

DOCUMENT

President Coaker's Log of His Trip to the Ice Floe last Spring in s.s. *Nascopie*

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INTRODUCTION

ON NOVEMBER 3, 1908 William Ford Coaker (1871-1938) formed the Fishermen's Protective Union (FPU) at Herring Neck, Notre Dame Bay, to lobby the Newfoundland Government for legislative changes favourable to the country's fishing population. The union grew fast; from the initial founding local of 19 members at Herring Neck, by 1914 it had 206 councils with a membership of 21,060 mainly on Newfoundland's northeast coast and in Conception Bay.¹ In 1911 it established a commercial side (the Fishermen's Union Trading Company) to provide cheaper fishery supplies and provisions to members. In the October 30, 1913 general election, the FPU's political wing, the Union Party, successfully elected eight members to the House of Assembly in an electoral alliance with Robert Bond's Liberal Party which elected seven members. The alliance failed however to defeat the People's Party of Prime Minister Edward Morris² which won re-election with 21 seats.

Coaker heralded the FPU presence in the House of Assembly on January 19, 1914 by declaring that “it is not by accident that we have come here. A revolution, though a peaceful one, has been fought in Newfoundland. The fishermen, the common man, the toiler of Newfoundland, has made up his mind that he is going to be represented upon the floors of this House to a larger extent than he ever was before; and the day will come, Mr. Speaker, when the fishermen of Newfoundland will have the controlling power in this House.”³ Addressing the working and living conditions of fishermen, who each spring went to the ice to prosecute the annual seal fishery, was one of Coaker’s legislative priorities in his first session in the House.

During the 1914 session of the House of Assembly Coaker introduced his sealing bill. It provided for better physical living conditions aboard steel steamers. With the legislature having approved his sealing bill, Coaker, along with his personal assistant Charlie Bryant,⁴ then visited the seal fishery off Newfoundland’s northeast coast aboard the *Nascopie*, an ice-breaking steel steamer chartered by Job Brothers of St. John’s from the Hudson Bay Company.⁵ He went to study first-hand the working and living conditions of sealers. The captain of the steamer was George Barbour, a veteran Bonavista Bay mariner who spent 35 years at the seal hunt beginning in 1893.⁶ During Coaker’s trip, 77 sealers from the *Newfoundland* were stranded on the ice and died in a snow storm. That same snow storm also caused the sinking of the sealing ship, the *Southern Cross*, with the loss of 173 men.⁷

There have been many early 20th century first-hand accounts of what life was like at the seal fishery, mostly written by non-sealers captivated by the romance and danger of that fishery. Coaker’s account offers insights into how he interrelated with fishermen, his great empathy for them, and demonstrates his great sense of injustice towards the mercantile elite which dominated the Newfoundland economy and society. We also get Coaker’s initial reaction as the story of the *Newfoundland* and *Southern Cross* disasters slowly becomes known to him and his fellow sealers at the ice and see their great sense of outrage at the ship owners for their treatment of sealers in the pursuit of profit.

The document that follows is Coaker’s log as published in the Union’s daily newspaper the *Daily Mail* between April 11 and 17, 1914 and reprinted in the *Mail and Advocate* for December 24, 1914. Coaker had begun his diary with the intention of publishing it in the Christmas edition of the *Advocate* newspaper. However, he wrote on April 9 “that idea I will forego in view of the awful disaster which overtook the *Newfoundland*’s crew. I therefore publish it now for the information of the Sons of Toil, in order to show the conditions as they existed, which in a major degree has a bearing upon the calamity that has come upon our country.” Coaker’s log was a source of information for Cassie Brown in her highly acclaimed book of that tragedy, *Death on the Ice*.⁸

Notes

¹On the history of the FPU, see Ian McDonald, "To Each His Own": *William Coaker and the Fishermen's Protective Union in Newfoundland Politics, 1908-1925* (St. John's: ISER Books 1987, edited by J.K. Hiller), S.J.R. Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1971), Robert H. Cuff, ed., *A Coaker Anthology* (St. John's: Creative Publishers 1986), J.R. Smallwood, *Coaker of Newfoundland* (Port Union: Advocate Press 1998, reprint of 1927 edition) and W.F. Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years of the Fishermen's Protective Union of Newfoundland* (St. John's: Advocate Publishing Company Ltd. 1930).

²Edward Patrick Morris (1859-1935), prime minister of Newfoundland, 1909-1918.

³*Proceedings of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council, 1914*, January 19, 1914, p. 37.

⁴Charles Bryant (1888-1954) was a longtime friend of Coaker and employee of the Fishermen's Union Trading Company.

⁵On the history of the *Nascopie*, see Doug Gray, *R.M.S. Nascopie: Ship of the North* (Ottawa: The Golden Dog Press 1997).

⁶George Barbour (1858-1928), born Cobbler's Island (Cape Island), Bonavista Bay.

⁷Accounts of the Newfoundland sealing industry are Shannon Ryan's *The Ice Hunters: A History of Newfoundland Sealing to 1914* (St. John's: Breakwater Books 1994), *Seals and Sealers: A Pictorial History of the Newfoundland Seal Industry* (St. John's: Breakwater 1987) and ed., *Chafe's Sealing Book: A Statistical Record of the Newfoundland Steamer Seal Fishery, 1863-1941* (St. John's: Breakwater 1989); James E. Candow, *Of Men and Seals: A History of the Newfoundland Seal Hunt* (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services Canada 1989); Briton Cooper Busch, *The War against the Seals: A History of the North American Seal Fishery* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1985); P.K. Devine, *In the Good Old Days!* (St. John's: Harry Cuff Publications 1990) and Michael Condon, *The Fisheries and Resources of Newfoundland* (1925).

⁸Cassie Brown, *Death on the Ice: The Great Newfoundland Sealing Disaster of 1914* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada Limited 1974). For an appreciation of this book, see Nancy Earle, "Death on the Ice and the Newfoundland Imaginary: Print Culture on the Periphery," in *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada*, Vol. 48, #1 (Spring 2010), pp. 119-152.