

# Challenging the “Merchants’ Domain” William Coaker and the Price of Fish, 1908–1919

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# Challenging the “Merchants’ Domain”: William Coaker and the Price of Fish, 1908–1919

MELVIN BAKER

## INTRODUCTION

In the first decades of the twentieth century, despite efforts to diversify the economy, mainly through forestry and mineral developments, the fishing industry remained by far the largest employer and the economic base for practically all Newfoundland and Labrador coastal communities. The bulk of the fishery involved catching and salting codfish for export. This had been so for many decades. Fishermen caught, dried, and salted fish for sale to merchants who, in turn, sold the commodity in world markets. The prices the merchants received in those markets, or their expectations of them, largely established the price they decided they would pay the fishermen. In other words, fishermen had no effective say in the price of their fish. However, by 1908 William Coaker and his Fishermen’s Protective Union (FPU) challenged that long-standing status quo.<sup>1</sup> This culminated in 1919 when Coaker entered elected office as Minister of Marine and Fisheries and introduced the fisheries regulations (the Coaker regulations). These measures were intended to allow government to control the shipment of salt codfish and determine the conditions for its sale, including the price the fishermen would receive. The Coaker regulations failed. The focus of this paper is not on that failure but, rather, on the years that preceded them, during which Coaker introduced a new phenomenon into the fisheries, that is, a collective challenge by fishermen to the merchants’ domain.

These early years of Coaker’s struggle to improve the marketing of fish and to obtain better prices for fishermen are not well documented. In particular,

the institutional arrangements within which exports took place, e.g., the roles of brokers and agents in export markets and efforts by Newfoundland exporters to co-operate, have received little attention in the literature. For instance, how the saltfish trade and its markets operated in the nineteenth century is admirably examined in Shannon Ryan's 1986 *Fish out of Water*, but that study does not deal with the post-1900 role of fish brokers in marketing fish.<sup>2</sup> Even Harold Innis's 1940 seminal work on the cod fisheries makes only a brief reference to St. John's exporters combining to protect their sale of fish in Spain during those earlier years.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it has been argued that during this period, Newfoundland was moving away from the notion of improving the fisheries, which would have benefited both merchants and fishermen, to other industries. The question as to why the business community and the government did not concentrate more effectively on the fishing industry in the early twentieth century has been examined by a number of historians. For David Alexander, in several 1970s publications, it was the "conundrum of the Newfoundland economy." In his view, Newfoundland's business and political elite were unable or unwilling to manage the fishery as well as their competitors in Iceland or Norway. On the other hand, William Reeves, in a 1989 article, addressed this conundrum, showing clearly that both fishermen and merchants were open to change and innovation in the fishery before 1914. However, change in the production and marketing of fish proved difficult as government, fishermen, and merchants moved slowly towards finding a fishery regime to "establish more orderly conditions" for all interested parties.<sup>4</sup>

The problem was how government could reconcile the interests of fishermen and merchants to tackle the issues associated with the production, cullage, and marketing of salt codfish that all three parties recognized had to be addressed for the general economic good. This would have enabled Newfoundland to confront growing competition in the markets for codfish coming from Norway and Iceland since the 1890s. In essence, both fishermen and merchants had a commonality of interests: they would all benefit from improved marketing and better export prices for fish. After all, if better prices were offered to fishermen, then better fish would be produced. If better fish were produced, then better prices would be realized in the markets. However, merchants were not united, competing with one another at times, while Coaker and the FPU had to also protect the fishermen's interests.

The formation of the FPU in 1908 challenged the way salt codfish exporters operated in buying codfish from Newfoundland fishermen, with the Union trying to control the supply of fish to maximize the price paid to fishermen. It

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tried this first by having fishermen not sell their fish unless a certain price named by Coaker was obtainable. It then tried to steer fish caught by Unionists to exporters willing to pay the Union price. Later, the Union unsuccessfully fought in court how exporters fixed the current price for fish shipped direct from Labrador, and also failed in its 1915 efforts to have the legislature determine the price of Labrador fish. When Coaker could not secure private capital support for his Union Export Company, after 1917 he moved more directly into the fish export business through the use of English brokers to sell Union fish. Coaker also tried to have the government guarantee a minimum price to be paid fishermen for their fish, as well as guarantee protection to exporters against losses, a situation he sought in 1918 and 1919 when he became directly involved in the fish export business through the Trading Company and Export Company. Nothing would be done substantially on these fronts until after the 1919 general election. This paper documents and provides insights into the complexity of these mutual and opposing interests within the broader context of the constraints imposed by world market conditions.

### THE MERCHANTS’ DOMAIN

By the early twentieth century, the bulk of Newfoundland’s labour force depended primarily on the export of salt cod, and most fishermen lived in nearly 1,400 small communities located along a long, indented coastline.<sup>5</sup> The economy in these communities (outports) was based on a truck, or credit, system. Outport fishermen each spring acquired their supplies and provisions from local merchants and each autumn squared up with them once their catch was delivered. The fishermen were often in perpetual debt to the merchant.<sup>6</sup> The major fish exporters in the capital, St. John’s, determined the price paid for the codfish and it varied widely throughout the season, depending on where in Newfoundland it was caught and how it was cured. At the end of each government fiscal year, the average overall price of codfish for that year was calculated based on the amount of codfish exports and its value declared by exporters through the Customs Department.<sup>7</sup>

Newfoundland’s major codfish exporters usually numbered fewer than 20 in any given year.<sup>8</sup> They bought fish from outport merchants, to whom they had provided fishery supplies and provisions, as well as from outport planters (independent fishermen who owned their own vessels and hired fishermen on a share basis) and from smaller merchant/buyers in St. John’s who owned or hired

schooners to collect fish, especially on the Labrador coast. Exporters in turn used commercial brokers<sup>9</sup> in England (mainly in London, often referred to locally as the London Brokers), whose responsibility<sup>10</sup> was to find buyers in the European markets for salt codfish, the chief markets by 1914, in order of market share, being Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Greece. In Brazil, Newfoundland's largest individual market by 1914,<sup>11</sup> and the British colonies in the West Indies, exporters generally dealt directly with local buyers or through one of the major St. John's exporters, such as John Crosbie or Walter Monroe, who specialized mainly in exports to Brazil.<sup>12</sup> Exporters depended on the expertise of long-established relationships with their brokers for knowledge of European markets. The brokers earned a commission based on sales. Merchants made regular visits to Europe to meet these brokers and to examine markets for themselves.

Generally, Newfoundland exporters were reluctant to co-operate to pool their fish to market for the general welfare of all of them. They closely guarded knowledge of their shipments from both St. John's and Labrador as well as the destination for their fish in Europe. They competed fiercely with each other to acquire fish locally and to sell it in the market. Exporters were at the mercy of buyers in Europe and vigorously competed with each other to be the first to market, frequently undercutting each other to sell their fish as quickly as possible for the best price their brokers could get. Sales were either outright or on consignment. With an outright sale, which could be made before the fish left Newfoundland, the broker reached an agreed price with a buyer to obtain an immediate payment. This was because most exporters depended on credit loans from local banks to finance their general operations. Since 1894, the banks were all branches of major Canadian financial institutions and they often restricted credit depending on prospects in the fish markets.<sup>13</sup> Exporters obviously preferred a quick sale as holding out for a higher price was a risky prospect, especially when they were paying interest on their credit loans to the banks. Only the largest exporters, such as Bowring, Job, and Harvey with their diversified economic interests, were less vulnerable in this regard.

Exporters generally found that, with no agent on the ground to look after their interests, they were at the mercy of fish buyers in foreign markets as the brokers generally did not look after that end of the transaction. Buyers in the markets often argued, justifiably or not, that the fish received was of a poorer quality or grade and cull than promised and demanded (and received) a lower price, much to the financial disadvantage of exporters. Also, these buyers often held back 20 per cent of the value of the sale for damage claims to the product contracted, regardless of whether there was any damage or lower quality than

agreed on. With consignment sales the exporter gave the fish to a broker who determined the most opportune time for a sale, with the fish often being held in storage until a deal was finalized. This method became increasingly common after 1909 when several major merchants combined and hired Spanish-based British timber and minerals broker George Hawes to represent their interests in Spain on a commission basis on the selling price and the volume of sales.<sup>14</sup> Within a decade he proved his effectiveness in looking after the fish of his clients by quickly resolving disputes for the exporters with buyers and by dealing with the quality and volume of fish shipped. His knowledge of local markets also enabled him to advise his shippers when to ship and where in Spain and he quickly gained their confidence in working on their behalf.<sup>15</sup>

In 1909 the merchants also began to organize themselves within Newfoundland. Merchants and exporters had been dismayed by the fishery problems that they had encountered in 1907 and 1908. Public efforts for a board of trade (formed in June 1909), what Coaker called the “Merchants’ Union” in November 1910,<sup>16</sup> gained momentum in November 1908 with a series of letters that Gilbert Gosling of A. Harvey & Co. wrote to the press. Gosling called for an organization encompassing all industries and businesses that would bring order to fishery matters and markets by appointing agents to look after exporters’ interests, regulate shipments from Newfoundland — “we go on shipping there [the markets] in an absolutely blind way” — and establish a standardized cure.<sup>17</sup> In their request to have legislation passed to incorporate a board in 1909, the Board’s founders (all major merchants) asked the People’s Party government of Prime Minister Edward Morris for regulatory authority over the standardization of fish cures, but the Prime Minister refused to give up the government’s legislative authority over this matter because of FPU opposition to it. However, the Board did receive limited authority to establish its own grades of fish and to appoint its own inspectors and cullers to provide inspection certificates on fish exports. It was not, however, the “reactionary body” portrayed in the literature on this period as in, for example, Ian McDonald’s 1971 study of William Coaker and the Fishermen’s Protective Union between 1908 and 1925.<sup>18</sup> Rather, the Board sought to bring order to the catching, curing, and shipping of salt codfish and pushed for more scientific investigations into all of Newfoundland’s fisheries, an approach also shared by Coaker.<sup>19</sup> Internal divisions and mistrust among shippers ultimately served to frustrate such efforts.

## THE PRICE OF FISH

Fish prices in Newfoundland were usually set in August and September and influenced by several factors. First, within Newfoundland, planters and fishermen received an agreed upon price determined by exporters in those months once the first shipment of fish went to market.<sup>20</sup> Second, the price in Newfoundland was affected by the amount paid to shippers for fish caught on the south coast, which went to market first in August in Oporto, Portugal, because the south coast fishery was earlier than the one in northern and eastern Newfoundland and on the Labrador coast. As exporter John Crosbie explained in 1920, the Oporto price often was the general benchmark for other Newfoundland fish that exporters purchased.<sup>21</sup> On the northeast coast, shore fishermen delayed making their fish early, concentrating instead on as large a catch as possible, even though fish made in August and sent in September would have fetched them a better price when the markets were only beginning to receive fish caught that year. Third, the success or failure of the previous year's (or years') fishery and how much money merchants lost on supplying fishermen were other factors influencing how much they would pay, regardless of the success of the current year's fishery.

While the price paid in Newfoundland depended on the success of exporters in selling their fish, that success was affected by the uneven cull of fish sent there. Newfoundland had no mandated standards for a fish cull so different grades of fish often went to market mixed together. This was especially true of fish shipped from the Labrador coast, where fish was loaded together aboard steamers "talqual," that is, as it was without a cull. A growing amount of this fish was small because cod traps had become increasingly used by these fishermen and the rush to ship directly from the coast meant that a proper cull was difficult to implement.<sup>22</sup> As part of the rush to markets, exporters chartered steamers to go to the Labrador coast to ship direct from the coast to European markets with exporters competing with each other to get there first. This fish came primarily from Conception Bay fishermen who travelled each summer to Labrador as passengers on other vessels and who fished from "rooms" they owned on the Labrador coast. For exporters and their agent buyers, it was cheaper to buy fish from Labrador and ship by steamer from there because it was closer to European markets.<sup>23</sup> The markets for this fish were Italy, Greece, Spain, and Portugal.

