene, “William Knox’s Explanation for the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 30, no. 2 (April 1973): 293.

19 Bellot, *William Knox*, 170.

20 Geoghegan, “Knox, William.”

21 Bellot, *William Knox*, 195-200.

22 Bellot, *William Knox*, 204.

in imperial matters – and recommend measures to rejuvenate the British fishery. Knox was concerned about US- and Icelandic-caught fish competing in the markets, but was even more worried by the British ships that had been released from military service now that peace had come and that took half-cargoes of Newfoundland fish and rushed to market to arrive before the supply was glutted. This had resulted, he believed, in giving Newfoundland fish a reputation for poor quality, and had caused losses to ship owners. More seriously, many of those in the trade, he argued,

have fallen upon a method of indemnifying themselves for the fall in the price of the fish which is more ruinous to the interest of Great Britain in carrying on the fishery than all the other causes. They are encouraging the shallop fishermen to settle and remain upon the island and engaging to take the fish they catch at the market price. They however oblige the fishermen to take their payment in goods upon which they charge a most enormous profit, and as the poor fishermen are always in their debt they are obliged to submit to this extortion and now these monopolizers actually purchase their shallop taken fish at one half or rather one third of the normal price, while those who carry out their shallop fishermen as well as their bankers from Great Britain or Ireland by paying them in cash give the full value for their fish and consequently are considerable losers by the sale. The advantage those monopolizers have over the British Adventurers I clearly proved last season, for altho my Bankers caught more fish than any upon the banks and I got the best price at the foreign markets my sales did not amount to above 70 per cent of my expense whereas the monopolizers tho their bankers neither caught so many fish nor did their cargoes sell so well made a considerable profit owing to the advantage they had by their purchased fish.

If others were to follow this example, Knox warned, Newfoundland would become a colony rather than a British fishery. He accepted that the shallop fishery – that is, the small-boat inshore fishery – had to be fitted out on the island. But he believed that servants employed in it ought to be recruited in, and returned to, the British Isles. He proposed that Britain pursue any means to this end that did not hurt the British fishery or give Americans, or other foreigners, an advantage.²³

Knox reported that the 1775 Act for the Encouragement of the Fisheries – known to subsequent historians as Palliser’s Act since it was in keeping with the views of the former governor Hugh Palliser – directed employers to deduct 40 shillings from each man’s wages to pay for his passage home. As an undersecretary to the American Department, Knox had had a role in formulating this policy. “Monopolizers,” he now said, conspired with their employees and gave fishermen back the deduction the next year when receiving their fish if they remained on the island. He proposed returning their passage money to the fishermen, and paying a

23 William Knox to Lord Hawkesbury, February 1790, William Knox Papers, vol. 8, no. 1, William L. Clements Library (WLCL), Ann Arbor, MI.

bounty to each shallop fisherman arriving in Britain who produced a certificate proving he had been carried out within the two preceding seasons. It was necessary, he believed, to leave some hands in Newfoundland to cure the last fish of the season, and to provide the fuel and do the other work to prepare for the next year. These shoremen should be “converted into seamen or fishermen” the next season and green men – inexperienced hands – left in their places. No servants, he believed, should stay on the island longer than two years.²⁴

Knox had no doubt that the “monopolizers” would try to counteract the effect of his suggested bounty: “The residents are all in their debt and cannot get out of it for their annual supplies at the enormous prices they are charged always amount to the value of the fish they deliver. They cannot therefore leave the island for if they attempt to do so they would be instantly arrested.” To strike at this “evil,” he recommended that the governor examine the original invoices for imported goods and set the price at which they could be sold to fishermen. He also suggested that Parliament prevent any person from recovering debt from a fisherman contracted in Newfoundland beyond twelve months. That would prevent debtors from being unable to pay their passage home and becoming trapped on the island. Without such strong action, he believed that the bounties intended to encourage the migratory fishery would be insufficient to prevent Newfoundland from becoming a colony and the fishery from ultimately becoming dominated by residents of the island. The expense to the Crown of the policies he advocated would be mitigated, in Knox’s view, by the facts that fishermen returning home would be getting their supplies in Britain and that the number of seamen available to be pressed into the navy would be increased.²⁵

