

Chapter 1

Old World Explores New: Settling and Securing Newfoundland in the Early 1600s

Context

Why, beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, did Europeans venture across the Atlantic Ocean and settle the Americas? Historians have offered several answers. Some stress the role of religion in promoting the so-called “Age of Discovery” and focus on the proselytizing efforts of the Spanish who in part aimed to “civilize” what they perceived as the “heathen” native peoples of Latin and South America in the ways of Catholicism. Other historians stress the larger context of the Renaissance in instigating European ventures in the Americas. Here, the Renaissance spirit of progress takes center-stage, an emphasis less on religion and more a general inquisitiveness, belief, and confidence in a nation’s ability to grow and expand. Advances in navigation and shipbuilding, especially among the Portuguese, occupy

an important place in this narrative. Expansion and colonization, aided by technological advancements, were, according to this interpretation, part and parcel of an adventurous spirit designed to bring glory to emerging European nation-states and monarchs.

Materialist explanations have also proven popular among some historians. Trade, material benefit, and wealth, so this argument goes, motivated various Europeans – the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and English, among others – to mount the expensive ventures and military campaigns necessary to colonize the New World. Fear of want and uncertainty combined with anticipated riches – gold, furs, staples of various sorts – guided national thinking on expansion with both the merchant class and nobility invested in the success of the various ventures. European nations were often at

8 *Writing the American Past*

odds in their competitive efforts to exploit the natural resources of the New World and colonization often took on a military overtone.

The effects of this Age of Discovery were multiple and enormous. Extremely diverse native peoples numbering over four million were often destroyed or severely weakened through disease or warfare and the development of precious plantation staples throughout the Americas led to the establishment of the slave trade, a trade responsible for the forced migration of over ten million Africans to the New World, 1450–1900. The quest for wealth led to the development of the “plantation complex” which, in turn, satisfied growing European demand for sugar, cacao, coffee, and tobacco, as well as a number of other foodstuffs. Modes and techniques of production and habits of consumption fed the Age of Discovery and helped establish its basic trajectory and form for over three hundred years.

In truth, and as many historians will agree, European colonization of the New World was influenced by many factors and it is likely that religious, economic, and cultural ideas worked together to inspire different nations at different times to embark on schemes to “discover” or exploit the New World. Moreover, the historian must pay attention to specifics if she or he is to divine why certain countries intervened in certain places at certain times in the New World. Place and time – context – matters and it is sometimes worthwhile examining places that frequently escape the attention of historians. While the exploration of the Caribbean, South America, and what later became the United States was certainly an important part of the Old World’s encounter with the New, European settlement of colonies farther to the North – what later became Canada – was also important and revealing of motives and patterns behind settlement.

Various referred to as “the new found land,” “*terra de bacalhao*,” or “*terre neuve*,” in the sixteenth century, Newfoundland was known to Europeans as early as the eleventh century when Greenlanders used northern Newfoundland as a temporary base for ship repair and as a starting point for the exploration of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. More systematic settlement had to wait several hundred years when the Venetian Zuan Caboto began to explore the eastern coast of the island in 1497. By the early 1500s, Europeans were busily harvesting Newfoundland’s enormous cod reserves and shipping them back to Europe where demand for the fish was high. Records indicate that the first cargo of North American cod reached Bristol, England in 1502. Cod fishing – and, to a much lesser extent, whaling – drew

Europeans to Newfoundland and proved critical to establishing economic ties between Old World and New. At first, a number of European nations fished the waters. Initially, especially by the 1540s, Norman and French Basque fishermen were central to the Newfoundland cod industry and they were joined by fishermen from the Basque coast of Spain in the 1540s. The English became more involved after the 1560s and by 1610 crews from the west coast of England and France came to dominate the trade. Numbers suggest the extent of the industry: 500 ships a year returned from Newfoundland by 1580 with various commodities, mostly cured cod. And with economic expansion came the slow but steady population of the region. By 1749 there were roughly 6,000 permanent settlers – some of them planters – connected to the fishing industry in Newfoundland.