Determining the price for Labrador fish was complicated by the pricing methodology of exporters, and this was a perennial grievance for fishermen

before 1914. This grievance consolidated Union support among Conception Bay fishermen and broadened the Union's initial support base beyond the northeast coast. These fishermen had been for many years unhappy with the compensation method for Labrador fish. In early 1907 fishermen had a test case in the Supreme Court questioning what was to be the current price of Labrador fish they were to be paid. In the jury trial *Soper & Sons v. Baine, Johnston & Co.* heard on 16 January 1907 before Justice George Emerson, the plaintiff claimed a balance due of 10 cents per quintal in excess of the current rate per quintal of Labrador fish at the time of sale, while the defendant's lawyer, Sir James Winter, argued that the current rate was the rate current at the time of the sale. The jury found in favour of the plaintiff that it was the highest price paid for Labrador fish.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, in 1907 buyers inserted into their agreements with fishermen that the current price would be based on the highest price paid on the Labrador coast that season instead of a higher price that might be paid later to fishermen who brought their fish to St. John's and other ports.<sup>25</sup>

Fishermen were dissatisfied with this change, and in October and November 1907 they protested in several Conception Bay communities. They were upset because Conception Bay buyers were offering \$3.50 per quintal when St. John's buyers were offering \$4.00. A Brigus meeting of 500 fishermen on 22 October decided to retain St. John's lawyer Edward Morris (who had resigned earlier in the year as Attorney General from the Bond government) to pursue an action in the Supreme Court against one of the largest buyers on how the current price was determined.<sup>26</sup> One Avondale merchant, E. Kennedy, defended his price by noting that those St. John's exporters had little or no Labrador fish for sale for market and did not handle Labrador fish. At Carbonear on 28 October, fishermen demanded \$4.00. On 2 November other fishermen met at Conception Harbour to discuss forming a fishermen's union. St. John's lawyer and Mayor Michael Gibbs, who had helped city workers to form unions, spoke on the benefits of unionism. The fishermen also agreed to appoint an agent to keep a watch on fish prices in the markets and to have Gibbs meet with fish buyers to secure an increase in the price of fish. If an advance could not be obtained, they supported a test case in the Supreme Court contesting how buyers set the price of Labrador fish. Despite these protests, fishermen failed to keep their newly organized United Fishermen's Union alive to lobby for their cause, but the seeds of discontent among Conception Bay fishermen were not far from the surface.<sup>27</sup> In February 1910 planter Samuel Snow sued fish buyer J.W. Hiscock of Brigus to recover \$19.85 as the balance due on the sale of 99¼ quintals of Labrador fish, claiming the difference was a bonus for other fish



paid at a higher rate in Labrador in 1909. Justice Emerson found in favour of Snow, but buyers continued to ignore the decision and paid the bonus only if they wished.<sup>28</sup> This grievance made Conception Bay fishermen receptive to Coaker's organizing efforts.

#### COAKER'S CHALLENGE TO WATER STREET

After its 1908 formation, the Fishermen's Protective Union actively promoted and galvanized efforts (and polarized them as well) for major structural changes in the fisheries in general and the salt codfish trade in particular, efforts briefly examined for the pre-1919 period by McDonald.<sup>29</sup> The Union grew rapidly after 1908 on the northeast coast and in Conception Bay, where there was considerable discontent among fishermen. By the end of 1914 Coaker claimed a membership of 20,000 spread among 206 local councils.<sup>30</sup> From 1908 the FPU challenged how fish exporters set the price of codfish and wanted the government to protect the interests of fishermen by regulating those prices. Its mercantile opponents championed the existing free enterprise approach, arguing that the fish trade was best able to look after fishery matters.<sup>31</sup>

Coaker long believed that fishermen, not merchants, should determine the price of fish.<sup>32</sup> He was appalled at the substantial gap that often existed between what merchants paid for fish in Newfoundland and what they received in the foreign markets. In 1907 and 1908 overstocked markets meant there was little demand for Newfoundland fish despite above-average catches. The situation led to a reduction in the price paid by exporters in these two years and a sharp reduction in what they received for fish sold. Fishermen had good catches but in both years got very low prices for it.<sup>33</sup> The situation was not helped by the Liberal Party under Prime Minister Robert Bond, which during the general election campaign in September and October of 1908 had advised fishermen to withhold their fish to exporters to drive up the price of fish.<sup>34</sup> The price of fish in August started at \$3.60 and declined to \$2.60, while that for Labrador fish was \$1.80 a quintal. The "whole army of fishermen showed great unrest," Coaker reflected in 1917, and "dissatisfaction reigned supreme."<sup>35</sup> In his organizing efforts in 1909, Coaker promised to get a minimum price of \$5 per quintal for shore fish, that is, fish generally caught by inshore fishermen on the Island of Newfoundland.

Coaker had supported the election of the People's Party led by the populist St. John's politician Edward Patrick Morris in the May 1909 general election.

Among his election promises were calls for a standard cull for fish and a system of government cullers. Coaker cautiously looked to Morris to embrace and implement the FPU's own agenda for fishery reform, a faith Morris would not live up to over the next two years.<sup>36</sup> At the top of Coaker's agenda was the inconsistency in the culling of fish by buyers, the three main grades being No. 1 Merchantable (which fetched the best price), No. 2 Madeira (the next price), and No. 3 West India (the lowest price for the lowest grade of fish). Merchantable was often graded as Madeira, Coaker observed, in order to pay a fisherman less for his fish, but the difference in the grade faded away "just as soon as it passes the portals of the buyer's fish stores." According to the FPU's culling plan, government cullers would be placed under an Inspector of Cullers. These cullers would qualify for their jobs based on examinations administered by the Inspector, who would be a fisherman "from the outports, a Union man, and nominated by the Union," and all their salaries would be paid by the government. Any fish shipped would have a government stamp of approval ensuring "proper standard, and the creation of confidence in the markets, which are absent under the present system. The mixing of fish, No. 1 with No. 2, and No. 2 with No. 3 in the stores, is responsible for a lot of the unsatisfactory cargoes and cut in prices when discharging abroad."<sup>37</sup> A "standard cull would be thus set up, and each quality and size properly defined by law." An improved cull would lead to fishermen preparing a better quality of fish and a better product for sale in the markets. As he told fishermen in February 1909, fish was an "article of food" and they had to do their "utmost" to make good "clean, white fish," and the "care must commence at the splitting table and follow until the fish is off" to the markets. He also advocated the explorations of new markets for fish and the co-ordination of sending fish to existing markets to prevent an overabundance of supply, a view shared by the Board of Trade as well.<sup>38</sup>

Coaker's vision for fishery reform would give the FPU future control over the system of supplying fish and prevent an oversupply in the markets, with exporters accepting the FPU price and purchasing the fish before the cargo sailed for markets. Once the Union had 30,000 members, it would consider a method for fixing the price that fishermen would receive, taking into consideration market conditions each year and the size of the catch in Newfoundland. The merchants would pay for it at the FPU-dictated price, otherwise fishermen would withhold their fish and their boycott would reduce the amount of fish available for export substantially. As markets would then consume the available supply, the price would advance and the FPU would charter its own vessels and "control the supply to each market, dispose of each cargo prior to sailing,

and thus become catchers and exporters.” As Coaker believed that exporters made contracts for the sale of their fish long before the beginning of each year of the fishery, they would have no choice but to pay a minimum of five dollars per quintal for shore fish once they realized that the fishermen were determined to remain behind the FPU.<sup>39</sup> However, Coaker’s knowledge of the markets was much influenced by his experience of fishery conditions within Newfoundland; in this regard, he was probably no different than many exporters who were so reliant on their brokers.

The Board of Trade and the FPU agreed that the fishery and the export business needed improvements such as establishing cull standards, but differed fundamentally on how to achieve their ultimate goal. Writing to Morris on 9 November 1910, Coaker demanded that government implement his culling suggestions.<sup>40</sup> Morris replied that he had given much thought to a standard cull for many years; indeed, Morris first considered it when first elected to the Assembly in 1885 and had discussed it for many years with fishermen, but had not “been able to devise a system which will give results as will command themselves to the fishermen of the country.” Morris claimed that Coaker’s suggestions were too costly to implement and he did not wish to burden fishermen with unnecessary rules and regulations. To do so, he told Coaker, would make a cull too strict on fishermen and prevent merchants from purchasing it. Yet Morris promised action, hoping to “devise a culling bill that will give satisfaction to every fisherman in the country” before his term of office ended in 1913.<sup>41</sup> He had also promised in 1910 a public conference on culling when all interested in establishing a standard cull of fish could meet to discuss the matter. It was postponed to the autumn of 1911 as there were not enough outport schooner captains and fishermen in the city at the same time to warrant such a discussion.<sup>42</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Board of Trade rejected the FPU approach to resolving the matter of culling. Board secretary and fish exporter George Fearn, regarded “Croaker” as misinformed and “an agitator,” whose views on the industry “cannot fail [but] to have a very bad effect on the community.” The Union and fishermen were “absolutely ignorant” of “commercial methods” involved in how the fish markets operated: merchants bought a perishable article such as salt fish and were at the mercy of volatile exchange rates and markets. In 1908, for example, merchants paid \$2.50 per quintal for fish from Placentia Bay although the fish could not be sold in the markets. With the banks unwilling to advance any further credit to merchants, they found themselves taking fish in order to help fishermen buy provisions for the winter. In November 1910 Fearn informed Morris that major exporters were running losses on their sales.

A. Harvey & Co., for instance, had for the last 18 months "met with losses on their fish, which is little short of disastrous." He also dismissed Coaker's claim that he had helped to raise the price of fish for the 1910 season. The "fact is," he wrote Morris, "he [Coaker] has as much to do with the price of fish, as he has to do with the creation of the man in the moon. It is simply a matter of supply and demand." Indeed, given how prices and exchange rates varied in markets, it was not possible for any fisherman to judge from the market price what would be the "proper value of fish here." In short, Fearn told Morris, the "interest of the COLONY at large, as well as the FISHERMEN and the MERCHANTS, are best served by the continuance of the present method of transacting its business, and I can see nothing but disaster likely to attend to the FISHERMEN if they try to invade the MERCHANTS domain."<sup>43</sup> Exporter Marmaduke Winter, for example, defended the right of shippers to their profit for shipping fish from Labrador in 1914 because it was the first time in eight years they had obtained a profit and a "great many of them required it to offset the losses of previous years."<sup>44</sup> The Board of Trade had drawn its battle lines with the FPU.

#### "RISING" THE PRICE, 1911-1913

Coaker successfully challenged the exporters from 1911 to 1913 to raise the price of fish. His bold claims for higher prices clearly demonstrated to fishermen the benefits of having a Union. To help Union planters/fishermen who brought their fish by schooner to the city in the fall of each year to sell to exporters, Coaker in October 1910 opened a temporary FPU office in St. John's,<sup>45</sup> which allowed him to negotiate on their behalf with exporters.<sup>46</sup> During the following 1911 fishery season Coaker faced concerted efforts by St. John's fish merchants to keep the price low. In late August, city merchants were offering \$1.80 less for shore fish than the \$6.80 they offered earlier in May and June, because they claimed the overseas markets would not pay the higher price.

