

The Letterbooks of Charles Robin-Collas & Company: Changes and Challenges in Cape Breton Island's Cod Fishery, 1886-1895

Erna Macleod

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Article abstract

Charles Robin-Collas and Company (CRC&C) was a fishing enterprise formed in 1886 that operated several fishing stations in Cape Breton and the Gaspé region, exporting fish to Europe, the Caribbean, New England, and South America in one of the largest global trade networks of the 19th century. The late 19th century marks a crucial transition in the company's history characterized by technological innovation and the shift from a merchant-credit system to a cash economy. This article examines CRC&C letterbooks, which reveal the centrality of ecological circumstances and fishers' agency in the company's daily operations and in processes of social and economic change.

The Letterbooks of Charles Robin-Collas & Company: Changes and Challenges in Cape Breton Island's Cod Fishery, 1886-1895

ERNA MACLEOD

La Charles Robin-Collas and Company (CRC&C) était une entreprise de pêche fondée en 1886, qui exploitait plusieurs établissements de pêche au Cap-Breton et en Gaspésie. Elle exportait du poisson en Europe, aux Antilles, en Nouvelle-Angleterre et en Amérique du Sud dans l'un des plus vastes réseaux commerciaux du monde au 19^e siècle. La fin du 19^e siècle marque une période de transition décisive dans l'histoire de l'entreprise, caractérisée par l'innovation technologique et le passage d'un système de crédit marchand à un système de paiements en argent comptant. Le présent article examine les copies de lettres de la CRC&C, qui révèlent le caractère central de la situation écologique et le rôle des pêcheurs dans les activités quotidiennes de l'entreprise et les processus de transformation sociale et économique.

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THIS ARTICLE INVESTIGATES THE ACTIVITIES OF Charles Robin-Collas and Company (CRC&C), a fishing enterprise in Cape Breton, which replaced Charles Robin and Company (CRC) when CRC collapsed in 1886. CRC had been the second-oldest continuously operating business within what is now Canada.¹ Established in 1765, the Robin Company from Jersey operated several fishing stations on Cape Breton and in the Gaspé region. It created one of the largest global trade networks of the 18th century, exporting fish to Europe, the Caribbean, New England, and South America in exchange for textiles, sugar, rum, salt, and other

¹ David Lee, *The Robins in Gaspé, 1766-1825* (Markham, ON: Fitzhenry and Whiteside 1984); Roch Samson, *Fishermen and Merchants in 19th Century Gaspé* (Hull, QC: Supply and Services Canada, 1984), ix.

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commodities. Local communities depended on the company for virtually all the necessities of life, obtaining goods on credit and fishing for it to pay down their debts. The Robin Company dominated local economies of the coastal communities in which it operated during the 18th and 19th centuries, and profoundly shaped cultural life in Cape Breton and other areas in the region.²

Academic studies have examined CRC's operations in the Gaspé region,³ but the company's activities in Cape Breton have been largely unexplored. This article examines Charles Robin-Collas and Company – the firm that took over when CRC declared bankruptcy and collapsed in 1886 as a result of banking failures back in Jersey.⁴ CRC&C letterbooks – the primary data source for this paper – offer a snapshot of daily operations in the Chéticamp region of Cape Breton Island from 1886 to 1895. They cover such vital matters as environmental and ecological changes; technological, market, and product innovations; and the relationship that the newly taken-over firm maintained with the local community. Letters include a large volume of both business and personal communication.⁵ They were written almost every day and, on some days, agents wrote 8-10 letters or more of varying lengths, ranging from only a paragraph to two or more pages. In addition to correspondence, the letterbooks contain orders for goods and statements of cargoes aboard company ships that shed light on the day-to-day activities of the company and the community. These documents offer insights into local and global events that shaped operations and decision-making processes. Correspondence with government representatives and business partners highlights the CRC&C's political and economic power, but the letters also reveal the contingency of the company's situation. Complaints of insubordination and descriptions of ongoing and accelerating conflicts reveal that community members were active participants in local economic developments.

2 Yves Frenette, *The Anglo-Normans in Eastern Canada* (Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association, Canada's Ethnic Group Series, Booklet No. 21, 1996), 15; Rosemary E. Ommer, "The Truck System in Gaspé, 1822-1877," in *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective*, ed. Rosemary E. Ommer (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1990), 72; Brian Payne, "Fishing the North Atlantic Border Seas: American Capital in a New Environment," *Acadiensis* XXXV, no. 1 (Autumn 2005): 115.

