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Devonshire, Iberia, and the Logic of the Trade in Newfoundland Saltfish

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This paper will explore the logic behind the English commitment in the Newfoundland fishery and trade to the production of saltcod. A persistent belief in the historical literature maintains that the English fishery at Newfoundland specialized in (indeed, some say invented) the cure that produced lightly salted dry fish because they were forced to do so by a shortage of salt. Yet there is abundant evidence to suggest that the English preference for saltfish was in fact dictated by the demands and logistical challenges of the Iberian market. I shall demonstrate this argument through an examination of Devonshire's commercial relations with Iberia during the sixteenth century.

INTRODUCTION

The strength and vigour of the Devonshire economy during the late medieval and early modern era has been credited to the region's economic diversity, a diversity which gave it resiliency when other parts of England were experiencing economic crisis (Kowaleski, 2000, p. 430). That diversity included cloth manufacturing, tin mining, and pastoral agriculture, but fish provided Devon with its third most valuable export to the Continent (Gray, 1988, p. 96) well before anyone knew about Newfoundland. Exports included fresh, salted, and dried fish (especially hake) to Spain and France (Kowaleski, 2000, p. 430). Devonshire fishermen could be found not only in the near- and off-shore waters of south-western England but also in the North Sea and even Iceland. By the time Cabot returned from his 1497 voyage with

reports of the rich fishing grounds there, the West Country had become heavily engaged in the seasonal fishery on the west coast of Ireland, producing salted fish – probably hake – at shore camps, using techniques they would later apply in Newfoundland (Kowaleski, 2000, pp. 432, 440–442; Pope, 2004, p. 12).

This may explain why Devonshire fishermen were slow to respond to the discovery of rich fishing grounds at Newfoundland – the first recorded date of a Devon ship returning from Newfoundland was a Dartmouth ship in 1554 (Gray, 1988, p. 114). For the first half of the sixteenth century, fishermen from other parts of Western Europe dominated the fisheries.¹ And yet, by the close of the sixteenth century, the English fishery at Newfoundland had expanded so markedly that Walter Raleigh was able to describe it as the “stay and support of the English West Country” (cited in Candow, 2001, p. 165). At its peak between 1610 and 1630, the Devonshire fishery at Newfoundland had “up to 10,000 men at sea, with Plymouth and Dartmouth each supplying more than 80 vessels and 2000 to 3000 men in some years” (Stephens, 1956, p. 91; Oswald, 1983, p. 23; Gray, 1992, 178–181).

What accounted for this rapid growth? There is no question that West Country ports were already engaged in a vigorous trade with Iberia before their Newfoundland fishery began to show growth after 1560, and that this well-established commercial relationship played a critical role in the ability of the West Country ports to capitalize on the Newfoundland fishery when the opportunity to do so arose after 1570. Devonshire had long had commercial links with the Iberian economy generally and with the Guipúzcoan economy in particular. In return for wool cloth and tin, with shipments of Iberian wine, iron, salt, oils, dried fruit, honey, and sugar (Youings, 1993, pp. 101–102; Croft, 1989, pp. 282–283). Then, during the fifteenth century, there occurred one of the “most significant ... changes in the overseas fish trade” of Devon: cargoes of cured fish developed into an important export to Iberia (Gray, 1992, 178–181; Kowaleski, 2000, pp. 432, 443). Much of that fish was hake, caught off the western coasts of Ireland and processed by splitting and lightly salting the fish. Significantly, Basque fishermen also fished for hake on the same Irish coast, which they then carried back to their home ports for further shipment to markets in northern Spain (M. Barkham, 2009, pp. 234–235). West Country merchants who encountered the Basques in

the Irish fishery and who were already engaged in other commodity trades with Iberia would have quickly recognized the market potential there for saltfish.