Opposition to Coaker's efforts came not only from St. John's. For example, Bonavista merchant Philip Templeman, who operated a branch firm at nearby Catalina, opposed Coaker's efforts to raise the price of fish and, trying to tarnish Coaker's character, told Catalina residents in 1911 that Coaker had made \$8,000 from the sale of guernseys to Unionists. He naturally opposed Coaker's efforts to establish Union cash stores that would take business away from him and other merchants. Templeman's actions, however, only confirmed Coaker's contention that the fishermen of Bonavista and Catalina needed their own

cash stores, similar to one recently opened in Botwood. There, Unionists were saving \$1,000 a month on supplies and goods by supporting the Union store, which by 1912 paid cash for fish from Union fishermen. The Union actively encouraged local councils to establish cash stores whereby goods would be sold at wholesale prices to Union members, who in turn sold their fish to the Union for cash payment. Four stores were set up in 1911 and eight more the following year. In 1911 the Union incorporated the Fishermen's Union Trading Company to co-ordinate its commercial activities and commenced operation in May 1912 with an office on Water Street, the main commercial street of St. John's. The Union financed this company through share subscription from its members and paid interest on money deposited with the company by Unionists. Coaker considered also striking back at merchants such as Templeman by having fishermen incorporate their own Fishermen's Bank and put the \$5 million fishermen reputedly had in savings in the branches of Canadian banks and in the Government Savings Bank into their own bank.<sup>47</sup> While the Union would not form its own bank, over the next decade Coaker actively encouraged fishermen to invest in FPU-sponsored commercial companies through buying shares and depositing money for a higher rate than that offered by the Government Savings Bank.<sup>48</sup> It would have great success: by 1918 the Trading Company had an annual business worth \$3 million.<sup>49</sup>

Concerning shore fish, Coaker had moved decisively to encourage Union fishermen to sell their fish on his terms, telling fishermen in August 1911 that fish in October would be \$6, not the \$5 then offered by exporters, and that they should withhold for the higher price. Coaker advised fishermen on 2 September not to rush to ship their fish to exporters, but wait for a higher price.<sup>50</sup> In early October Coaker arranged for the sale in the outports of shore fish at \$5.50 talqual and informed fishermen, "Don't sell, boys. Demand \$6. It will be paid. Don't sell in town at less than \$6 merchantable. Don't sell any large merchantable at less than \$7. Keep it until next spring."<sup>51</sup> By late November Coaker's efforts had success, with practically all the fish having been disposed of.<sup>52</sup> Yet, opposition to Coaker's efforts had been strong; as St. John's commission merchant John Cowan wrote to Fogo fish merchant H.J. Earle on 9 October 1911, "it is quite correct that some of the buyers are paying more for shore fish than combine prices altho they say combine is not in existence. They do not want to give in to Coaker."<sup>53</sup>

Coaker and the FPU undermined a 1911 fish combine as exporters had tried to resist Coaker's efforts. Coaker persuaded William Franklin to withdraw from that arrangement by selling fish to him "at an advance of 50¢ per qtl.

which sale was copper fastened and can be produced, to prove our assertion." Franklin was the St. John's manager for the Nova Scotia-based fish exporter R.H. Silver, which had been operating in Newfoundland for several years and paid cash for fish. Franklin also operated an import-export business under his own name, Franklin's Agencies, and, in turn, had positioned himself to sell goods such as engines for boats to Unionists. For those northern fishermen who brought their fish to St. John's, Coaker daily stated the price he wanted for the fishermen, and those exporters "who did not get fish were compelled to buy from him when they found their wharves empty, and were glad to pay the prices they refused a few days previous." By paying the Union price, Franklin was the only buyer with "full stores" and, Coaker noted, "apparently will stand to make big money on fish this year as he bought when others looked on tamely."<sup>54</sup> With the Union's annual meeting due to be held in late November 1911 at Greenspond, Coaker proudly claimed that he was "the main and strongest factor in raising the price in this country." Newfoundlanders were their own worst enemies, he asserted, because in the past they "have been depreciating the value of our produce through the press and every other conceivable way and have been allowing the foreign buyers to value our fish."<sup>55</sup>

Pricing for Labrador fish proved more difficult to advance in value. Labrador fish buyers in early August 1911 had set \$3.80 per quintal as the current price to be paid fishermen, with some buyers offering a special bonus to fishermen if the fish were quickly loaded aboard steamers that were being hired on time-sensitive contracts. In early September the Minister of Marine and Fisheries, Archibald Piccott, met with the buyers twice but failed to get them to increase the price.<sup>56</sup> His efforts followed an FPU-inspired strike at Indian Harbour led by George Roberts of Brigus, which secured \$4.20 per quintal for Labrador fish at that location.<sup>57</sup> On this occasion, fishermen refused to load fish aboard a steamer lying at anchor in the harbour, at great cost to shippers, until their demands were met.<sup>58</sup> The \$4.20 amount had been recommended by Coaker through the *Fishermen's Advocate*.<sup>59</sup>

Fishermen's discontent with the Labrador price continued into the 1912 fishery season. In the first two weeks of September another strike occurred in the Labrador fishery at Indian Harbour. Again, fishermen refused to sell their fish directly "off the coast," at the then current price of \$3.50, to a steamer sent by Job Brothers of St. John's. The fishermen believed they would get a higher price if they held their fish and forced the steamer to pick up fish elsewhere. However, it later returned to Indian Harbour after Coaker appealed to Job Brothers, which bought the fish at the price previously offered.<sup>60</sup> The *Bay Roberts*

*Guardian* weekly newspaper, a supporter of the Morris government, reported in early October that the strikers had been acting on instructions from the FPU, although it could not determine if the “unconfirmed rumor” was true. While not saying that “Coaker is a party to this alleged misunderstanding,” the newspaper noted the fact “that he was appealed to send vessels to take the fish would seem to argue a prior knowledge on the affair on his part.” Coaker never advised them to strike, and later in 1912 said “we had fully considered the matter and ascertained information concerning the prices and conditions and had there been a reasonable prospect of securing \$4.00 by holding back the fish, I would not have hesitated to advise it. I can assure you that the best possible prices obtainable were paid.”<sup>61</sup>

Coaker’s successful challenge to the exporters continued into the 1912 fishery season. He again forced exporters to pay higher prices for shore fish by directing Union fishermen to sell fish for cash to Nova Scotia-based exporters, who were not suppliers to fishermen at the beginning of each season. Coaker had support from two city merchants in co-ordinating the sale of fish from Unionists. Grand Bank native Albert E. Hickman, a buyer for the Halifax firm Smith Company, Limited (and a major shareholder in the St. John’s branch of this firm at this time),<sup>62</sup> and Franklin paid the price recommended by Coaker. Both Hickman and Franklin were exporters who, Coaker observed, studied “the markets and give the closest attention to the pack and assortment of their fish.”<sup>63</sup> In the *Advocate* on 30 November Coaker asserted that if Hickman and Franklin managed all of Newfoundland’s fish exports, then the trade “would never again hear about low prices or losses.”<sup>64</sup> Regarding the appearance of Nova Scotia firms in the fishery, one exporter later recalled in 1920, that these “outside buyers” from Canada produced greater competition for the Water Street exporters and drove up the price paid locally for fish.<sup>65</sup> Coaker followed the same practice for 1913, and also chartered two vessels to go to Labrador to buy fish and drive up the current price being offered. As Coaker informed members on 11 April, “we don’t intend to let buyers have fish at their own prices this year. Let them have the fish but at our prices.”<sup>66</sup>

It had long been Coaker’s intention for fishermen to be represented in the House of Assembly. For “too long,” he told fishermen at Joe Batt’s Arm in February 1909, fishermen had been “fooled and duped by party heelers and politicians. Take the power which is your right, and use it for your own advantage and for the prosperity of this colony.”<sup>67</sup> Coaker had envisaged a political role through the creation of a Union Party to hold the balance of power in the House of Assembly between Sir Robert Bond’s Liberals and the governing party

led by Prime Minister Morris. Throughout his subsequent organizing efforts for the FPU, Coaker always presented a political message of social and economic reforms that fishermen endorsed for implementation. In the 1913 general election, held on 30 October, the Morris government won re-election against a coalition opposition consisting of the Bond-led Liberal Party and the Union Party led by Coaker. Coaker’s Unionists won eight seats (Coaker won in Bonavista district) to seven for Bond’s Liberals, some of whom, such as Albert Hickman in Bay de Verde district, owed their success to FPU support.<sup>68</sup> In that election, Coaker promised in the Union’s election platform manifesto to enact legislation providing a standard cull of fish and to regulate the price of fish sold abroad and the price of fish shipped from the Labrador coast.<sup>69</sup>

Coaker now brought the price of fish debate to the floor of the House of Assembly, where his party worked closely with the Liberals, who, with their parliamentary experience, had been allowed by Coaker to be the official opposition. When Liberal member William Lloyd asserted that the rise in fish prices in 1913 was Coaker’s doing, Finance Minister Michael Cashin replied that “Coaker had no more to do with the raising of the price of fish than he had with the rising and setting of the sun. The price of fish is governed like the price of everything else by the law of supply and demand.”<sup>70</sup> Quoting Shakespeare that “every braggart shall be found an ass,” exporter and government MHA (Bay de Verde) John Crosbie on 28 January 1914 agreed with Hickman<sup>71</sup> that “supply and demand govern the price” and marshalled fish export figures for the past decade to show how market demands determined the price. Coaker disagreed, challenging the merchants’ claim that they had no control over fish prices and declaring he had no intention to deny that the law of supply and demand had something to do with it, but it was the FPU now “who were the chief cause of the high prices locally paid.” He then explained how he did it in 1912. Knowing from reports abroad what the prices were in foreign markets, he advised fishermen to withhold their fish until they got the price he recommended. He had gone to city merchants to see what price was being offered and, if it was lower than what he thought it should be, he found someone to take the fish at his recommended price and wait for the other merchants to come around to his viewpoint. Coaker said that in “the past, we often hear the merchants complain that they were losing money on exporting fish, but we never heard that they were making money by selling fish. They tell of their losses but are silent as to their profits. Now I get reports from the foreign markets and know how prices stand and I am in a position to advise the fishermen down north when to hold back their fish until they get satisfactory values.”<sup>72</sup>



## THE 1914 SEASON AND THE WAR'S INITIAL IMPACT

In August 1914, Newfoundland, as part of the British Empire, was automatically at war with Germany and its allies and the conflict threatened to disrupt the export market for Newfoundland fish. Exporters were initially reluctant to ship fish because of higher freight insurance, and fishermen, who had held back their fish for higher prices, rushed in panic to sell as the price quickly dropped from \$7.00 before the outbreak of hostilities to \$3.00 by mid-September 1914. By the end of the year, however, with Norway's fishery compromised by potential Anglo-German naval conflict, additional demands for fish in Italy, and the knowledge that the Atlantic was safe for transport allowed Newfoundland fish to rally to \$7.00 a quintal.<sup>73</sup> By 1917, with her competitors shut out of the markets, Newfoundland had a near monopoly of markets and exporters moved to take advantage of favourable trade conditions. Coaker positioned the Trading Company to exploit that advantage.

