

***The Ice Hunters: A History of Newfoundland Sealing to 1914, Newfoundland History Series 8.* Shannon Ryan.**

Helen Peters

Volume 12, numéro 1, spring 1996

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds12_1rv01

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Peters, H. (1996). *The Ice Hunters: A History of Newfoundland Sealing to 1914, Newfoundland History Series 8.* Shannon Ryan. *Newfoundland Studies*, 12(1), 54–61.

REVIEWS

Shannon Ryan, *The Ice Hunters: A History of Newfoundland Sealing to 1914*, Newfoundland History Series 8 (St. John's: Breakwater, 1994), pp. 537. Hb \$34.95; pb \$24.95.

HELEN PETERS

THIS BOOK JOINS the small but compelling company of books on the Newfoundland seal fishery. In addition to the American George Allen England's *The Greatest Hunt in the World* (1924 [rpt. 1969]), books on sealing have been written more recently and closer to home such as Cassie Brown's *Death on the Ice* (1972), Naboth Winsor's *Stalwart Men and Sturdy Ships* (1985), Michael Harrington's *Goin' to the Ice* (1986) and James E. Candow's *Of Men and Seals* (1989). However, Ryan's account, which to some extent can be seen as work he started with *Haulin' Rope and Gaff*, a collection of poems and songs on the seal fishery co-edited with Larry Small (1978), *Fish out of Water*, on the Newfoundland saltfish trade (1986) and *Seals and Sealers*, a pictorial history in which he was assisted by Martha Drake (1987), goes far beyond the works on sealing that preceded it.

In *The Ice Hunters* Ryan takes a squarely postcolonial view of the seal fishery and the role it played in the emergence of Newfoundland's independence. He identifies the industry, first of all, as one which was market driven by Britain's requirements for marine mammal oil throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sealing was, however, a locally invented and locally developed industry, and Ryan carefully traces its evolution in the economic sector and exhaustively assesses the major role sealing played in the demographics, politics, society and culture of Newfoundland.

As is the norm in colonization, the economic development of Newfoundland was governed by the exploitation of the island's resources both by inhabitants, who wanted to remain resident on the island and make it their home, and by those who were temporary residents or not residents at all. Ryan argues convincingly that sealing gave the inhabitants the power to channel economic development in a manner which led toward gaining political independence for Newfoundland. This situation decreased the power of temporary residents and non-residents to maintain Newfoundland subject to the will of British imperialism and the economic benefits of the West Country fish merchants. Increasingly in the nineteenth century, Newfoundlanders' control of development and industry led toward independence. First a colony (in 1824), then Representative Government (in 1832) and finally Responsible Government (in 1855) came into being. The decrease in the value of Newfoundland's natural resources and the country's inability to diversify industries led to the inevitable relinquishing of independence in 1934 and again in 1949. Ryan argues that the Newfoundland seal fishery and the role of the ice hunters played a major role in the rise and fall of Newfoundland's independence. His argument is compelling. He gives us an in-depth, meticulously documented and tragically realistic account of the heroic effort which went into the success and failure of this maligned industry.

Ryan's work is comprehensive. His introduction traces the contest for economic power and political control between West Country merchants and Newfoundland resident merchants and fishermen; this contest was a major factor in the development of the Newfoundland fishery. During the period from the late sixteenth century to 1800, the fishery evolved from an English dominated migratory fishery to one under the control of Newfoundland resident planters, dependent first on migratory labour, then on resident labour as immigration to the island increased. Throughout the period, residency and colonization were discouraged by the British government. In 1775, the British Parliament passed an act to prevent the growth of the resident fishery in Newfoundland, citing among other reasons the need for the migrant fishermen out of England to return home in order to man the Royal Navy (32). Nevertheless, the lure of Newfoundland grew in England and migratory labour became resident or moved on to North America. Newfoundland also attracted the Irish; these new immigrants settled various locations along the Newfoundland coast particularly on the Avalon Peninsula.

The Newfoundland cod fishery having become predominantly one carried on by residents during the eighteenth century, a second industry that was developing near the end of the century — the spring seal fishery — began to play a role in the Newfoundland economy. By 1815 with two industries, which complemented each other in terms of both skills and timetables, the seeds of advocacy for representative government had sprouted among the resident Newfoundland population of some 40,000.

56 *Reviews*

Ryan argues that the impetus to develop the seal fishery throughout the nineteenth century in Newfoundland was England's increasing demand for marine mammal oil. His book thoroughly documents and explains Newfoundland's market-driven response to the need for oil in England, not only for the long-standing requirements for oil in currying leather and in soap and cloth manufacture, but more pressingly and abundantly for increased and improved public lighting which grew throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, when gas replaced oil for lighting. Seal oil continued high in demand in England for traditional uses in manufacture and for metal lubrication until animal oil was replaced by petroleum oil for these purposes in the late nineteenth century. Supplying seal oil to England was a key building block in the nineteenth-century economy of Newfoundland. The economic growth which the seal fishery brought changed both social structure and political ambition.