The demand of the Iberian markets for salted fish was a critical reason for both the expansion of the Devonshire fishery at Newfoundland after 1570 and the single-minded dedication of Devon fishermen to the saltfish cure. By then, Basque fishermen had shifted their efforts to the new fishing grounds on the coasts of Newfoundland. The outfitters of major Basque ports like San Sebastian, Bilbao, and Santander, with the support of numerous smaller ports such as Portugalete, Deba, Renteria and others, had begun sending ships and crews to Newfoundland waters sometime in the 1530s (Innis, 1931, pp. 51–70; Innis, 1954). Easy access to forests near the coast as well as close proximity to substantial iron deposits had enabled the Basques to develop a vigorous and innovative tradition of building ships that were capable of oceanic voyages, were competitive in price, and were superior in quality (M. Barkham, 1985, pp. 122–123; Phillips, Jr., 1988, pp. 267–301). At the same time, trade in regional products such as wool and iron with northern Europe and with adjacent Spanish provinces provided the risk capital necessary to enable the Basques to invest in distant fisheries like the one in Newfoundland (Phillips, Jr., 1988, p. 270; S. Barkham and M. Barkham, 1993, pp. 269–298; Grafe, 2011, pp. 81–115). Much of the fish brought back to their home ports by Basque fishing ships was consumed in their own coastal regions, yet a great deal of the overall production was shipped to inland markets like Pamplona, Burgos, and even Madrid. The result was an intricate and interdependent commercial network in which fish from Newfoundland was just one more commodity to be added to the commercial pattern.

The strength and vigour of the Basque fisheries, however, did not last. Before the end of the sixteenth century, it fell into an irreversible decline. The reasons for that decline are numerous and complex. They include Spain's weakening military condition with accompanying fiscal demands which rested heavily on the Basque economy, combined with inflationary pressures which undermined the ability of the Basque fishery to be competitive (Innis, 1931, pp. 43–61; S. Barkham, 1977, pp. 73–81; S. Barkham, 1993, pp. 173–180; Pope, 2004, p. 18). But Spain's loss would be England's gain. Spanish consumers who by then were accustomed to having Newfoundland saltfish as a staple

element of their diet were now obliged to turn to other European suppliers.² Since English trade with Spain generally, and West Country trade in particular, in a variety of commodities was well developed by then, the opportunity to fill the vacuum created by the decline of the Basque fishery was easily accommodated (Grafe, 2012, chapter 3, especially pp. 62–64). And since the Spanish market wanted saltfish, that was what West Country fishermen would deliver. Thus, as the Basque fishery at Newfoundland faded, the West Country fishery at Newfoundland expanded in order to satisfy the Spanish appetite for saltfish (Gray, 1992, 184–185). This would persist even after Spain's relations with England first chilled, and then descended into war in 1585 (Cell, 1969, p. 29; Grant, 1989, p. 93; Croft, 1989, pp. 282–285; Croft, 1991, pp. 236–263).

WHAT IS SALTFISH?

Before we go any further, let us pause to explain what we mean by 'saltfish', for there is more than one way in which to cure cod. The oldest method may well have been 'stockfish', a cure used in cold climates where the fish was caught, cleaned, split, and dried by cold air and wind, without the use of any salt whatsoever. This technique was quite common in Iceland. The second method was used by the inshore fishermen on the coast of Ireland and, later, Newfoundland. Fish caught from small open boats were brought ashore, cleaned and split, lightly salted (which, for many, makes the term 'saltfish' a confusing one) and then laid out on stone beaches or on purpose-built flakes to dry (Turgeon, 1987, p. 138; Kowaleski, 2000, p. 443; Pope, 2004, p. 11; M. Barkham, 2009, p. 234). The process took several weeks to complete, but it resulted in a product with a long shelf-life, making saltfish an attractive product in southern European markets. Moreover, its light weight also made it easy to transport, a point to which this paper will return. The third method produced what was known as a 'wet' or 'green' cure. In this method, the fish would be gutted and cleaned, then heavily salted. In the early years of the fishery, fish processed this way was caught close to shore, much as fish made into saltfish was caught. When the French developed the offshore banks fishery in the mid-1500s, green cod became the exclusive cure of the banking vessels, with heavily salted cod arranged in layers in the hold; there it remained for considerable lengths of time before it was either

processed further or delivered to market (Mannion and S. Barkham, 1987, plate 22; Pope, 2004, p. 19). This 'wet' or 'green' cure became a specialty of French fishermen who serviced the demands of markets in northern France, notably Rouen and Paris. Those markets were accustomed to that cure since the days of the North Sea cod fishery, long before the Newfoundland fishing grounds had been discovered (Moore, 1984). This meant that the French favoured two very different cures for cod, saltfish (*morue sèche*) and green cod (*morue verte*), depending on which market was being serviced (Turgeon, 1986, p. 532; Mannion and S. Barkham, 1987, plate 22; Brière, 1990, pp. 54–58). In contrast, the West Country fishery specialized exclusively in the production of saltfish.