Coaker initially accepted the view that the war would be of a short duration and worried that the immediate wartime conditions precipitated a decrease in fish prices, which he prevented. Because of the uncertain market, he encouraged shore fishermen to hold their fish unless they received \$6.00 when fish buyers were offering only \$5.00 and suggesting that the price would go lower. In early September a Trading Company schooner arrived at St. John's with 1,400 qtls. of fish, but the exporters refused to offer the company a price even though their warehouses were empty and although there was not even 3,000 qtls. of fish in the city. Fish exporters in late September claimed that market conditions did not warrant the payment of higher prices for fish and that prices would drop lower whenever fish were offered for sale overseas. Coaker called on the government to guarantee a price of \$6 for shore fish and, if this were not done, threatened to have fishermen, who would suffer greatly otherwise, to withdraw their savings from the banks and refuse to pay their accounts.<sup>74</sup>

Coaker's indignant outrage against the Water Street merchants and the Morris government over the loss of 250 sealers in two tragic sealing disasters during the 1914 seal fishery had greatly enhanced his political standing.<sup>75</sup> On 26 September he wrote Liberal Opposition Leader James Kent seeking his support for government intervention to prevent a slump in the price for both shore and Labrador fish and to have a joint meeting with Morris to discuss what action the government should take. Morris was supportive, and on 5 October Coaker wrote him offering the support of both Opposition parties and requesting a meeting to discuss the matter. Morris replied to Coaker later that same day

promising to keep the Opposition informed “of anything it may be possible to do” and would arrange for an early meeting, but he did not commit the government to any fish guarantees. On 7 October Coaker again wrote Morris, pointing out that the price of fish was continuing to drop and immediate action was necessary. Waiting until a slump hit, he emphasized, was unacceptable. Indeed, many buyers were waiting for a drop in price to get fish for at least 50 cents per quintal cheaper, he said. He reiterated his request for a meeting right away. Morris again wrote Coaker that he desired a meeting, and noted that the bank managers or representative fish merchants should be part of the “conference.” He told Coaker that “privately, my opinion is that if a slump occurs, it will be largely due to those who advised the people to keep back their fish, the result being that there is practically no fish at present ready for market in Saint John’s, and we have lost nearly two months’ consumption in the foreign markets.” This was a slamming indictment of Coaker’s “price of fish” policy and Coaker took umbrage at the “hurling” of a “poisonous shaft” at him.<sup>76</sup> The government convened an informal meeting of fish exporters and, worried by the potential impact of the war on the local economy, Piccott persuaded exporters to agree on a price for Labrador fish, which they set at \$3.60. As Marmaduke Winter recalled of the meeting, because of the war no fish was being sold at the time and they had no idea what demand there would be for their fish or what exchange rates would be, as exporters were pessimistic that any fish could be sold.<sup>77</sup>

Coaker never waited for government action. When large quantities of fish arrived in St. John’s about 12 October the price fell 25 cents, with the Trading Company selling some shore fish for \$5.75. To prevent further lower prices, the company stored its fish and held out for a higher price or for export later.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, Coaker continued to appeal through the FPU newspaper *Mail and Advocate* for fishermen not to sell their shore fish for less than \$6 and Labrador fish for not less than \$4. He stated that exporters could afford to buy for these prices and insisted the government guarantee these prices. He cautioned those who had not come to St. John’s with their fish to remain home and dry their fish until word came from the Trading Company to sell at the price it recommended.<sup>79</sup> The newspaper stressed that if Coaker were a member of the government then the price of fish would be fixed by the government. By mid-October the Trading Company had sold the shore fish it had purchased through its Union stores from fishermen, having once more arranged with exporter A.E. Hickman of Smith & Co. to sell Union fish. Coaker’s campaign for fishermen not to sell for less than \$4 proved effective as the Trading Company’s practice of buying soft Labrador fish led to other major buyers increasing their price from \$3.50 to \$4.<sup>80</sup>

COAKER ATTEMPTS TO DEFINE THE "CURRENT PRICE"

Through legal and legislative means Coaker and his fellow Unionists sought to ameliorate the grievance associated with pricing Labrador fish. Unionists in late 1914 were upset over the falling price of the Labrador slopp fish,<sup>81</sup> and wanted Coaker to have the matter of what was meant by the "current price" for fish shipped off the Labrador coast tested before the courts.<sup>82</sup> Coaker asked fishermen to send him all receipts necessary for such a case because the meaning of the current price of Labrador fish shipped off the coast had never been judicially decided. As Union lawyer Alfred Morine advised Coaker:

the buyers on the Labrador, sometimes principals, sometimes agents, are not certain what price to offer. The fishermen [*sic*] has to put off his fish because he wants supplies, or because he cannot afford to hold the fish. The custom has been for the exporting merchants in St. John's to decide at the end of the season what price they would give, and the only surprising thing is that more difficulty has not arisen. Some means of settling this matter should be devised at once. I think that an action will help clear up the air.<sup>83</sup>

In a 19 December circular letter Coaker asked for a "Labrador fisherman with pluck belonging to Conception Bay who have [*sic*] sold fish to [J.W.] Hiscock of Brigus to take action against Hiscock in order to settle the price of fish — only one is wanted. Will some Brigus man come forward. It will be no expense to the man. Send me amount of fish shipped and what was received — but he must be sure that there will be no backing out after the action is taken. I must have this man at once."<sup>84</sup>

Besides prospective action on the commercial and legal sides, the FPU also moved legislatively, with Union lawyer and Bonavista MHA Morine on 9 April 1915 moving first reading of a bill relating to the sale of codfish on the Labrador coast. Morine's bill provided for the annual appointment on 1 July of each year for a board of three arbitrators to determine the price to be known as the Labrador Fish Prices Board. One member would be appointed by the Board of Trade, the second by the FPU, and the third by the other two members. If either party refused to appoint a representative, then the Supreme Court would appoint such a representative. If the Board failed to fix a price for Labrador fish within one month of the Board's appointment, then one of the two parties could appeal to a judge of the Supreme Court to fix a price within

30 days of this appeal. The judge would hold a hearing into the matter and would have authority to examine witnesses and “to compel them to give evidence as is vested in any court of law in civil cases; and any willfully false statements made by any such witness on oath or solemn affirmation shall be a misdemeanor or punishable in the same manner as willful and corrupt perjury, but no such party or witness shall be compelled to answer any such question by his answer to which might render himself liable to a criminal prosecution.”<sup>85</sup>

On 15 April Morine moved second reading, receiving Morris’s support and that of the whole Assembly. The bill avoided any interference with the freedom of contract but dealt with the abuses associated with the practice of the phrase “current price” and fish shipped directly from Labrador. Morine said that in this “trade the custom has almost universally been not to fix the price at the time of the sale, but to give receipts for the fish in which the terms on which the price is to be arrived at are variously set down.” In his investigations Morine found the term set down in the following ways: “the current price,” “whatever price is paid on the coast of Labrador,” “at general current price,” “current price,” the “current dealing price,” sometimes at “whatever price is paid by supplying merchants,” “current coast price,” “\$4.00 and current price,” and “\$3.00 and the rise.” He never came across any situation where the actual price was named. There was no freedom of contract on the Labrador because the “merchant plays with loaded dice because the current price is fixed by the buyers themselves, who meet at the Board of Trade late in the year when they have received enough information to know what is safe for them to pay. They naturally aim to pay as little as they can, and whatever they agree upon is the law for all parties. This has been the assumption up to the present time by all parties.”<sup>86</sup> Third reading was on 20 April and then the bill was sent to the Legislative Council for its consent.

Merchants in Newfoundland’s the Legislative Council accepted the bill’s principle but opposed the method for deciding the price of fish. For Bonavista-based exporter James Ryan, the problem was not the price of fish, for the “fixing of the price is an impossibility too great for any one person to assume,” but the cure of fish, which was uneven. In 1913 he had shipped a cargo of fish on demurrage at Gibraltar<sup>87</sup> and it remained unsold for 13 months. Ryan could not sell this fish because his asking price was too high and the Italian merchant at Genoa could get cheaper fish from Norway and Iceland. He had lost “\$1,500 on that cargo and might have lost \$10,000 but that the cure was really good.” Ryan called for the government to appoint “cullers to supervise every shipment from the Labrador coast, with power to issue certificates with each cargo to prove it is No. 1 quality. This would be a very great advantage. Very often a sale is made

and finalized, so to speak, but is not confirmed until an expert is sent to Gibraltar to examine the cargo.”<sup>88</sup>

The Legislative Council went into committee of the whole on the Labrador Fishery Bill on 13 May and opponents amended the bill. One concerned the composition of the board, with one member being appointed by Labrador fish exporters, the second by the outport members in the House of Assembly, and the third by the other two. Merchants in and outside the Legislative Council generally agreed that some arbitration board was needed to fix the price of Labrador fish, but were against Coaker’s proposal. Other amendments were that, if the two board members failed to agree on a third member, then no action would be taken because there was no recourse to the Supreme Court to appoint the third member. Another amendment took from the board the right to call witnesses, to examine the books of exporters, and to call for any evidence.<sup>89</sup> John Harvey best voiced the concerns of his colleagues: the bill “in its more particular features,” he said, “traverses the obvious principles on which a commercial community must exist.” The change in the composition of the fish board he considered “more formal than actual.” Getting information on a voluntary basis instead of by compulsion would not prevent the board from getting information it would request: “they can get it from everyday information and will get it from voluntary evidence.” As for the Supreme Court, Harvey said it was the “one institution in this country that ought more than any other to be inviolate and kept within its own strict functions,” and the Assembly’s proposal for the Court was a “precedent at once more objectionable and dangerous.” If called on to fix the price of Labrador fish, where would it stop, Harvey asked, “fixing the price of partridge berries or seals or sausages?”<sup>90</sup>

On 28 May the Assembly considered the Council’s amendments, unanimously rejecting them and passing a resolution asking the Legislative Council to withdraw its amendments to the bill.<sup>91</sup> The Assembly appointed a committee consisting of Morris, Minister of Marine and Fisheries Piccott, Kent, and Coaker to explain why the amendments were rejected and so informed the Council on 31 May.<sup>92</sup> The Legislative Council, which “killed” the bill “by their ridiculous amendments” aimed solely to make the bill “useless and ineffective,” sent it back on 2 June, the *Mail and Advocate* observed, as “a delusion and a snare.”<sup>93</sup> Morine moved that the Council’s message be considered “this day six months,” thus effectively allowing the bill to die on the order paper.<sup>94</sup>

The FPU also looked to the legal route to determine the current price for Labrador fish. The case of *Noseworthy v. Munn* came before Supreme Court Justice George Emerson on 23 June without a jury. The plaintiff was Lorenzo

Noseworthy, a planter from Spaniard’s Bay who fished from his room at Sandy Islands, Labrador. The defendant was Harbour Grace fish exporter William Munn. Noseworthy sold to Munn’s agent in Labrador 576.5 quintals of Labrador fish and received fish receipts marked “current price.” After returning home, Noseworthy got \$3.60 per quintal for his fish from Munn although the price of fish at the time of payment was \$4.50 per quintal. Munn asserted in his defence before the court that he paid the current price of Labrador fish for the season. The question at issue in the case was the definition of “current price” — did this mean at the time the fish was sold in Labrador or later, when payment was made? On behalf of Noseworthy, FPU lawyer Morine argued that it meant the highest price paid for Labrador fish during the fishery season, while Martin Furlong countered on behalf of Munn that it meant the price paid by the greatest number of purchasers for the greatest quantity of Labrador fish. Justice Emerson found in favour of Munn, accepting the view that the “current price” was a term used in the local fish trade for over a century and reflected the practice that the current price was one paid for the greater bulk of Labrador cured fish.<sup>95</sup> For the 1915 fishery season, to maintain fair prices for fishermen, Coaker continued to call on fishermen not to sell fish for less than what the Trading Company was paying at its cash stores, which in late September 1915 was \$6.25 per quintal. However, exporters were paying much less, with one exporter offering \$4 for Labrador fish.<sup>96</sup> The tight grip the merchants and shippers held over the export of Labrador fish remained in place.