West of England merchants’ concerns about the decline in the trade, particularly their objections to the appointment of a customs officer on the island, prompted the government to establish a Select Committee of the House of Commons to investigate the state of the fishery and the local administration.²⁶ Although retired from public office, Knox took the opportunity on 26 March 1793 to give the committee the benefit of his advice. As well as establishing his authority by pointing out that he was an “Adventurer” in the Newfoundland fishery, Knox claimed insight into the intentions of the ministry in the passage of Palliser’s Act by virtue of his earlier position as undersecretary at the time that the act was drafted. He reported that in this capacity he had “furnished much of the information upon which they [the Crown and Parliament] acted.” He then turned to the history of the fishery in the passage that has gained prominence in the historiography of Newfoundland:

The island of Newfoundland had been considered, in all former times, as a great English ship moored near the Banks during the fishing season, for the convenience of the English Fishermen. The Governor was considered as the ship’s Captain, and all those who were concerned in the Fishery business, as his crew, and subject to naval discipline while there, and expected to return to England when the

24 William Knox to Lord Hawkesbury, February 1790, William Knox Papers, vol. 8, no. 1, WLCL.

25 William Knox to Lord Hawkesbury, February 1790, William Knox Papers, vol. 8, no. 1, WLCL.

26 Ryan, “Fishery to Colony,” 40.

season was over. The English then had no rivals in the trade but the French; and although the French Fishery exceeded theirs, the English gradually increased, and those who carried it on were generally successful. The Treaty of Paris, by adding Canada, all Nova Scotia and Cape Breton to the British American dominions, deprived France of the advantage she had from the employment of the inhabitants in the Fishery; but at the same time a new rival was raised up to the English Traders and Fishermen in those and the other northern British colonies, and as the profit of the French inhabitants had made under the French Government by the Fishery on their coasts, as well as on the coasts of Newfoundland, naturally turned the attention of the British subjects to the same business, many settlers immigrated to Newfoundland for the purpose, while others spread themselves along the shores of Nova Scotia and Cape Breton, so that there appeared evident danger of the Trade and Fishery being lost to England; and that instead of its being a British Fishery, as it had hitherto been, it would become a Colonial Fishery. To prevent the increase of inhabitants on the island, the most positive instructions were given to the Governors not to make any grants of lands, and to reduce the number of those who were already settled there. Their vessels, as well as those belonging to the colonies, were to be denied any priority of right in occupying stations in the bays or harbours for curing their Fish over the vessels from England; and he was instructed to withhold from them whatever might serve to encourage them to remain on the island; and as Lord North expressed it, whatever they loved to have roasted he was to give them raw; and whatever they wished to have raw he was to give it to them roasted.

Knox reviewed the efforts in Palliser's Act to promote the English bank fishery over the shore fishery. To ensure the return of ships' passengers and servants to Britain, and thus prevent their swelling the number of residents, half the fishermen's wages were to be paid in cash or bills of exchange at the end of the fishing season. Employers were also obliged to find them passage home, Knox reported, and a bounty was paid to ship owners who took catches greater than 20,000 fish and who carried out two green men. But, he testified, his five years of experience in the fishery now enabled him to "correct his judgement as a politician." He thought that Palliser's Act had had the opposite effect of that which had been intended, and had suggestions for how this could be remedied. Knox reported that soon after the act had been passed, the returns from the fishery indicated that the number of green men left on the island increased. After consulting with people who had been coming out to the island, he learned that half wages were insufficient for a youth to fit himself out for the fishery for the next season, and that the youngsters wanted money to support their mothers. "Traders" therefore hired them for two years, employing the young men during the winter in cutting wood, the salmon fishery, and other work. Employers thus saved themselves the expense of paying the passage home for their employees and avoided paying them half their wages. The act's obligation to return servants home, and hold back a part of their wages, he argued, had the unintended