Still, the number of migratory fishermen, those who came to fish off the Newfoundland coast in the summer and return to Europe with their salt-cured catches, vastly outnumbered the settlers. Yet the fishermen were to some extent dependent on the Newfoundland planters, relying on them to offer logistical support while fishing off the coast. Planters also relied on the migratory fishermen not least because the crews brought with them supplies and labor. But conflict between the two groups sometimes erupted. The fishermen and the planters often competed for shoreline space and there were also tensions between crews for that same land. Tension in Newfoundland sometimes echoed the political divisions emerging in England. The English Civil War of the 1640s, for example, divided Newfoundland settlers and reminded Newfoundlanders of their connection to the mother country. And the absence of a formal governing structure in Newfoundland – there was no effective local administration – hardly helped in resolving or containing the periodic conflicts. Later on, in the seventeenth century, stronger commercial ties with Massachusetts, which administered Newfoundland between 1651 and 1660, served to stabilize the island’s economy and when Britain intervened in the colony’s political life later in the eighteenth century, Newfoundland began to stabilize and enjoy greater formal protection from both pirates and the French.

The document presented here tends to support an older emphasis on the importance of trade and imperial policy in shaping the settlement of the Americas. Details concerning its author and even its date are sparse. The Library of Congress places the document in the rough

range of 1611–1621 although there is some evidence internal to the text that it might have been written a little later. And although we do not know the author or authors, it seems reasonable to surmise that the document – excerpted here only in part – is of an official nature and addressed to British authorities. The document suggests the scope and importance of the cod trade to Britain and points to problems in maintaining it and realizing its full economic potential.

Source

Anonymous, “The Address and Reasons humbly offered for the speedy [settling] and [securing] of New found land, and the fishing trade there,” Papers of David B. Quinn, Box 89, Folder 8, Research Files, New Foundland, Documents, Fishing Rights, 1611–1621, no date, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

That Newfoundland hath bine out of mind belonged to the Dominion of England
and is the next part of the West Indies adjacent to his Majesties Territories
and lies in equal degrees with Britany in France, and in the time of King
James of blessed memory, there went yearlyly to fish there above 300 sayle
of ships, which did produce to this nation 500000 of lbm. advantage besides the
humble education of 5000. Seamen, and brought into his Majesties Revenue
above 100000 lb. for Customs yearly by the Export of the fish sent to Italy, France,
Spain, Portugal, &c. for which things was Exported but butchers, shipwreck, haws,
can be consumed here at home for no purpose, except some persons if they
had not been employed in that fishings, as for El water Rawleigh, and others
was they spent, after which, and our sayle, Experience will clearly appear, that
all this time there goes from England but above 60 sayle of ships in a year
to fish there, and in some late yeares not 20 sayle, and those make but small
returnes, the reasons whereof, as is humbly conceived are these that followe.

- 1 That there is no harbour fortified to secure the merchant from Pirats Sea Robbers & Enemies.
- 2 That in proportion of salt, no other newfangled Butchers can be brought in, but from
hand to mouth, which when times spoyle their Voyages, for in good fishings season
the traders can employ much more salt &c. then they have by them.
- 3 That by reason no better ment is made, all staves, Boats, frame fish, flukes, and all
manner of fishings Craft, and stores are destroyed, either by the plankton, or
the first storm every seas on, by which violent, and illegall actions, the fishermen
are obliged to a months delay, with the loss of all their most fishings for soe long
and great labour, and charge to fit all things new, which renders it soe expensive
Christgeable to the merchants, & fishermen, that thereby foreigners understand us
in all markets

Study Questions

1. How might we date this document? Are there clues suggesting when it could – and could not – have been written?
2. What is the purpose of the document?
3. What does the document suggest about the extent of the fishing industry in Newfoundland?
4. What were some of the specific problems facing migratory fishermen and how might they have been solved?
5. Based on this document, what do you consider to have been an important motivation for the expansion of European influence in the New World?

Further Reading

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