



Hope and Deception in Conception Bay

Sean Cadigan

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In late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Newfoundland, the evolution to colonial self-government within the empire was accompanied by an economic transition from a migratory to a residential fishery. This was the beginning of the modern liberal order for Newfoundland.

The standard view is that the truck system, wherein merchants supplied fishing families with provisions, gear, and so on, against the season's catch, shamefully exploited resident fishermen, as well as planters and servants. Sean Cadigan reviews the economic and social developments of this period from a new perspective. He contends that the persistence of independent commodity production in the fishery of northeast-coast Newfoundland from 1785 to 1855 cannot be attributed to merchant-imposed truck credit practices. He calls for a reassessment of the truck system as a realistic accommodation to the limited possibilities and requirements of the local economy. The rise of the truck system and the household-based fishery was above all a historical outcome which involved the adjustments of settlers, merchants, and governments during a complex period of transition. Elements of the staple model are used to suggest that the resource base of the fishery and the legal institutions of the initial fishing industry limited the ability of fishing families to respond otherwise to exploitation by merchants. Later, reformers struggling for colonial self-government obscured the staple restraints on fishing families in order to discredit fish merchants politically by saying the latter purposefully used truck to impoverish the fishery and prevent agricultural development in order to preserve their hegemony in Newfoundland's economy and society.

Besides newspapers accounts, missionary correspondence, and local government records, Cadigan makes use of court records which have never before been systematically used. These records provide evidence that serves as the basis for his discussion of family production in the fishery, the unsuccessful attempts by families to diversify production through agriculture, the gender division of labour, and economic development.

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