effect of encouraging servants to remain in Newfoundland. Hiring a fisherman in England, paying him, and returning him home, cost four pounds more than hiring a fisherman in Newfoundland and leaving him there. While the obligation was for employers to secure passage for their fishermen, the fishermen were under no obligation to take that ship back to England or Ireland. The fishermen might then demand payment of their full wage, even though they did not return on their employers' ship, which would make its way home in ballast. "Are then the traders to be blamed," he asked, "for not providing ships to carry home their fishermen, or for leaving as many of them in country as are willing to stay? Or is it strange that many are willing to stay and cut wood all the winter for those who will supply them with provisions, without wages, under the promise of being employed the following season as fishermen?" Knox claimed that when he took green men out to the Newfoundland fishery, and brought them home, he was out of pocket.²⁷

Under Palliser's Act a complicated system of bounties were paid to English vessels that fished in Newfoundland waters, the intention of which was to increase the number of men employed in the migratory fishery. After seeing it in operation, Knox argued that ship owners who had a successful voyage did not need the subsidy, and those who fished for a longer period in Newfoundland waters trying to qualify for the bounty were likely to lose out, since once the capelin appeared in inshore waters the cod no longer took salted bait. In the preceding year, Knox reported, his banker lost at least £200 by attempting to earn the bounty. He had given up fitting out his voyage at a large-enough scale to hope to qualify for the bounty, which had been intended to increase the number of green men working in the migratory fishery. Others had done the same, with the result that fewer seamen were made by the fishery.²⁸ He believed, accordingly, that a bounty should be used as a security against a bad voyage, rather than a bonus for a successful one.

The regulations under Palliser's Act, Knox claimed, as well as the fees and the detentions for customs clearances and the fact that the governor's commission did not authorize him to "determine civil causes," all combined to discourage the English fishery. These factors would not have caused such deterioration of the fishery, he believed, had the "fatal treaty of 1783" not given US vessels permission to fish on the banks and in the harbours of the island. Since the Americans built and fitted out ships more cheaply than did the British, paid less for provisions, and paid lower wages than British traders, they were able to sell fish for a lower price. Americans were thus able to beat the British out of Atlantic coastal markets, and were able to find ways into the Mediterranean markets as well. Meanwhile, the Danes and Norwegians fishing at Iceland were producing cheaper fish (stock fish rather than salted and dried) for immediate use. Knox's correspondents in Spain and Italy confirmed that such fish was entering their markets.²⁹

Knox reported that even as Scandinavian fish was becoming increasingly easily available, so too was the demand declining as the Roman Catholic Church granted indulgences to relax the requirement to eat fish during Lent and as church guidance

27 Lambert, *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, 90:173, 188-90.

28 Lambert, *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, 90:190.

29 Lambert, *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, 90:190-1.

on this matter in any case fell into disregard. Fish was now merely a cheap food, and duties on British fish in Spain meant that the Newfoundland product was no longer inexpensive. And if a British ship paid the duty in one port but was unable to sell its cargo, then the duty was not refunded and had to be paid a second time on the ship's arrival in the next port. The failure of Spanish tribunals to be fair to the British, and the lack of protection extended by the British government, according to Knox, discouraged the trade.³⁰

Knox had recommendations that, he argued, would revive and support the British fishery. The government should "recur to [the] old idea of the island of Newfoundland being considered as a great British ship." He suggested investing the governor and surrogates with the powers they had once exercised by custom. Knox proposed having the navy remain on the island until the first of December, so that it would be able to oblige the fishermen to return home. If the navy forced the matter, employers would not have to find passages for the fishermen since the servants would have been obliged to have made arrangements for their return before the start of the season. He accepted that the fishery needed some persons at each station who could prepare during the winter for the ensuing season, so he proposed that "it would be proper to oblige none to return but such as had been left the following year, or had resided there two years, so that all who chose to stay might remain one or two winters on the island." This would encourage ship owners to carry out green men, who could be left during the winter and would thus acquire skills that would make them useful.³¹