#### AN FPU MARKETING PLAN

Coaker also challenged the Water Street merchants on their own territory with an ambitious plan for catching and marketing of codfish based on the Conception Bay fishery in Labrador. Under it, the FPU formed a new company to export the Union’s salt codfish and other products, such as cod oil, lobsters, herring, and berries. In late 1914 Coaker envisioned the new company embracing two or three existing business firms and having a capitalization of \$500,000, with the Union as the largest shareholder. The Trading Company’s branch stores would serve as purchasing agencies for this new company, which would be managed by A.E. Hickman.

The FPU incorporated the Union Export Company in 1915 with an authorized capital of \$1 million with preferential and common shares. Preferential shares to the amount of \$200,000, open to anybody to buy, would be placed on

the market with an annual 10 per cent guarantee. The common shares were open only to Union members and carried a bonus on each quintal of fish sold to the Union Export Company "when profits are made exceeding the dividend due for preferential shares and an allocation for the Reserve Fund." The company would have a managing director reporting to a board of directors, with a majority being elected by the common stockholders, thus guaranteeing Union fishermen control of the company. The FPU president would be ex-officio president of the company, which would not supply for the fisheries but restrict its duties to the purchase and export of fishery produce; the Union Trading Company would continue to be the importer and seller of supplies for the fisheries and sell to the fishermen. The Export Company would operate from St. John's but would establish two large branches in the outports, one on the northeast coast and the other on the south coast. These branches would prepare fish for export that would be sent by steamers under sole charter to the Export Company. The Export Company would maintain agents in all the large fish-consuming markets and export other fishes such as salmon, lobster, and caplin. These products would be shipped in the company's own fleet of steamers, all equipped with cold storage facilities, that would pick up frozen produce at ports where the Export Company operated cold storage depots. Thus, "the freighting of fish to Europe and America will be combined with a frozen fish business." With its own steamers the company would also prosecute the seal fishery and thereby "settle the dissatisfaction existing over the price of seals and the big profits of the firms manufacturing seal oil." The company would set up two large stations on the Labrador coast to help fishermen from Conception Bay who fished there; their fish would be collected and packed in casks at the stations and shipped to market in steamers.<sup>97</sup> The Trading Company and its various Union stores would act as buying agents for the new company and receive a commission per quintal of fish for doing so. The defeat of the Labrador Fish Bill, which had promised a more orderly purchasing arrangement for the Labrador fishery, delayed Coaker's plans for organizing two stations on the Labrador for the 1915 fishing season. The establishment of these stations depended on the full plans for the Export Company to be realized. However, plans for the Export Company were slow to develop: Hickman decided against investing in the new company (in 1916 he established his own fish export company), and Union members were slow to invest in the new company.<sup>98</sup>

Morris hoped fishery reform would come through a legislative select committee he had appointed in 1914 to examine the cure of fish, how a standard cull could be established, and other aspects of the seal and lobster fisheries.<sup>99</sup>



A.E. Hickman, ca. 1915, amidst a sea of salt codfish on the roof of the St. John's premises of Smith Company, for which he was a buyer and part-owner. (Photo courtesy Bert and Jonathan Hickman)

Liberal Opposition members James Kent and Hickman sat on the committee, which included Morris, Piccott, and the Minister of Finance and Customs, Michael Cashin. This committee later recommended in the legislative session that a commission of inquiry be appointed to examine matters more extensively, and the legislature requested Governor Sir Walter Davidson to do so.<sup>100</sup> The commission, consisting of representatives from both the Assembly and the Legislative Council, reported in late May 1915, recommending that either a compulsory or a voluntary inspection and certification of all fish exports should be established, as well as a compulsory abandonment of talqual buying, the enforcement of a strict culling system between buyers and sellers, the need to separate the “curing establishments from the catching of the Fish,” and a government grant of a bonus to the curer for strictly prime merchantable fish. The commissioners recommended the creation of a three-member Fish Inspection Board, similar to the Canadian Grain Inspection Board. One member would be appointed by the Governor-in-Council, one by the Board of Trade, and the third by the “members of the House of Assembly who sit for outport



districts, excluding holders of Executive and departmental seats, as these will have already their say in the choice of the Government's nominee." The proposed board would have power to "make rules for inspecting and standardizing fish, and to appoint and license Inspectors and Cullers, and to pass such rules and regulations as they may consider necessary to regulate the cull, and thus cause more attention to the cure and improved value for our staple in foreign markets."<sup>101</sup> In many ways, the committee's success was doomed from its beginning because of FPU mistrust of the government and the business community. During the 1914 session, with political and personal feelings running high between Coaker and Crosbie over Crosbie's business connections with the government and aspects of Coaker's personal life, especially the legal separation from his wife,<sup>102</sup> Coaker and his fellow Unionist MHAs consequently had refused to sit on the committee.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, a booming market for Newfoundland fish after 1915 delayed any incentive for fishery reform,<sup>104</sup> while both the FPU and the Board of Trade continued separately to push for a standard fish cull. In the case of the FPU, in 1916 at its annual convention in Catalina, it called for the establishment of a permanent commission to supervise the standarization and culling of fish.

#### BOOM YEARS, 1917–1919

Coaker also continued to look to the electoral system to implement fishery reform. As 1916 drew to a close, he confidently anticipated winning the general election required by law to be held in 1917. Following Morris's appointment of James Kent to the Supreme Court, William Lloyd became Liberal Party leader and joined with Coaker to create a unified Opposition under the Liberal-Union banner and Lloyd's leadership, with Coaker focused on the FPU and its commercial companies. Coaker concentrated his efforts from 1916 on planning the construction of new FPU premises at Catalina on the northeast coast, in an area that by 1918 would become known as Port Union. The premises would be paid for out of the annual surplus earnings of the Trading Company.<sup>105</sup> From 1918 the FPU would be headquartered at Port Union, all the FPU-sponsored commercial companies were to be housed there, and Coaker had his residence there when not in St. John's on legislative business.

With a need to institute conscription for the war effort and concern about the repercussions of such a measure, Morris had no desire to hold the general election and had secured British government approval to postpone the 1917

election for a year. Having discussed the matter occasionally with Coaker and Lloyd since 1916, Morris brokered a deal with the Opposition in July 1917 that resulted in the formation of an all-party "National government" to deal with many of the economic problems the war had wrought on the economy. Coaker became a minister without portfolio in the new executive, which also included Hickman and Crosbie.<sup>106</sup> They formed a tonnage committee tasked with finding tonnage to ship fish and to import foodstuffs and coal. As cabinet ministers, Coaker and Crosbie quickly developed a strong personal bond as that government's two most important ministers dealing successfully with economic and trade problems, and this trust spilled over to their commercial relations. This included in 1917 the procurement of much needed steamer tonnage to carry fish to market and the provision of government-guaranteed war insurance policies to the trade to maintain high fish prices.<sup>107</sup>

For the 1917 fishery season, Coaker involved the Trading Company directly in selling fish with Crosbie's advice rather than selling exclusively to city exporters, and he used the connections of Crosbie's London broker (Rolfe) to do so.<sup>108</sup> Coaker bought as much fish as he could from fishermen to drive up the local price of fish. He also sold fish to Spanish buyers who had come to St. John's and paid high prices.<sup>109</sup> With fish prices now nearly three times higher than pre-war levels and the war continuing to disrupt competition from Iceland and Norway, it was a profitable time for exporters. Fearing prices might drop in 1918, Coaker that year unsuccessfully tried to have the government provide a guaranteed price to fishermen for their fish, arguing that both Canada and the United States had done the same thing for wheat and got the price asked for.<sup>110</sup> This was a critical matter for the Trading Company, which at one point had over \$500,000 worth of fish in its stores for export and that year conducted a fish business as large as any other at the time. Both executive councillors, Cashin and Crosbie strongly resisted, arguing that higher prices could be had than the ceiling Coaker was proposing in August 1918 of \$12 per quintal. They would be proven right as the price later rose to \$16 at one point in the local Newfoundland market.

While working within government to continue fishery reform for the post-war period, Coaker continued to push for a government guarantee that the Union endorsed at its annual convention in December 1918. The convention also endorsed Coaker's proposal for "greater State Control over staple articles of production" whereby the price of fish would be fixed about the middle of October each year by a government-appointed board consisting of the Board of Trade president, the Minister of Marine and Fisheries, the FPU president, an outpost

fish exporter, and a planter. This board would also regulate fish cure and cull, and “anybody buying or taking fish above or below the price fixed would be severely punished.” He argued that all fishermen should receive the same price; in the present boom times, it was a “great injustice inflicted by paying one man \$12.00 for an article and three weeks later paying another \$15.00 for a similar article.”<sup>111</sup>

In late 1918, markets for Newfoundland fish in Italy declined sharply as importers there were unhappy with the high prices and the poor quality of fish received from Newfoundland over the past few years. In September of that year, because of the perceived view that Newfoundland exporters had profited in selling their fish when they had the Italian markets to themselves, the Italian government encouraged fish importers to form a body, known as the *Consorzio*, to co-ordinate the purchase of fish. Newfoundland appealed unsuccessfully to the British government to persuade Italy to change the policy. Instead, the British suggested in early 1919 that Newfoundland form its own combine for its own protection.<sup>112</sup> The Italians were unmoved, arguing that they had to secure the lowest price possible for their people now that the Great War had ended. With the Italian market closed to Newfoundland fish because Newfoundland refused to sell at the price demanded by the *Consorzio*, Crosbie in January 1919 chaired a committee of three major fish exporters to establish minimum prices for which Newfoundland fish would be sold in Italy, Greece, and Brazil. This committee persuaded about 20 exporters to voluntarily work together to co-ordinate the shipment of their fish to market and eventually found an alternative market for 200,000 quintals of fish in other markets. Some of the fish ultimately ended up in Romania, with the exporters having no choice but to accept payment initially in Romanian treasury notes (and after 1922 in Romanian government bonds), a risky business for which merchants never received full payment for their product, and during the 1920s they received instead bond interest dividends.<sup>113</sup> Generally speaking, Crosbie made no effort to interfere with the price of fish, except in Brazil where he voluntarily asked merchants to maintain prices in that market.<sup>114</sup> With this success, the Board of Trade in April 1919 called on the Lloyd government — which had been appointed the previous year after Prime Minister Morris accepted a peerage and resigned his post to sit in the House of Lords in London — to establish a department of trade and commerce to research and collect statistics on markets and competitors, and to promote the sale of fish in existing and new markets. The Board of Trade also asked the government to appoint a committee with representation from the trade, the FPU, and the government to investigate fishery issues in general and the matter of an improved cure in particular.<sup>115</sup>

During the 1918 fishery season and with the new commercial premises recently constructed available at Port Union, the Trading Company was determined to make Port Union a rival to St. John’s as an exporting centre and bought as much as fish as it could for export at a higher price than that being offered by exporters.<sup>116</sup> With so much fish, Coaker decided to deal directly with London brokers to sell Union fish and in January 1919 made his first trip<sup>117</sup> to examine European fish markets, returning to Newfoundland on 30 March. His original intent was to have an agent based in Italy to look after the sale and distribution of Trading Company fish exports in Italy, Spain, and Greece.<sup>118</sup> The visit changed his perspective; it was the markets and not the merchants that determined the price of fish in Newfoundland. He met with officials of the Consorzio in Genoa and with fish exporters in Spain and Portugal. In Italy, he negotiated an arrangement with an Italian company to be the import agent for all Newfoundland fish once the initial term of the Consorzio ended on 30 June 1919.<sup>119</sup> However, for the 1919 fishing season, the Consorzio’s early success in lowering the price of imported fish from Newfoundland and elsewhere resulted in the Italian government’s decision to extend the life of the Consorzio into 1920. After his return, Coaker’s business arrangements were all for nothing as he soon found himself outside government. Finance Minister Michael Cashin on 20 May had engineered a non-confidence vote in the Lloyd government, which led to the government’s defeat and the assumption of power by Cashin two days later, with Coaker’s Unionists forming the Opposition and Lloyd out of politics altogether. Cashin enticed Unionist John Stone (Minister of Marine and Fisheries) and Liberal A.E. Hickman to join his government, thus ensuring Cashin of a slight majority government.<sup>120</sup> Stone’s defection was probably due to his increasing alienation from Coaker, and from late December 1918 had been reflected by his own claims that the high price paid for fish was because of Newfoundland’s domination of European markets and its ability to command high prices, regardless of the quality of the fish. This put Stone at odds with Coaker, who continuously claimed credit for the Trading Company’s buying practices in driving up the price.<sup>121</sup> As for Hickman, he had alienated Coaker by opposing many of Coaker’s policies while in the National government and with his practice of diverting fishermen in Bay de Verde district to selling to his agents instead of the local FPU Councils and stores.<sup>122</sup>

Fishery problems remained critical, however, as the Consorzio would only buy on its terms despite Crosbie’s efforts to persuade the Italians to make an agreement. On 7 July 1919 the Board of Trade asked Crosbie to appoint a committee of fish exporters to co-ordinate voluntarily fish exports to Greece and Italy as

“regards price, quality and supply.”<sup>123</sup> Upon Crosbie’s suggestion, the fish exporters appointed a committee, which in several meetings developed a system of fish inspection that met with Crosbie’s approval.<sup>124</sup> The government refused to approve it in the midst of a pending election campaign because its members generally opposed such regulations, especially Hickman, who was against the setting of minimum prices at which fish would be sold. He and other exporters preferred the flexibility associated with selling fish at their discretion.