Ryan demonstrates convincingly that it was because of the market for seal oil that Newfoundland's population both grew and spread geographically. He quotes British parliamentary papers which indicate that, in 1817, the saltfish trade could not sustain the population of 40,000. These papers recommended that at least 5,000 people be removed from the island (92), but obviously the Newfoundlanders did not want to go. By 1825, the population rose quickly to 55,504; by 1845, to 96,296; by 1857 to 124,228; and by 1911, the population of Newfoundland doubled to 242,619. (404-5) The population growth was driven, Ryan writes, by the combination of the cod fishing and sealing industries. Animal husbandry and agriculture played a minimal role in the island's economy, as did forestry. However, the seal fishery by 1832 employed nearly one-half of the total male adult population of 14,000; it provided in the 1840s and 1850s one-third of the value of total exports.

The hunt for seals drove socio-economic factors and changed the demographics of Newfoundland. It caused the growth of wealthy outports, first in Conception Bay and then up the east coast where men hunted seals in the spring and fished for cod off the Labrador coast in the summer. It increased the need for ships in the days of sail (particularly in the 1840s and 1850s, but really until 1863 when the first foreign-built steam driven boats were introduced to the hunt), which drove a successful wooden boat building industry in many communities. It occasioned an oil refining business located in outports from which the sealing vessels sailed; the refining later became consolidated almost exclusively in St. John's. The introduction of steam-driven wooden boats in 1863 consolidated boat ownership into the hands of the major companies in St. John's, with a few in Harbour Grace. Most of these were built in Dundee. Such developments sapped the economic strength of the outports while increasing the wealth in St. John's, particularly among the merchants.

Ryan traces the development, peak and decline of the seal fishery. The industry which began in the 1790s peaked in 1840 and reached a plateau. In the 1850s, 14,000 men sailed to the hunt on 400 predominantly locally-built boats most of

which were owned in and sailed from the outports. The decline began in the 1860s and it accelerated in the 1880s. The introduction of steam boats in 1863 had led to larger and fewer boats, with a concomitant requirement for fewer captains and men, so that by 1914, 3959 men went to the hunt on 21 ships which were owned in and sailed from St. John's. Export value of seal oil and skins peaked at 30% to 40% during the 1840s and 1850s, falling to 5% at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Ryan's analysis of the role the seal fishery played in the lives of captains, men who sailed with them and the landsmen who hunted from the shore is detailed and fully documented. The spread of wealth throughout Newfoundland and the rise of a well-paid and influential middle class was built on an industry that was brutal if not horrific. The most powerful and moving aspects of this account deal with the squalid conditions of life on the sealing ships, the brutality and danger of the act of killing seals on the ice (whether one sailed out to them by ship or pursued them within sight of land as a "landsman") and the dangers of driving a wooden boat into the thick of an icefield in order to engage the prey. Ryan quotes Anspach's *History* on the conditions in the ice:

During the months of February, March, April, and part of May, the coast of Newfoundland is generally surrounded with ice to the distance of several leagues ... Immense fields of ice of such extent that the eye cannot reach their bounds, and sometimes impelled by a rotary movement by which their circumference attains a velocity of several miles per hour: lofty islands and mountains moving along with irregular and sometimes inconceivable rapidity, ... whilst fragments of various sizes are scattered about throughout the intervening spaces, and coming in drifts so thick and so quick as to whirl the ships about as in a whirlpool: here and there a mountain bursting with a tremendous explosion; the fields suddenly changing their directions, coming into close contact with a dreadful shock, and overlaying each other [called 'rafting'] with a noise resembling that of complicated machinery, or of distant thunder...the strongest ship can no more stand these shocks than a sheet of paper can stop a musket-ball. (249)

On the other hand, when a boat became stuck in the ice, Jukes in his *Excursion* describes the efforts that the men had to exert to get the ship moving again. Ryan quotes from his account:

If a large and strong pan was met with, the ice-saw was got out. Sometimes, a crowd of men clinging around the ship's bows, and holding on to the bights of rope suspended there for the purpose, would jump and dance on the ice, bending and breaking it with their weight, shoving it below the vessel, and dragging her on over it with all their force. Up to their knees in water, as one piece after another sunk beneath the cutwater, they still held on, hurraing [*sic*] at every fresh start she made. (250-1).