The unyielding preferences of the market explains why West Country ships concentrated on producing and delivering saltfish to Spain after 1560; that was what Spanish importers and consumers preferred (Pope, 2004, p. 15). Yet for decades, historians assumed – incorrectly – that the West Country preference for the dry cure was also a function of the availability and cost of salt. France had domestic sources of salt and so, it was argued, French outfitters could supply their fishing ships with salt both cheaply and in abundance. The English, in contrast (or so the argument went), had no domestic sources of salt and instead had to purchase it and transport it from overseas sources. Because this allegedly made salt expensive, historians maintained that the English adopted the dry cure method primarily because it used salt much more sparingly (Innis, 1954, pp. 35–36, 49; Cell, 1969, p. 5; Gilchrist, 1972, pp. 7–26; Davis, 1973, p. 82; Oswald, 1983, pp. 19–36; Dickinson, 1987, pp. 67–69). Accepting these authorities in good faith, authors of survey histories of Canada have picked up the interpretation and passed it on to countless numbers of university undergraduates (MacNutt, 1966, p. 2; Francis *et al.*, 2000, p. 39). One has even given the shortage of salt a deterministic role, to explain why Newfoundland was not settled more quickly, or explored more intensively (Norrie and Owsram, 1991, p. 54). While academics are beginning to give market factors a stronger role in determining which cure would be favoured, nevertheless, the belief that an abundance of salt gave the French an advantage over the English in the fishery persists in the literature to the present day (Morison, 1971, pp. 473–478; Rowe, 1980, p. 100; Davies, 1980, p. 242; Starkey, 1993, p. 183;

Kurlansky, 1997, pp. 54–55; Fagan, 2006, p. 230; Cadigan, 2009, p. 32; Ryan, 2012, p. 13).

Under close scrutiny, this erroneous argument falls apart. For one thing, the conclusion that salt was available and affordable for the French fishery but scarce and costly for the English is one drawn almost entirely without evidence. We still know far too little about the salt trade to determine what the costs of salt were, whatever the source. Nor is there any evidence in the documentary record of complaints about the cost or availability of salt. True, in his *Discourse and Discovery of New-Found-Land*, first published in 1620, Richard Whitbourne stressed the expense of salt. Yet he did so only to support a proposal to produce salt in Newfoundland. Nowhere did he suggest that English fishermen were handicapped by salt that was more costly and less abundant than salt available to fishermen of other nations (Cell, 1982, p. 142). On the contrary, we now know that salt was readily available to the English (Pope, 2004, p. 15). For the ships of Devon, it was a common cargo, together with nuts, fruits, cork, and especially wine, in their bilateral trades with Spain and Portugal (Gray, 1988, p. 128; Scantlebury, 1978, pp. 61–62; Kowaleski, 2000, pp. 443, 448).

If, then, we are to understand the most important factor in causing Devonshire fishermen at Newfoundland to specialize in the production of saltfish, we must pay attention, not to the price or availability of salt, but to the particular markets they supplied. And since Devonshire merchants were delivering their fish to Iberian and southern European markets, then we need to ask, why was saltfish better suited for those markets? The answer rests with the reality of geography and the stubbornness of mules. Much of the fish delivered to Spanish seaports like Santander and San Sebastian was transported inland to satisfy the high demand for fish of urban markets like Burgos and Madrid. But northern Spain lacked rivers that would enable bulk cargoes like fish to be delivered to interior destinations efficiently by water. The coast behind the Basque seaports was in fact quite rugged, so that fish had to be transported by mule trains over primitive trails and roads. While saltfish had other desirable qualities – such as its long shelf-life – the logistical challenge of moving cod from receiving port to inland consumers must have been a critical reason for the Spanish market to insist on receiving only high quality saltfish. Because it was light enough to be shipped by mule train in significant

quantities, only saltfish could arrive at inland destinations and still be affordable for consumers (R. Basurto Larrañaga, 1983, chapter 4, p. 205; Phillips, Jr., 1988, p. 269).