3 See, for example, Lee, *The Robins in Gaspé*, and Rosemary E. Ommer, *From Outpost to Outport: A Structural Analysis of the Jersey-Gaspé Cod Fishery of 1767-1886* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1991).

4 Ommer, *From Outpost to Outport*, 185-9. The company's Cape Breton stations commenced operations as "Charles Robin-Collas & Company" on 3 August 1891. See Eastern Harbor to Arichat, 3 August 1891, p. 9, MG 14 55 A4, Beaton Institute (BI), Cape Breton University (CBU). In 1887, agents identify the company as "Philip Robin & Company in liquidation," and by 1889 letters are signed by agents for "Charles Robin & Company Limited." See MG 14 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU.

5 Personal exchanges typically involve comments on the weather or on illnesses and deaths in the community, opinions about election campaigns and political representatives, and expressions of good wishes on holiday observances. For example, on 15 February 1892, the agent at Eastern Harbor wrote: "A deal of sickness, influenza & laGrippe prevails in this locality & many deaths have occurred latterly." See Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Jersey, 15 February 1892, MG 14 55 A4, book 386, BI, CBU.

Context: a brief overview of the Robin firms in the Gulf of St. Lawrence

The Robin Company originated in 1765 on Cape Breton Island, when John Robin arrived in Arichat and began trading for fish with resident Acadian inhabitants.⁶ The following year, John Robin began his own fishing enterprise – Robin, Pípon, and Company of Isle Madame. The operation established links with neighbouring outports at Darnly Island and Petit de Grat, and within a few years operated a summer station at Chéticamp.⁷ These connections were part of an overall strategy that over time enabled Charles Robin and Company to create the strongest fishing monopoly in Atlantic Canada.⁸

In 1766 company agent Charles Robin (John's brother) visited the Baie des Chaleurs to assess its potential for a fishing base, and he established a headquarters at Paspébiac on the Gaspé Peninsula near New Carlisle. Thereafter, he developed the highest quality dry salted cod in North America. Gaspé experienced less fog than Newfoundland, and its cod were slightly smaller and therefore more suitable for salting and drying than those caught along the Grand Banks. Robin's renowned "Gaspé cure" secured top prices in Europe and sustained a more stable market than dry salted cod produced elsewhere. In the 1870s, the Robins' Cape Breton operations merged with Charles Robin and Company. Then, in January 1886, the Jersey Banking Company collapsed (in January 1886), and the Robin family withdrew from its fishing enterprise. Charles Robin and Company became incorporated as Charles Robin-Collas and Company. Elias Collas, along with two Jersey partners, assumed control of the new firm and re-established operations as usual. In 1910 Collas and his partners in turn would sell the company to Nova Scotians (of Jersey descent), at which time the firm became the Robin, Jones, and Whitman Company. The Robin family has not been involved in the company since 1886, but the firm remains known as "the Robins" in both Cape Breton and Gaspé.⁹ Robin, Jones, and Whitman – the descendant of the longest-operating Jersey enterprise in Atlantic Canada – eventually abandoned its fish exporting activities, but continued to operate a chain of retail stores in Cape Breton and Gaspé until 2005.¹⁰

The Robins had established their Chéticamp fishing operations at La Pointe in approximately 1770, where they had initially maintained a summer fishery and relocated their possessions and personnel to Arichat during the winter months.¹¹ La Pointe – the original Chéticamp Harbour is also referred to as Big Chéticamp in company documents, a translation of the French name "Grand Chaddyé"¹² – has an easily accessible harbour, sheltered from ocean and northeast winds but vulnerable to devastating southeast gales. As well, the mouth of Chéticamp Harbour proper was

6 Lee, *Robins in Gaspé*, 17.

7 Ommer, *From Outpost to Outport*, 24; Sally Ross, and Alphonse Deveau, *The Acadians of Nova Scotia: Past and Present* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1992), 104.

8 Anselme Chiasson, *Chéticamp: History and Acadian Traditions* (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1986), 65.

9 Lee, *Robins in Gaspé*, x, 98, ix.

10 *Cape Breton Post* 1 March 2006. Lee states that the Robin, Jones & Whitman Company "no longer exports fish but still operates a chain of general stores" (*Robins in Gaspé*, 98). See also Ommer, *From Outpost to Outport*, 189.