During the 1919 general election campaign, Coaker on 9 September telegraphed Cashin to act under the War Measures Act to provide a government guarantee of \$10 per quintal for Labrador fish and \$12 per quintal for shore fish that exporters would buy from fishermen. Coaker also wanted the price set at which it would be sold for export and the exporters to be guaranteed by the government against any losses. Finally, he asked for an immediate conference of exporters and the government to discuss the fish crisis. This Cashin refused to do, as fixing prices and guaranteeing exporters placed the financial burden on taxpayers for any losses but left to the exporters all “possible gain.” As for the conference, he asked Coaker to return to St. John’s from Port Union and discuss the matter with the Board of Trade since the Trading Company was now a major exporter in its own right. Coaker met soon afterwards with Cashin, but not with the Board of Trade, claiming in the FPU newspaper that the Board had refused to co-operate with him. For Cashin, Coaker’s proposals were “fantastically absurd” as they would enable the “proposer to buy and export fish at the public expense, with an off-chance that he would make a profit.” To force fishermen to accept a fixed price ran the risk, Cashin argued, that fishermen might be forced “to take a lower price than they ... otherwise might be able to get,” as had been the case in 1918. In his election manifesto Cashin asserted that Coaker’s scheme “would, I believe, destroy the stability of the fish trade of the Colony, and give our prosperity such a blow as would not be recovered from in a generation.” Other critics asserted that fixed prices would mean that all fish would go talqual without any standards being made to fish exports.<sup>125</sup>

Coaker remained adamant in his view that a government guarantee was critical, and on 22 September he announced this as part of the political alliance he formed with the Liberal Reform Party led by Richard Squires.<sup>126</sup> The issue was settled at the 3 November 1919 general election won by the Squires-Coaker alliance; as Minister of Marine and Fisheries, Coaker moved quickly later in the month to implement his long-sought fishery reforms: regulating the price of fish, fish culling, and the co-ordination of fish to market. In doing so, he worked in step with most of the large fish exporters and fish broker George Hawes, who

supported Coaker’s efforts to bring order to an otherwise chaotic Newfoundland fish export market. Indeed, Coaker’s direct use of London brokers with outright sales in 1919 had made him more sympathetic to the Hawes consignment approach. In fact, his recent success in September and October had involved Hawes selling Union fish in Spain and Italy with good results. By comparison, a recent transaction of a sale to Portugal with a London broker particularly had “disgusted” Coaker because of an unexpectedly low price. He wrote Rolfe & Co. on 23 October that Newfoundland exporters might be better off with the Hawes consignment model. Under it, Hawes’s agents looked directly after sales in Spain, and Hawes wished to extend this scheme to the rest of Europe.<sup>127</sup> The subsequent 1919 and 1920 Fish Regulations would be a test of the willingness of exporters to adopt a more co-operative approach involving a greater use of consignment sales to the marketing of codfish from Newfoundland.<sup>128</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the many ways William Coaker acted before 1919 to challenge Newfoundland fish exporters to raise the price they paid fishermen for their salt codfish. He did this by urging fishermen to boycott exporters unwilling to pay the Union-recommended price, by a legislative effort to have a government-appointed board set the price for Labrador codfish, and by a legal challenge to clarify the confusion surrounding the procedure exporters used to set that price. Coaker also moved the FPU companies into the export business with the intent, through competition, of forcing the exporters to increase the price they paid for fish.

With this last tactic, Coaker, along with his competitor exporters, benefited greatly by the great demand for Newfoundland fish during the war. However, in entering the business, Coaker faced the same difficult marketing issues as did his fellow merchant exporters when markets were not booming. Those issues were: dealing with the quality and cull of fish to be sold on the market; getting the fish to market in a timely fashion to maximize any potential profit advantage; dealing with brokers on both an outright and consignment basis and how to co-ordinate in a more orderly way the delivery and sale of fish to the exporter’s best advantage; and getting timely information on the current state of markets and the activities of their European fish competitors. The Coaker Fish Regulations of 1919 were meant to address these concerns. With support from the business community, in 1919–20 Coaker enacted comprehensive fishery

reform addressing the price of fish issue, albeit without any long-term success — new disputes soon arose between Coaker and his fellow exporters, leading to the 1921 government repeal of the Regulations. Ultimately, the realities of competition in export markets meant that the economic gain was not large enough to satisfy both the merchants and the fishermen.

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#### NOTES

- 1 The standard reference work on Coaker is Ian D.H. McDonald, *"To Each His Own": William Coaker and the Fishermen's Protective Union in Newfoundland Politics, 1908–1925* (St. John's: ISER Books, 1987).
- 2 Shannon Ryan, *Fish Out of Water: The Newfoundland Saltfish Trade, 1814–1914* (St. John's: Breakwater, 1986).
- 3 Harold A. Innis, *The Cod Fisheries: The History of an International Economy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1954), p. 465.
- 4 W.G. Reeves, "Alexander's Conundrum Reconsidered: The American Dimension in Newfoundland Resource Development, 1898–1910," *Newfoundland Studies* 5, 1 (1989): 1–37.
- 5 David Alexander, "Newfoundland's Traditional Economy and Development to 1934," *Acadiensis* 5, 2 (Spring 1976): 68; W. Gordon Handcock, "Settlement," in Cyril F. Poole and Robert H. Cuff, eds., *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, vol. 5 (St. John's: Harry Cuff Publications, 1994), 139.
- 6 James E. Candow, "'Recurring Visitations of Pauperism': Change and Continuity in the Newfoundland Fishery," in James E. Candow and Carol Corbin, eds., *How Deep Is the Ocean? Historical Essays on Canada's Atlantic Fishery* (Sydney, NS: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1997), 142–43. The credit or truck system is explored in detail in Rosemary Ommers, ed., *Merchant Capital and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective* (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 1990), especially 86–137.
- 7 Ryan, *Fish Out of Water*, 262–63; McDonald, *"To Each His Own"*, 152–53. In Newfoundland parlance, codfish was referred to as fish.
- 8 In 1916 the largest exporters included Harvey & Co., Job Brothers, Baine Johnston & Co., A. Goodridge & Sons, Smith & Company, George M. Barr, Monroe Export Company, Baird Bros., and A.H. Murray and Company. See the Rooms Provincial Archives

- (RPA), GN1/3/A, Box 95, desp. 100, Colonial Secretary John Bennett to Governor Davidson, 4 Jan. 1916.
- 9 Major English brokers before 1919 were Holmwood and Holmwood (London), Harrington & White (London), C.T. Bennett & Co (Bristol), Rolfe & Co (London), and George Hawes (Alicante, Spain). Occasionally, the largest firms had their own agents in European markets to look after their interests directly. Both Job Brothers and Bowring Brothers had employed in the early 1900s Newfoundlander John Rendell in Spain and Italy. See Robert Hong, “An Agency for the Common Weal: The Newfoundland Board of Trade, 1909–1915” (MA thesis, Memorial University, 1998), 94. Before Rendell, Bowrings had employed briefly former insurance agent F.W. Bissett as their Italian agent. See *Evening Herald*, 5 Apr. 1904.
  - 10 Their critical role in the Newfoundland fishery was evident in the bankruptcy of a London broker in 1894 that led to the commercial collapse of Newfoundland’s two banks because they had insufficient funds to cover overdrafts of major exporters who had substantial overdrafts with them. From 1895, branches of Canadian financial institutions filled the commercial banking void in Newfoundland. See Ryan, *Fish out of Water*, 66–69; J.K. Hiller, “A History of Newfoundland, 1874–1902” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1971), 290–92; Patrick O’Flaherty, *Lost Country: The Rise and Fall of Newfoundland, 1843–1933* (St. John’s: Long Beach Press, 2005), 184–87.
  - 11 *Observer’s Weekly*, 21 Mar. 1935; J.R. Smallwood, ed., *The Book of Newfoundland*, vol. 1 (St. John’s: Newfoundland Book Publishers, 1937), 326. For the fiscal year 1913–14, the exports were Brazil (462,000 qtls.), Spain (200,562 qtls.), Italy (170,634 qtls.), Portugal (153,000 qtls.), and Greece (69,602 qtls.). For 1917–18 the export totals were Portugal (451,000 qtls.), Brazil (392,000), Spain (385,533 qtls.), and Italy (189,925).
  - 12 In 1900 major merchants had temporarily formed the Fish Exporters’ Association to market their fish in Brazil. See *Newfoundland Law Reports 1897–1903* (St. John’s: 1905), *Job v. Bowring*, 16 Nov. 1900, where the plaintiff challenged the Association’s right to prevent it from selling the amount of fish it wished and for less than the minimum mutually agreed to. St. John’s native Charles R. Duder was an agent for Monroe Export Company for at least 13 years from 1907 in Brazil. See RPA, MG73, Box 11, file 11, Proceedings of a Board of Trade Conference on the Fishery Regulations, 1920; Reeves, “Alexander’s Conundrum Reconsidered,” 19; Barbara Neis, “A Sociological Analysis of the Factors Responsible for the Regional Distribution of the Fishermen’s Protective Union of Newfoundland” (MA thesis, Memorial University, 1980), 113–14.
  - 13 A good summary of how outright and consignment sales worked is McDonald, “*To Each His Own*”, 7–14.
  - 14 David Alexander, *The Decay of Trade: An Economic History of the Newfoundland Salt-fish Trade, 1935–1965* (St. John’s: ISER Books, 1977), 21; *Third Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade, 1911* (1912), 19–20. Hawes spoke to the Board in 1910 and 1911 on the need for better organization in the markets. See *Daily News*, 18 Oct. 1910; *Evening Herald*, 21 July 1911.
  - 15 Maritime History Archive (Memorial University), John Rorke & Sons Limited fonds,