When the sealers returned to their ships, their living conditions were far from commodious. Ryan includes a description from Lindsay's account from the S.S. *Aurora* in 1884:

58 Reviews

I looked into the 'tween decks and saw a horrible mess. The bunks were full of men, many playing cards, as each bunk held four. They must have stifled. For light, lamps burning seal oil were used, and the reek coming from the main hatch would almost have suggested fire. (262)

Nearer the turn of the century, conditions had not improved. Ryan reproduces the evidence which John Hiscock gave to the Sealing Commission in the wake of the *Greenland* disaster:

You are out on the ice all day tugging at the seals and, without any proper food. Now a man can endure that, and even endure it day after day, for a succession of days, if he is strong and well, and can look forward, after the day's work is done to a good square meal and a quiet bunk. But the poor sealer has none of these. The steamer in which he is pigged together with some two or three hundred other men *has no sleeping berths whatever for the men*. There are a few rough shelves without bed clothes or bedding of any kind, about enough for one-third of the men on board. If a man wants a bed he must bring a bag of shavings on board to lie on, which he has borrowed or begged from some charitable neighbour on shore. (262)

In 1899 the *Evening Telegram* attacked the government for failing to pass protective legislation for sealers. It was as late as 1914 before regulations proposed by Coaker and the Fishermen's Protective Union provided for:

wooden sheathing to reduce condensation in steel ships; portable iron frame berths; some protection from drafts in the sleeping quarters; the heating of sleeping quarters with steam pipes; a room for the ill and disabled and, where practicable, a doctor; and a prohibition on the use of rifles. (366)

There were also regulations which ordered that hot food and soft bread be served at least three times per week, that hot breakfasts be provided and that the cooks' time be dedicated to cooking. (367)

If conditions on sealing ships were bad, written reports on sealing carried out by the landsmen (and women and children) were hardly less daunting. Ryan quotes the *Evening Mercury*, 4 January 1889 on the arrival of the seals in Bonavista:

All [men and boys] who could carry a gaff, a tow rope and knife, and had strength to tow one or more seals to land, made for the ice. Then followed women and children, with baskets and kettles containing bread, cake, tea and everything in the way of eatables that could be gathered in a hurry, to meet the men and big boys when they came back with their tows, — some going after them on the ice, the more timid waiting on the shore to give the hungry, tired men food, and take a turn with them on the tow-line. (267)

These were the normal conditions of sealing. Ryan also details, in his chapter on sealing disasters, the loss of life and ships that dogged the ice hunters throughout the more than a hundred years covered in this book. Men on the ice could fall through, become lost in a snow storm, could be blown away on the ice from their ship, and freeze to death. Ships could run aground in conditions of poor visibility, suffer engine explosions, become crushed in the ice or fall apart in storms. As technological progress in ship building and decrease in the seal populations dictated

that larger and fewer ships went to the front, the dangers for men adrift from their ship and lost grew because there were fewer vessels out there able to find them and pick them up. Ryan chronicles sealing disasters in the industry as sealing developed, peaked and declined. Many tragic incidents throughout the history of sealing have been documented both on ships and amongst landmen. As merely one instance of the latter Ryan provides information on the loss of life in Trinity on the 28th of February 1892 when the wind shifted, stranding some 24 men on the ice unable to reach shore. The year 1914, the last year covered in this study, stands as a testimonial to the grief caused by the deaths of 78 men separated from their ship (the S.S. *Newfoundland*); they froze to death on the ice, most probably in the same storm which sent the S.S. *Southern Cross* to the bottom of the ocean with her entire crew of 173 men.

While it is obvious that the nature of the occupation itself was dangerous, government attitudes during the colonial period did nothing to help. Ryan quotes the *Patriot* of 19 April 1843 which pointed out the government's expenditure of £500 to assist the crew of a foreign ship that was wrecked in Newfoundland waters en route to the United States while giving only £200 to help the survivors and dependents of men from more than twenty sailing ships lost in the sealing industry. (317) It is clear that loss of life did not decrease during the period of responsible government, but there is evidence of, at least, some concern over the plight of women and children bereaved by losses in the pursuit of the seal industry. Ryan quotes the *Royal Gazette* of 21 June 1870 which reported that:

some of the wives of the lost have suffered so much that their minds are deranged ... It is sincerely hoped that our Government will do something for us in this our time of need and sore affliction. I trust it will assist the poor starving widows and orphans who are ruined, as their only means of support has been taken away from them. (299)

Among dangerous occupations the sealing industry was always particularly dangerous. It was only finally at the beginning of the twentieth century that the companies sending men to the ice, the sealing captains and officers began to be held accountable for their actions.