11 Chiasson, *Chéticamp*, 65.

12 Charlie Dan Roach, personal communication, 24 April 2013.

closed by a sand bar, making it too shallow to accommodate larger vessels.¹³ The Robins subsequently established several permanent fishing stations in the Chéticamp area, including operations at La Pointe, at “Eastern Harbor” (established after the harbour dredging and located at the site of today’s Chéticamp Harbour),¹⁴ and at Grand Étang (also referred to as “Big Pond,” and “the Pond” in company documents). By 1790, they had constructed a large wharf and a store at La Pointe, creating a centre of activity in the Chéticamp area. In addition to a wharf and the store, the shoreline was dotted with flakes for drying fish, a large shed, and numerous warehouses for storing dry cod. In 1874 the Canadian government responded to local demands and dredged the harbour, creating a more welcoming port and encouraging a more productive industry. In 1886, CRC collapsed as a consequence of Jersey’s financial crisis.

Chéticamp in the late 19th century: environmental and ecological factors

The years after 1886 saw many changes at Chéticamp. The government wharf was constructed in 1888 and lighthouses in 1890. As Chéticamp Harbour became more accessible to marine traffic, La Pointe became less important economically and the Robin Company moved its operations to Chéticamp Harbour in 1903. Competition from other businesses and cooperatives in this location eventually forced it to adapt its commercial practices to changing economic circumstances.

Underlying all developments in technology and trade, however, was the profound impact of environmental factors on the fishery. Sean Cadigan has explored the crucial significance of the natural environment and ecological relationships in his examination of Newfoundland’s cod fishery.¹⁵ Cadigan and others have illuminated fishers’ intimate knowledge of seasonal cycles and environmental conditions.¹⁶ These investigations complicate notions of merchants’ control of the fishery, bringing to light the complex constraints within which they conducted their operations. CRC&C wielded significant power within the community and participated in the global fishery, but managers could not control broader economic

13 Chiasson, *Chéticamp*, 68.

14 According to Charlie Dan Roach, the name “Eastern Harbor” was invented by Canada Post when a second post office opened in the Chéticamp village. The original Chéticamp Post Office was located at la Pointe, thus the new office needed a different name to distinguish it and avoid confusion. In designating the new post office, Canada Post anglicized the name but it is no longer in use.

15 Sean Cadigan, *Newfoundland and Labrador: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

16 W. Jeffrey Bolster, *A Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). In addition, Bonnie McCay and James Acheson argue for more nuanced understandings of the complex ways in which knowledge of local environments and ethical concerns for sustaining natural resources shape economic practices within fishing communities. See McCay and Acheson, *The Question of the Commons: The Culture and Ecology of Communal Resources* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1987). See also Brian Payne, *Fishing a Borderless Sea: Environmental Territorialism in the North Atlantic, 1818-1901* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan University Press, 2010), for an examination of the intimate connection between fishing people and their environment and the ways in which nuanced understandings of complex ecological circumstances gave rise to a moral economy in which fishers worked to protect a local resource and participate in the global fishery.

and technological developments or natural occurrences such as weather and fluctuating fish populations. Examinations of ecological conditions underlying the fishery also reveal fishers' efforts to control a shared resource.

The crucial role of weather in communication, transport, and fishing is evident in the tone of letters expressing optimism and relief during calm, pleasant periods and, conversely, frustration and apprehension during unpredictable, inclement conditions. Pleasant conditions typically merit briefer mention. Stormy, unseasonable weather, on the other hand, is frequently noted and its potential consequences for navigation and the fishery lamented. In May 1889, an agent from Eastern Harbor informed representatives in Paspébiac that "the ice has disappeared and navigation is now open on this coast and in the Gulf. We are busy pricing goods and putting every thing in order and readiness for the fishery. We very likely shall have an early fishery. . . . Weather is favourable for farming operations."¹⁷