The relationship between the logistics of overland transportation and the preference in Iberia for lightweight saltfish may seem incredibly obvious, yet as Santiago Piquero and Ernesto López observe in the opening sentence of a recent article:

“Despite the important place that dried, salted cod has occupied in Spanish diet and cuisine, it has received surprisingly little attention in the historiography of Spanish consumption and food prices” (Piquero and López, 2006, p. 195).

Fortunately, that has begun to change. A new generation of historians is giving growing attention to the way in which market prices and consumer preferences were shaped by the logistical costs of transporting cod from receiving port to the market. In Spain, where fish destined for consumers in the urban markets of the interior had to be transported by road rather than by water, the cost of moving saltfish from coastal receiving ports to Spanish inland markets in the middle of the seventeenth century was twenty-five times greater than the cost of transporting saltfish across the Atlantic in the first place (Grafe, 2010, pp. 249, 266, especially tables 1 and 2, pp. 258–259; Grafe, 2003, 2012). This surely was a compelling reason in its own right for Spanish markets to favour lightweight saltfish. Indeed, so powerful did that preference become that, just as in other markets for saltfish such as Portugal and south-western France, Spain – particularly the Basque region – developed a cuisine in which that product became a key ingredient in many dishes.³ We can only hope that this attention to the factors which shaped consumer preferences will go far in offsetting the primacy given until now by the literature to the characteristics of production in the fishery.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, several factors converged in the sixteenth century which explain why Devonshire fishermen developed such a single-minded dedication to the production of, and trade in, Newfoundland saltfish. Of these, perhaps the most important was the logistical challenge of delivering fish to Basque seaports and thence to inland markets such as Burgos or even Madrid. This challenge committed Spain at a very

early stage to a preference for saltfish. When the Basque fishery went into decline after 1570 and was no longer able to satisfy the demands of the Iberian markets, it created an opportunity for foreign suppliers such as the merchants of Devon to expand their fishing operations in Newfoundland and satisfy those demands. In short, both the rapid growth of the West Country fishery at Newfoundland and its dedication to the production of high quality saltfish can be explained by the continued preference of the Iberian market for that commodity.

NOTES

1. Contemporary estimates together with surviving records suggest that French fishermen – predominantly Breton and Norman but from other regions as well – may have outfitted 500 vessels for the Newfoundland fishery, with 12,000 fishermen, during the late 1570s, while Basque and Portuguese outfitters equipped between two and three hundred vessels; on the French, see Turgeon, 1987, pp. 135–138; on the Portuguese, see Amorim, 2008, pp. 280–281; on the Basques, see M. Barkham, 2009, 236–244. The English presence did not begin to expand until the mid-1560s; Pope, 2004, p. 16; Dickinson, 1987, p. 67. Channel Island participation may have been even slower to develop; Appleby, 1984, p. 473. In 1578, Anthony Parkhurst estimated that the English fleet still numbered only thirty to fifty vessels, far fewer than the French Spanish, Portuguese fishing vessels and and Basque whaling vessels that he reported; Quinn, 1979, pp. 7–10.
2. Precisely what generated such a powerful demand for saltfish in Spanish consumers is an entirely different question than the one explored here. This paper takes that demand as a given and concentrates on the English response to that demand.
3. To this day, many of those dishes are prepared “mule driver style” in recognition of the way that saltfish was carried into the interior and the way in which saltfish dishes were routinely consumed by the mule drivers. One such dish – ‘bacalhao al ajo arriero’ (cod and potato puree, mule driver’s style) – figures prominently in the recipes assembled in Mendel (2002, p. 233).

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