- file 1.102.133, Hawes to Rorke & Co., 6 July 1923. See also Alexander, *The Decay of Trade*, 21–27.
- 16 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 26 Nov. 1910.
- 17 Hong, "Board of Trade, 1909–1915," 22–27.
- 18 Ian D.H. McDonald, "W.F. Coaker and the Fishermen's Protective Union in Newfoundland Politics, 1908–1925" (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1971).
- 19 Hong, "Board of Trade, 1909–1915," 8, 35–37, 45, 77–78.
- 20 Marmaduke Winter as quoted in the *Mail and Advocate*, 3 July 1915.
- 21 RPA, MG73, Box 11, file 11, Proceedings of a Board of Trade Conference on the Fishery Regulations.
- 22 On the impact of the cod trap, see Innis, *The Cod Fisheries*, 457–58; Robert G. Hong, "Pandora's Box and the Thin Edge of the Cultural Wedge: Technological Adaption and Accommodation in the Newfoundland Codfishery, 1870–1920," paper presented to the Atlantic Studies Conference XIII, 4–7 May 2000, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax.
- 23 William Coaker as quoted in the *Mail and Advocate*, 2 July 1915. Those who went to Labrador in their own vessels generally brought their fish back to St. John's for shipment by steamer, returning to their communities laden with coal and other winter supplies. See C.O. 194/291, Governor Davidson to Bonar Law, 11 Jan. 1916. On the Labrador fishery out of Conception Bay, see P.W. Browne, *Where the Fishers Go: The Story of Labrador* (Toronto: Musson Book Company, 1909); Nicholas Smith, *Fifty-two Years at the Labrador Fishery* (London: Arthur H. Stockwell, 1936); and evidence of William C. Job in *Royal Commission on the Natural Resources, Trade and Legislation of certain Portions of His Majesty's Dominions: Minutes of evidence taken in Newfoundland in 1914* (Great Britain, Dominions Royal Commission, 1915), 38–40.
- 24 RPA, GN5/2/A/1, Box 53, Book 1908–1911, 271–73.
- 25 *Daily News*, 25 Oct. 1907.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 26 Oct. 1907; *Evening Herald*, 26, 28, 29, 31 Oct. 1907.
- 27 O'Flaherty, *Lost Country*, 239–40; *Evening Herald*, 28 Oct., 5 Nov. 1907.
- 28 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 19, 26 Aug. 1911; RPA, GN5/2/A/1, Box 53, Book 1908–1911, 10 Feb. 1910, 352–53. Neither Morris nor Gibbs was involved in the case.
- 29 McDonald, "To Each His Own", 20–33.
- 30 W.F. Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years of the Fishermen's Protective Union of Newfoundland* (St. John's: Advocate Publishing Company, 1930), 82.
- 31 See McDonald, "To Each His Own"; Sean Cadigan, *Death on Two Fronts: National Tragedies and the Fate of Democracy in Newfoundland, 1914–24* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2013).
- 32 Melvin Baker, "William Ford Coaker, the Formative Years, 1871–1908," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 27, 2 (2012): 228, for his view in the mid-1890s.
- 33 Hong, "Board of Trade, 1909–1915," 22; O'Flaherty, *Lost Country*, 242–43.
- 34 *Evening Herald*, 9 Oct. 1908. See also *Daily News* 3, 18, 21 Sept. 1908.
- 35 *Evening Advocate*, 22 Dec. 1917.
- 36 Hong, "Board of Trade, 1909–1915," 57; RPA, GN8, Box 2, GN8.21, folder 2, Coaker to

- Morris, 9 Jan. 1911. Coaker told Morris that it was now “useless to ask anything further from your party.” Morris often bragged that he knew how to deal with Coaker and, once pointing his index finger at Coaker in the Assembly, declared that “I will get you when I want you.” To a political confidant, Morris once noted that Coaker “has a very convenient political conscience. He is dangerous only to the men who believe in him. He can do me no injury. He cannot injure any intelligent public man because no intelligent public man would trust him except to use him.” See “Calchas” in *Daily News*, 2 Feb. 1919.
- 37 See Coaker’s speech given at Joe Batt’s Arm in February 1910 and published in the *Fishermen’s Advocate*, 19, 26 Nov. 1910; Sir William Ford Coaker Heritage Foundation Archives (Port Union), *Plaindealer* Scrapbook, items “Fish Culling!” and “The Cull of Fish”; Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years*, 8, 17.
- 38 *Fishermen’s Advocate*, 19 Nov. 1910; RPA, GN2/5, file 12-B, Mews to Fearn, 5 Oct. 1909; Hong, “Board of Trade, 1909–1915,” 61–62, 92. Indeed, the Board of Trade in 1909 worked with the Morris government to share the cost of employing Arthur Dallas as a trade agent for Brazil. Following Dallas’s death in October 1910, he was not replaced. As Aidan Maloney, president of the Canadian Saltfish Corporation in the 1970s, commented to the author on 9 June 2014, there were as many grades of salt codfish as there were fish stages in Newfoundland before 1949.
- 39 Coaker Heritage Foundation Archives, *Plaindealer* Scrapbook, item on “combination and price of fish”; and *Fishermen’s Advocate*, 19, 26 Nov. 1910.
- 40 Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years*, 8; RPA, GN8.21, folder 1, Coaker to Morris, 9 Nov. 1910.
- 41 RPA, GN8.21, folder 1, Morris to Coaker, 7 Nov. 1910.
- 42 *Ibid.*, Morris to Coaker, 21 Nov. 1910, and Coaker to Morris, 22 Nov. 1910; *Fishermen’s Advocate*, 21 May 1910. In October 1911 the government held three meetings to discuss fish culling, but they were poorly attended as Coaker had not been invited to attend and had been critical of Minister of Marine and Fisheries, A.W. Piccott, in the FPU newspaper. As the FPU’s ideas for fishery reform had been well publicized, Coaker called on the government to live up to its promises to call a conference with officials of the Board of Trade, the FPU, and fishermen. See *Fishermen’s Advocate*, 7, 21, 28 Oct., 4 Nov. 1911. On past government efforts to improve the cure, see Keith W. Hewitt, “Exploring Uncharted Waters: Government’s Role in the Development of Newfoundland’s Cod, Lobster and Herring Industries, 1888–1893” (MA thesis, Memorial University, 1992), 136–90.
- 43 RPA, GN8.21, folder 1, Fearn to Morris, 10 Nov. 1910. Very few studies exist of the fish operations of exporters. There are several studies of merchant-fisherman relations in the outports in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See David Gordon Bradley, “Smugglers, Schemers, Soundrels and Sleeveens: An Analysis of Merchant-Client Relations at Bonavista, Newfoundland, 1875–1895” (MA thesis, Memorial University, 1994); David A. MacDonald, “Really No Merchant: An Ethnohistorical Account of Newman and Company and the Supplying System in the Newfoundland Fishery at Harbour Breton, 1850–1900” (Ph.D. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1988); Robert C.H. Sweeney, “Accounting for Change: Understanding Merchant Credit Strategies in Outport Newfoundland,” in Candow and Corbin, eds., *How Deep Is the Ocean?*, 121–38.

- 44 *Proceedings of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council, 1915*, 33–35.
- 45 In the 6 Aug. 1910 issue of the *Fishermen's Advocate*, Coaker cited the example of a fisherman who sent his fish to St. John's in December 1909 by the coastal steamer *Prospero* and got \$3 per quintal for his fish, although other fishermen had received \$5 per quintal for their shipped fish. The FPU in the future would prevent "these fish-buying sharks" from preying on fishermen, Coaker observed.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 5, 12 Nov. 1910.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 26 Aug. 1911, 28 Sept. 1912. The first four cash stores were at Botwood, Change Islands, Doting Cove, and King's Cove in 1911. Stores added in 1912 were at Catalina, Keels, Joe Batt's Arm, Fogo, Herring Neck, Port Rexton, Cat Harbour, Tilting, and St. John's (where Coaker served as general manager of the Trading Company).
- 48 Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years*, 46. In late 1913 Coaker called on Unionists to withdraw their money in the government's Savings Bank and invest in the Trading Company. Enough did so to seriously impact the bank's stability that former Prime Minister Robert Bond and a few friends immediately injected sufficient funds to help the bank over its difficulties. See RPA, MG136, file 2.01.011, diary entry for 21 Dec. 1913.
- 49 McDonald, "To Each His Own", 32.
- 50 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 2 Sept. 1911.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 7 Oct. 1911.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 15 Oct., 25 Nov. 1911.
- 53 RPA, MG 464, Box 36, file 12, John Cowan to H.J. Earle, 9 Oct. 1911.
- 54 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 7 Oct. 1911, 20 Jan. 1912; Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years*, 30.
- 55 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 25 Nov. 1911, 20 Jan. 1912.
- 56 *Daily News*, 7 Sept. 1911.
- 57 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 11 Nov. 1911, 9 Mar. 1912. In the *Advocate*, Coaker wrote that the strike was the "result of the advice given by the *Advocate*, and the new spirit which the FPU developed in our hardy sons of toil."
- 58 Wilfred Grenfell to *Evening Herald*, 5 Oct. 1912.
- 59 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 11 Nov. 1911.
- 60 *Daily News*, 3 Oct. 1912; *Fishermen's Advocate*, 19 Oct. 1912.
- 61 Copies of several articles from the *Bay Roberts Guardian* were reprinted in the *Evening Chronicle* of 29 Oct., 20, 21 Nov. 1912; Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years*, 47.
- 62 *Fishermen's Advocate*, 12 Oct. 1912.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 21 June 1913.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 30 Nov. 1912.
- 65 Michael Cashin as quoted in the *Evening Telegram*, 9 Jan. 1920.
- 66 Coaker Heritage Foundation Archives, Circular Letter No. 4, 11 Apr. 1913.
- 67 This speech can be found in the *Fishermen's Advocate*, 19, 26 Nov. 1910. On Coaker's early organizing efforts, see Melvin Baker, "Plaindealing and the Fishermen's Protective Union, 1908–1910," *Newfoundland Quarterly* 105, 4 (Spring 2013): 43–51.
- 68 On the 1913 general election, see S.J. Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 95–115; Melvin Baker and Peter Neary, "Sir Robert Bond

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- (1857–1927): A Biographical Sketch,” *Newfoundland Studies* 15, 1 (Spring 1999): 23–25.
- 69 *Fishermen’s Advocate*, 8 Oct. 1913. Section 1 of the FPU’s political manifesto, the “1912 Bonavista Platform,” had called for the “establishment of a permanent commission to operate the laws to standardize fish, the culling of it and the fixing of the fish of price shipped directly from the Labrador coast.” See Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years*, 50.
- 70 *Proceedings of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council, 1914*, 90–91.
- 71 Bay de Verde was a two-member district and Crosbie’s re-election was much resented by Coaker, who claimed Crosbie used considerable public funding and alcoholic spirits to win votes.
- 72 *Proceedings of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council, 1914*, 2 Jan. 1914, 157–58.
- 73 J.W. McGrath, “Newfoundland’s Fish Industry and the War,” *Canadian Fisherman* (Jan. 1915): 12; *Seventh Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade, 1915* (1916), 2–4; O’Flaherty, *Lost Country*, 272–76.
- 74 *Mail and Advocate*, 25 Sept. 1914; Patricia Ruth O’Brien, “The Newfoundland Patriotic Association: The Administration of the War Effort, 1914–1918” (MA thesis, Memorial University, 1981), 108–09, 118.
- 75 This is discussed in Cadigan, *Death on Two Fronts*, 32–92; Melvin Baker, “The Struggle for Influence and Power: William Coaker, Abram Kean, and the Newfoundland Sealing Industry, 1908–1915,” *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 28, 1 (Spring 2013): 63–96.
- 76 *Mail and Advocate*, 12, 13 Oct. 1914.
- 77 *Decisions of the Supreme Court of Newfoundland, 1912–1920* (St. John’s: J.W. Withers, 1930), 103; Marmaduke Winter as quoted in the *Mail and Advocate*, 3 July 1915.
- 78 *Mail and Advocate*, 15 Oct. 1914.
- 79 *Ibid.*, 14 Oct. 1914.
- 80 *Ibid.*, 15 Oct. 1914, Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years*, 82–85.
- 81 Until 1919, slop or slopp fish was a term used to describe poorly dried and heavily salted fish, often only for three days or less. In October 1919 the Board of Trade decided to no longer use this “objectionable” name, using “Labrador” only. See RPA, MG73, Box 73, Board of Trade Minute Book, 17 Oct. 1919; Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years*, 84; G.M. Story, W.J. Kirwin, and J.D.A. Widdowson, eds., *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 496.
- 82 *Mail and Advocate* (weekly edition), 28 Nov. 1914.
- 83 *Mail and Advocate*, 25 Nov. 1914.
- 84 Melvin Baker, ed., “Dear Friends: Coaker’s Circular Letters to Councils, 1909–1927” (unpublished manuscript, 2014), Circular Letter #34 for 19 Dec. 1914.
- 85 *Mail and Advocate*, 10 Apr. 1915.
- 86 *Proceedings of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council, 1915*, 123.
- 87 This is where Newfoundland exporters generally held their fish-laden vessels until a buyer was found.
- 88 *Proceedings of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council, 1915*, 72–74.
- 89 *Ibid.*, 821–22.
- 90 *Ibid.*, 127–28.