Documents are filled with references to Cape Breton's changeable weather, to migrating fish populations, and to seasonal cycles of economic and community activity. On 28 August 1893, Eastern Harbor agent Philip LeMontais informed CRC&C Paspébiac that "during the last two weeks have experienced very rough weather with a deal of rain, the farmers are having a deal of difficulty to house the hay crop in good condition."¹⁸ Unsettled weather hampered the fishery throughout the fall with serious consequences for the Robin company: "We are having a continuation of boisterous and unsettled weather and no fishery since beginning of August. Bait and cod are plentiful on the grounds and with favourable weather a deal of fish should be landed. . . . Fishery since beginning of August is a total failure."¹⁹ Financial difficulties for the company also brought hardship for CRC&C customers: "Owing to the wet weather prevailing so long a deal of our green fish is greasy. We have ordered very little goods this season & will reduce our stock as much as possible."²⁰ Moreover, the unpredictability of Cape Breton's weather meant that conditions could change quickly. On October 16, LeMontais wrote to company officials in Jersey: "Have had a couple of days fair fishery this week – Received 39460 pounds of green fish at the stages during the week, equal to Qtl 113 dry – Boats report bait and cod plentiful on the grounds & with favourable weather hope a deal of fish will be landed yet."²¹ Yet the fine weather was a brief respite and, by month's end, LeMontais informed suppliers in Montreal that "owing to the failure of the fall fishery, we shall not require more tea this season."²² In early December gales and heavy snows prevented a late-season fishery and LeMontais reported to the Arichat agent that most boats were beached for the winter.²³

Stormy weather hampered not only the fishery but also transportation between fishing stations and from stations to distant markets. By mid-month LeMontais lamented the disruption in sailing:

17 Eastern Harbor to CRC Ltd., Paspébiac, 4 May 1889, p. 173, MG 14, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU.

18 LeMontais, Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Paspébiac, 28 August 1893, p. 2, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

19 Eastern Harbor to Paspébiac, 4 October 1893, p. 70, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

20 Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Paspébiac, 10 October 1893, p. 81, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

21 Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Jersey, 16 October 1893, p. 86, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

22 Eastern Harbor to Mess W. D. Strand & Sons, Montreal, 31 October 1893, p. 121, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

23 Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Arichat, 9 December 1893, p. 223, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

“Swallow” is still here wind bound (now 8 days) if this stormy & wintry weather continues it will be impossible for her to go to Arichat anymore this fall. We regret she put back as we note the “CRC” [another company vessel] is waiting for those [Brazil] tubs to complete her cargo – After all it may be fortunate she put back had she been on the coast during this blinding snow storm all week it is very probable she would have been casted on shore & might have been a total loss.²⁴

Despite tumultuous weather, a small number of boats continued to fish late in the season when weather permitted. The early end to fishing, however, meant decreased incomes for fishers and hardships for their families. Early in January, LeMontais disclosed local suffering to company officials in Jersey: “We are having snow with cold and wintry weather, the Harbours are freezing up these days. Boats have caught some fish this will be a help to the fishermen in this winter as some of them are sadly in want of provisions.”²⁵

The onset of winter inevitably isolated and encumbered local inhabitants. Heavy snows made roads impassable, impeding both travel and mail service, but unseasonably warm temperatures could be equally troublesome. Community members needed solid ice to haul firewood and transport dried fish between local fishing stations. Predictable seasons were also important throughout the year because late snow and ice delayed the spring fishery and exacerbated shortages of food and other provisions. Unfortunately, the early arrival and intensity of wintry weather in 1893 and 1894 did not herald an early spring. On 2 April 1894, LeMontais wrote to Jersey:

This week we have washed our green fish it turns out in good order, and we hope weather will be fine to put out the flakes next week. As soon as weather permits will push on the curing of dry and green fish as much as possible. Last week we have had a heavy fall of snow and will take sometime before the flakes and beaches are cleared. The weather keeps cold and wintry and the Harbors are frozen solid as yet – If the weather don’t change soon, I am afraid we will have a late spring. Fodder is scarce in the county.²⁶

Ice prevented navigation until month’s end. Spring brought intense activity and a flurry of correspondence among agents, officials in Jersey, suppliers, brokers, and business partners.

Unseasonable conditions continued, and warm temperatures late in the year brought torrential rains that damaged roads and bridges and disrupted trade, transportation, and communication: “The recent heavy rains caused considerable damage at Margaree Harbour, the span of the bridge was carried away & several boats floated over the beach and drifted out to sea. We have had no mail since

24 Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Arichat, 15 December 1893, p. 235, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

25 Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Jersey, January 1894, p. 285, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

26 Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Jersey, 2 April 1894, p. 354, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

Friday, the mail courier cannot effect a crossing.”²⁷ Such tumultuous weather conditions were more than inconvenient and could devastate operations, threatening the company’s solvency and impoverishing the community. Adjusting to nature, however, may have provided the company – and, more importantly, the community – with adaptability and resilience that sustained them through challenging social and economic circumstances.