If the government, he said, were to decide it was necessary to remove the inhabitants (most of whom, he erroneously reported, were Irish Roman Catholic), they would readily accept being resettled in Canada. The government would only need to provide transportation to the inhabitants, grant them lands, and provide tools and provisions while their farms were being established. If there were no grants of land made on the island, and no civil governor or magistrate appointed, then any danger of Newfoundland becoming a populous colony would be averted. Residents in small numbers could yet become amenable subjects of Great Britain if they focussed on the timber trade, and imported all the necessities of life from Britain.³²

The markets of Italy and Spain preferred shore fish to the bank fish, so Knox suggested that a bounty be paid to byeboatmen. A byeboat keeper would leave his boat in Newfoundland over the winter, returning each season to fish. A bounty should be paid per capita, he believed, on the servants employed, upon their being returned to England. He thought that if Spain could not be convinced to reduce its duties, then it could at least be persuaded to refund the duties paid on unsold fish that was taken back out of the country. He also believed that Spain and the Italian states might be pressed into granting preference to British fish. "These things being done," he concluded, "the fishery might be left to itself; and the less Government attended to it, the better it would thrive."³³

30 Lambert, *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, 90:191.

31 Lambert, *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, 90:192-3.

32 Lambert, *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, 90:192-3.

33 Lambert, *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, 90:192.

Knox's comment that "the island of Newfoundland had been considered, in all former times, as a great English ship moored near the Banks during the fishing season, for the convenience of the English Fishermen" might seem Anglo-centric. Knox apparently exaggerated the extent of the English fishery in preceding centuries, for the English were relative newcomers; other European powers dominated the fishery in the 16th century, and control of the fishery and of the island remained contested in the 17th and 18th centuries. He was not, however, claiming the island was English vis-à-vis any other European power; rather, the independence of the Americas was always uppermost in his mind. He meant that the island had been considered the property of the fishery based in England, not a settled fishery. Reading Knox as having claimed that Newfoundland had always been an English possession might have appealed to 19th-century nationalistic historians of Newfoundland, such as Prowse, who, against all evidence, maintained that the fishery had been predominantly English since Cabot's discovery.³⁴ Prowse, however, was fully aware – as were the historians who succeeded him – that in that speech Knox was claiming it had always been a British-based fishery and arguing that it should never become a colonial fishery.

Palliser's Act had been intended to encourage the British fishery at a point when the settled fishery was growing and when English attention was fixed on the trouble with the American colonies. In 1793, Knox again advocated taking a hard line against colonists. But his literary turn of phrase could not revive his flagging business. Still, his two commentaries upon the Newfoundland fishery show the persistence and coherence of his mercantilist view of the empire and of the Americas. This case reminds us that while Newfoundland's historical development was unique in many respects, it was on a continuum of imperial policy. Knox's influence in London varied over the years, and he may indeed have had a greater role in drafting Palliser's Act than historians have previously recognized. But he was always one voice, among many, within the political elite. With every letter, representation to a parliamentary committee, or pamphlet, he was competing for influence. It is not helpful to take any one metaphor out of its context, and then claim it as an insight into the imperial mind, or assume that he was speaking for the West of England ship owners. Knox's anti-settlement position towards the island was consistent with his longstanding ideology towards the whole of the Americas and with his own, ongoing business interests. The aphorism of the "Great English ship," the governor of which was like the ship's captain, was neither a neutral descriptive statement of British policy nor an accurate account of the state of the fishery. Knox was no archetypal representative of the West of England migratory fishery either. His rhetoric, the evidence he marshalled, and the strategies he used to claim authoritative knowledge were all bids for influence within the maelstrom of voices and interests that shaped imperial policy. His outdated and unrealistic view that the settled fishery could be diminished by removing settlers was crucially informed by his experience with the Thirteen Colonies, despite the demonstrable failure in those colonies of the British approach that he had advocated.

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³⁴ Prowse, *Guide Book*, 6-10.