- 91 *Ibid.*, 820–25.
- 92 *Mail and Advocate*, 29 May 1915; *Proceedings of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council, 1915*, 831–32.
- 93 *Proceedings of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council, 1915*, 839–40.
- 94 *Mail and Advocate*, 5 June 1915.
- 95 *Decisions of the Supreme Court of Newfoundland, 1912–1920*, 409.
- 96 *Mail and Advocate*, 27 Sept. 1915.
- 97 *Ibid.*, 28 Nov. 1914, 12 Feb. 1915. In the 1920s the Trading Company actively supplied fishermen following the liquidation in 1921 of the Export Company, which had failed to secure sufficient capital to become a strong exporter.
- 98 Newfoundland Labrador Registry of Companies, Smith & Co file #107a; Warwick Smith, “The Tale of a Fish Merchant,” *Newfoundland Magazine* (Dec 1920): 3. In 1917 Coaker also entertained negotiations with the Reid Newfoundland Company to involve the Export Company in the export of fresh fish for the British and American markets by working with the Reids to provide a supply of fresh fish for a processing plant they planned to build at St. John’s. The Reids subsequently built a plant by 1918 but the Export Company was not part of it. See *Evening Advocate*, 21 Apr. 1916, 12 Aug. 1918; *Colonial Commerce* (July 1918): 33–34.
- 99 *Proceedings of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council, 1914*, 19 Feb. 1914, 507, 525; *Daily Mail*, 20 Feb. 1914.
- 100 Its members consisted of John Harris, John Harvey, W.C. Job, M.G. Winter, A.F. Goodridge, Philip Templeman, P.T. McGrath, and James Ryan from the Legislative Council, and J. R. Goodison (Speaker of the House of Assembly), Prime Minister Morris, Minister of Marine and Fisheries Piccott, Minister of Finance and Customs Cashin, J.M. Kent, Robert Moulton, and A.E. Hickman. The commissioners chose Piccott as their chair and McGrath as secretary. *Report of the Commission on Fishery Matters*, 1–2.
- 101 *Ibid.*, 3–6.
- 102 Debating the government’s financial support for widows, Crosbie suggested having such support extended to the wife who “is deserted by her husband,” a “class of women who notwithstanding the solemn marriage vow made before the altar is deserted by her husband,” prompting Coaker to call him a “contemptible clown.” Crosbie refused to apologize, for he did not recognize Coaker by name in his criticisms, and called for Coaker to withdraw his own words towards Crosbie. *Proceedings of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council, 1914*, 800–03. See also Melvin Baker, “Coaker Week, May 1912: The Clash between Patrick McGrath and William Coaker,” *Newfoundland Quarterly* 107, 1 (Summer 2014), 53–57.
- 103 C.O. 194/288, Davidson to Harcourt, 16 Mar. 1914.
- 104 By the end of 1914 they found buyers for Newfoundland fish despite exchange problems in the Mediterranean and Brazil. Higher prices were attained in markets than the previous year when the fishery catch was better. For the following year demand for fish remained strong as fish from Newfoundland’s competitors, Iceland, Norway, and France, was disrupted by the war. Over the next few years, the average price paid by

- exporters for fish was \$8.21 per quintal in 1916 (1,568,055 quintals exported), \$10.33 in 1917 (1,821,206 quintals), \$14.46 in 1918 (1,681,730 quintals) and \$12.67 in 1919 (1,787,849 quintals). See O’Flaherty, *Lost Country*, 272–90; CO194/390, Governor Davidson to Bonar Law, 15 Nov. 1915; McDonald, “*To Each His Own*”, 153.
- 105 Baker, ed., “Dear Friends,” Circular Letter # 17, 22 Sept. 1917. The substantial part of the funding came from “selling cod oil, after holding it over each Spring.”
- 106 McDonald, “*To Each His Own*”, 54–72.
- 107 *Evening Advocate*, 26 Sept., 9, 26 Oct., 31 Dec. 1917.
- 108 C.O. 194/293, Davidson to Long, 22 Oct. 1917. Crosbie, in turn, had the guidance of exporter A.S. Rendell of C.F. Bennett & Co. whom the Governor regarded as “the shrewdest business man in the Colony.” Coaker’s political opponents, including lawyer and politician Richard Squires and businessman R.K. Bishop, pushed back, unsuccessfully trying to encourage Unionists to withdraw their investments in the Trading Company and its related subsidiaries. See Archives and Special Collections (Memorial University), Coll-9, file 4.03.001, Trading Company shareholders’ report for 1918.
- 109 On Spanish fish buyers in St. John’s, see RPA, MG 73, Box 9, file 6, Ernest A. Payne to Richard Squires, 21 Nov. 1917, dealing with Albert Hickman’s objections to the presence of these Spanish buyers. The Seville-based buyers first came to St. John’s in October 1916 and operated from a fish store rented from the FPU. See *Mail and Advocate*, 16 Oct. 1916.
- 110 *Evening Advocate*, 8 Aug. 1918; *The Plaindealer*, 17 Aug. 1918; and see ASC, Coll-9, file 4.03.001, Trading Company shareholders’ report for 1918.
- 111 *Evening Herald*, 27 Sept. 1919; *Evening Advocate*, 16 Dec. 1918; Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years*, 131–32.
- 112 *Daily Star*, 15 Jan. 1920. The Newfoundland government considered creating a combine to counter the Consorzio but decided against it, believing that Newfoundland fish could be diverted to other markets from Italy and that the Consorzio was the result of a few wealthy Italian importers acting out of self interest to enrich themselves while forcing a low price for fish on Newfoundland exporters. See RPA, GN1/1/7, Box 28, Harris to Secretary of State, telegram sent 13 Sept. 1919.
- 113 During the 1919 election, Cashin claimed that Coaker was one of the exporters who benefited from the government guarantee on this cargo. While Coaker had fish aboard the *Eskasoni*, it had been already sold to a Greek buyer. Romania paid interest on these bonds until 1933. See *Daily News*, 26 Sept. 1919, *Daily Star*, 25 Sept. 1919; *Evening Herald*, 27, 30 Sept. 1919; *Evening Advocate*, 29, 30 Sept., 3 Oct. 1919; RPA, GN2/5, file 402-A, Leonard Outerbridge to W.J. Carew, 4 Mar. 1936; GN1/3/A, Box 122, desp. 6. When he went to Ramea in 1944 to work for fish exporters John Penny & Sons, Aidan Maloney found Penny’s worthless Romanian bonds pasted to the walls of the company’s office. Maloney memo to the author, 20 July 2013. The issue remained unresolved in 1956. See RPA, GN133.243, J.M. Baird to D. Hunt, 26 Mar. 1956.
- 114 *Proceedings of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council*, 1920, 78.
- 115 RPA, MG73, Box 10, file 15, Payne to Lloyd, 29 Apr. 1919, *ibid.*, file 5, Payne to Halfyard, 28 Apr. 1919.

- 116 As part of the commercial facilities at Port Union, including fish storage facilities and wharfage, the FPU built its own shipyard, which constructed several schooners for the fish export trade and helped the Export Company to get around a shortage of available tonnage during the war. For a discussion of the tonnage shortage, see George Snelgrove, "Shipping, Shipowners and Fish Merchants: A Study of the Newfoundland Codfish Export Trade, 1914–1923" (Honours Essay, Memorial University, 1993), 15–34.
- 117 The trip was made at the "request of the shareholders of the Trading Co." and "my expenses were paid by the Trading Co. and Export Co., and my trip was not at the public expense." See Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years*, 167. Coaker also envisioned the Trading Company becoming directly involved in the export of fresh fish and was a strong supporter of local efforts to develop this aspect of the fishery.
- 118 *Evening Advocate*, 23 Jan., 31 Mar. 1919. The diary of his 1919 visit can be found in Coaker, ed., *Twenty Years*, 149–67.
- 119 *Evening Advocate* 12 Jan. 1920.
- 120 See Edward Roberts, "Nothing Venture, Nothing Have: Mr. Coaker's Regulations" (MA thesis, Memorial University, 2006), 12–14.
- 121 See Stone's review of the fisheries for 1918 in the *Evening Advocate*, 21 Dec. 1918. Writing to former Liberal Premier Robert Bond on 10 May 1919, *Daily News* editor and Burin MHA John Currie observed that Stone had severed "his connection with the Coaker faction. I know there is a row on between him and Coaker." See ASC, Coll-237, file 3.38.005, Currie to Bond, 10 May 1919; Melvin Baker, "John Glover Stone," *Newfoundland Quarterly* (Summer/Fall 2001): 36–37.
- 122 See Circular letter #11, dated 26 Sept. 1919, in Fishermen's Protective Union of Newfoundland, "Circular Letters, 1913–1939" (n.d., typescript available in the Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University).
- 123 RPA, MG 73, Box 10, file 2, Board of Trade to Sir John Crosbie, 7 July 1919. As Minister of Justice in the Cashin government, Morine believed that these duties could be carried out by the existing Department of Marine and Fisheries as there was no need to set up a new, costly department. See *Daily News*, 7 Feb. 1919, where he opposed the Board's discussion of the creation of the proposed new department.
- 124 *Daily Star*, 15 Jan. 1920.
- 125 *Evening Advocate*, 22, 26 Sept. 1919; *Evening Herald*, 29, 30 Sept. 1919; *Evening Telegram*, 1, 8, 14 Oct. 1919; RPA, GN1/3/A, Box 106, desp. 1107, telegram from Coaker to Cashin dated 9 Sept. 1919.
- 126 *Evening Advocate*, 22, 26 Sept. 1919.
- 127 Coaker Heritage Foundation, file 98.05.682, Coaker to Rolfe, 23 Oct. 1919. Coaker's transactions with Hawes are in file 98.05.771, Hawes & Co., 1919–1920.
- 128 How these regulations were implemented are discussed, for example, in Innis, *The Cod Fisheries*, 463–70; Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland*, 142–48; McDonald, "To Each His Own", 86–105; J. Feltham, "The Development of the F.P.U. in Newfoundland, 1908–23" (MA thesis, Memorial University, 1959), 113–17; Roberts, "Nothing Venture, Nothing Have"; O'Flaherty, *Lost Country*, 294–309; Cadigan, *Death on Two Fronts*, 217–33.