Food and other staple goods

Imports, exports, and patterns of trade provide a window into local food practices at Chéticamp in the late 19th century, revealing continuity and fluctuation in such factors as availability, affordability, habits, and tastes. Food practices and preferences, in turn, shed light on the local culture and participants’ day-to-day behaviours, revealing, on the one hand, surprising diversity of provisions and tastes existing within the community and, on the other, changes in prices and availability that often meant significant hardship for local inhabitants. Foods regularly mentioned include – among others – flour, pork, beef, oats, beans, rice, barley, potatoes, onions, turnips, butter, molasses, tea, and coffee. Documents also identify less popular foods: “Cheese is an article that sells slowly, we will not order anymore.”²⁸ Produce such as potatoes and onions could be produced on Cape Breton Island and was often shared among Robin establishments. On 11 October 1894, the agent from Eastern Harbor wrote to Arichat:

We intend sending you 100 Brls potatoes in bulk next trip “Swallow,” which we will invoice @ 90¢ per Brl. About 25 Brls will be needed for vessels, allow for your stock, and sell balance for cash or fish If any empty bags, you might send us a few for potatoes. If you want more than 100 Brls let us know. You might advertise them in the Arichat paper to let people you know have them. The quality is very good.²⁹

Such abundance suggests that Cape Breton farmers had experienced a bountiful growing season in 1894. The agents’ comments also indicate the existence of a growing number of customers outside the company’s credit system as well as the convenience and advantages of newspaper advertising, even for local business transactions.

Subsequent communication reveals that potatoes were becoming a relatively profitable commodity: “I see that you sold all the potatoes on [schooner]. Pity vessel is not larger, could buy 300-400 Brls more. Will tell people to plant blue potatoes next year.”³⁰ CRC&C’s interest in marketing potatoes provides evidence of the company’s diversification into products other than dry salted cod and supports Cadigan’s argument that merchants in fishing communities did not discourage

27 DeGruchy, Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Arichat, 31 December 1894, p. 334, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

28 Eastern Harbor to A.E. Collas, Arichat, 7 September 1894, p. 415, MG 14, 55 A8, BI, CBU.

29 A.E. Collas, Eastern Harbor to Arichat, 11 October 1894, p. 26, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

30 Eastern Harbor to Arichat, 17 November 1894, p. 195, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

agriculture so as to ensure local inhabitants' indebtedness.³¹ Markets for potatoes were extending to destinations such as the West Indies, as indicated in a letter to an agent in Halifax: "Can you tell us which is best W.I. market for potatoes and what kind of packaging is required?"³²

The importance of flour and salt (for food and production of dry salted cod) is evident in detailed price negotiations and in urgent requests during shortages and at the beginning and end of each shipping season. Agents' requests for specific products indicate that community members were brand loyal, particularly concerning staple foods: "I am surprised to hear complaints of Sunlight flour, everyone swears by it. Here not one complaint has been made. The man who says he would not buy another barrel does not know how to bake."³³ Agents were also highly sensitive to local tastes, repeatedly refusing to purchase such provisions as flour, tea, and tobacco that did not meet community members' established preferences as indicated in their past buying habits: "Our customers consider No. 35 the strongest tea and I think you better order 30 halfchests of that sample to retail 30¢ p lb. Also 5 each Nos 33 & 37 which will give us 40 halfchests, the remaining 10 halfchests to complete order. We could get H I F X as Grand Etang has a mania for that particular kind. Our customers don't go in so much for flavor as strength and the stronger the tea the better they like it."³⁴ Other frequently purchased food items included raisins and various nuts (such as filberts, walnuts, and almonds). Lobster, sardines, and smoked herrings receive mention as do lemons, oranges, and coconuts. Candies, such as peppermints and chocolate drops, appear on several orders for retail stock, along with hops, alum, baking powder, baking soda, and flavourings such as sugar, ginger, and cloves. Although not food, tobacco was also in high demand and consumed as a staple commodity.

Popular seasonal items include apples, which were imported for local consumption and shipped to Jersey at the request of CRC&C agents. The quality and variety of apples were important factors that reveal market demands and individual tastes: "We are ordering our apples tonight to come per Fastnet Thursday. There ought to be 2 Brls. Northern Spy in lot, which address as I had told you, one to Mr. Elias Collas, Jersey, & the other to me, Jersey . . . should there not be any Spys, substitute Golden Russetts or some other good kind, and ship per Ellen Mary to Paspebiac."³⁵

In February 1895, when flour began to run out, the company agent at Eastern Harbor reported: "We have discontinued selling flour for cash as our stock is getting low besides we have to supply [Chéticamp] and [Grand Étang], both of these stations are cleaned out. We should have purchased one or two extra cars last fall and

31 Sean Cadigan, "The Staple Model Reconsidered: The Case of Agricultural Development in Northeast Newfoundland, 1785-1855," *Acadiensis* XXI, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 48-71. See also Sean T. Cadigan, *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 15.