Sealing began to make an impact on social conditions in Newfoundland. Ryan outlines the role that the seal industry played in securing political independence in Newfoundland and in forging a sense of identity and pride. Through strike action in the industry in Harbour Grace and Carbonear in 1832, the sealers made the point that their labour was valuable and much in demand; in St. John's in 1842 they secured a lowering of berth charges (the sum a sealer paid to the merchant-shipowner to go to the ice). Ryan cites Philip Tocque (quoting John Nugent) who describes the inequity of the relationship between sealer and ship owner thus:

Upon the return of the sealing vessel, one half of the proceeds of the industry of the men is handed over to the merchant, in remuneration for the capital he had advanced in the first instance. The other half is divided amongst the men, whose toil and daring procured it; but then, the merchant's half is given perfectly clear and unencumbered of all charges, of every deduction — the poor man's half is clipped and curtailed —

he is, first, obliged to pay hospital dues; and, further, besides giving the merchant a full and undiminished half of the entire voyage, he is still further taxed by the merchant, to whom he is obliged to pay a sum of money, not only for the very materials used in its prosecution, but actually, a further sum for the privilege of *being allowed* to hazard his life to ensure a fortune for the merchant. (332-3).

Further strike action in 1842 struck a blow for sealers' economic independence by initiating legislation which came into effect in 1843. The legislation ensured that the price of seal pelts (money with which the sealer paid his debt to the merchant) was fair. The sealer who bought his tools and outfit from the merchant on credit (as almost all sealers had to), was charged a price that ranged from some 43% to 86% higher than the cash price of the goods. (346) The last strikes which resulted in progress for the men involved were those in Harbour Main and Brigus in 1845 which succeeded in lowering the berth charges. These strikes succeeded in improving the working and pay conditions of the men. The results stand in contrast to the last major strike in 1902 in St. John's when the sealers were fighting a rear-guard action and gained no benefit from their action. The fact that the sealers were predominantly from the outports and were swarming through St. John's, where they came to board their ships, frightened and antagonized the townsfolk and furthered the division between "townies" and "baymen" which had already developed through the previous movement of work and wealth from the outports to St. John's.

Ryan surmises that the isolation of the sealers in St. John's and their lack of power increased their antipathy to the St. John's merchants and to St. John's in general: "they were part of a populist uprising culminating in the formation of the Fishermen's Protective Union, which neither requested nor received any favours from the capital." (347) He argues that

The seal fishery created an environment, temporary though it may have been, that was conducive to the development of a sense of identity and solidarity among its workers and fostered the concept of collective action ... The seal fishery was also a different industry from the family-based inshore cod fishery on the island, and also different from the planter Labrador cod fishery which was prosecuted from thousands of isolated fishing stations along the coast of Labrador. It was poetic justice that an industry which was fuelled and driven by the demands of the Industrial Revolution should also become the breeding ground for modern industrial action among the fishermen of Newfoundland. (352)

The legacy of the Newfoundland seal fishery and the ice hunters who pursued it is a great one. It undoubtedly created, as Shannon Ryan illustrates, a strong economic base which fostered political independence, social advancement and demographic change. It also promoted a distinctive Newfoundland culture. The seal fishery established the reputation of Newfoundland sealing captains and crews as the most skilled mariners in Arctic exploration and discovery. It gave Newfoundland heroes. Through narratives, vignettes and songs, the sealer and his way of life with its hardship and danger were celebrated. Ryan writes,

By 1914, sealing had gained a reputation for being harsh, dangerous and cruel; still it contained an element of romance and adventure, and the men who succeeded at it, whether as captains, officers, gunners or batsmen, were viewed with respect by the local community and by those interested in Arctic travel and exploration ... By the beginning of the twentieth century, sealing was having its greatest impact on the culture of the colony, as writers reminded their readers of the great days of the old industry and of the sterling reputations of the leading captains. In fact, its decline as an economic enterprise was matched by its growth as a significant cultural feature of Newfoundland. (395)

The Ice Hunters is a powerful book because of the strength of its argument on the significant role which the seal fishery played in Newfoundland's economic, political, social and cultural development; it is a valuable work because of the comprehensiveness of its scope and the fullness and accuracy of its detail. There is little that one might want to know about the seal fishery that is not covered: additional information is to be found in stories and accounts of sealing adventures; obituaries of leading sealing captains; reports of cruelty to seals; information on cooking seal flippers and an account of Lady Blake, wife of the governor, who hosted a bazaar at Government House in St. John's in 1899 where she raised \$800 for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

The book is the result of an enormous amount of painstaking research, and I believe, love and respect for the topic and the men who lived this phase of Newfoundland's history. The captains and crews come alive and their exploits are presented vividly in Ryan's account. The book is meticulously documented, containing extensive quotations from historical reports and documents, photographs and 90 pages of illustrative and valuable tables. The work is clearly and well written and it gives the kind of postcolonial perspective that the study of Newfoundland history requires and deserves. Technically, the text shows evidence of careful proofreading by the author. It is a pity that the publisher did not provide equal care in preparing the captions for the illustrations where there are some typographical errors. The worst omission is in Figure 1. where a line is missing. The reader may be less mystified by Figure 22. if aware that the photograph is printed upside down.