32 Eastern Harbor to Messrs. Cunningham and Curren, Halifax, 6 October 1894, p. 7, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

33 Eastern Harbor (recipient unknown), 9 October 1894, p. 19, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

34 Eastern Harbor to A.E. Collas, Jersey, 20 February 1895, p. 434, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

35 Eastern Harbor to Arichat, 6 November 1894, p. 139, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

we would have no difficulty to find ready sale for it at 3.75.”³⁶ One month later, escalating flour prices caused additional concern among CRC&C agents:

The flour market is in a nervous condition and from indications good brands such as “Kentucky” and “Sunlight” will soon reach \$4.00. We have received 4 carloads Kentucky at 3.45 delivered at Arichat . . . we could have purchased at 20¢ less in early Feby but we had no idea market would go up, on the contrary expected flour to go down as is usually the case during this month. Some of the Halifax merchants are buying full season’s stock which shows they expect higher prices. Today Kentucky is quoted 3.69 ½ delivered Pictou and Arichat.³⁷

The situation grew worse, as indicated in a subsequent letter: “Flour is still advancing and millers expect higher prices. We have only 15 Brls on hand. None at the Pond or the Point. We could have disposed of 20 or 30 cars more during winter for cash and to good dealers as all of our neighbours & at Margaree Harbour are sold out. If navigation is late to open as there is every appearance I am afraid some of the fishermen will have a hard time of it.”³⁸

In early May (1895), the agent instructed Arichat to provide flour only to fishers in an attempt to preserve diminishing stocks and estimated that his reserves would last only until mid-to-late June.³⁹ Shipments of flour and other goods arrived shortly thereafter and the opening of navigation and the fishery alleviated the burgeoning crisis. The situation, however, accentuates the company’s reliance on imports and the community’s consequent vulnerability.

Changing communication and transportation technologies

Developments in communication and transportation technologies were crucially important factors in the CRC&C’s successful operations. In the late 19th century, written correspondence was the predominant medium for business and personal communication; but the arrival of telegraph service in Chéticamp in 1891 enhanced the speed of interaction, providing access to global information and newly instant communication with global markets.⁴⁰ Telegraphic messaging facilitated communication among agents in Chéticamp and Arichat, and between local agents and their business partners, but the transmission of messages was occasionally impeded by outsiders’ uncertainty regarding the locations of “Eastern Harbor” and “Chéticamp.” The name Eastern Harbor distinguished the new post office located at the newly dredged Chéticamp Harbour from the older office at LaPointe (the original Chéticamp Harbour), but telegram senders had to identify Chéticamp as

36 Eastern Harbor to A.E. Collas, Jersey, 17 February 1895, p. 419, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

37 Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Jersey, 18 March 1895, p. 448, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

38 Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Jersey, 25 March 1895, p. 470, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

39 Eastern Harbor to A.E. Collas, Halifax, 4 May 1895, p. 653, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

40 Chiasson, *Chéticamp*, 93. “Father Fiset obtained telegraph service for Chéticamp in 1891. This service was installed in the home of Conrad Fiset (nephew of Father Fiset). In 1905 it was moved to the home of Charlie W. Aucoin, and in 1912 to the home of Moise S. Aucoin. This service ceased in 1959.”

their destination in order for messages to reach recipients in Eastern Harbor: “We have the telegraph but the office goes under the name of Cheticamp, although situated at Eastern Harbor. The reason why is because the harbor has been dredged lately, and its name changed.”⁴¹ To expedite written correspondence, on the other hand, senders had to use Eastern Harbor as the mailing address: “When writing to us please address Eastern Harbor C.B. and not Cheticamp. Telegrams, however, must be addressed to Cheticamp as that is the name by which the office is known.”⁴²

This new technology was too expensive to permit exchange of routine messages, and telegrams were used only in situations where the urgency of the message justified costs incurred: “We don’t use wires much, can’t afford it, their 8pms [evening messages] cost 40¢.”⁴³ Telegrams, however, could be extremely advantageous for securing the best prices in volatile international markets: “If Boston market for salted mackerel keeps up, buy @ 10.00 & ship at once, \$3.50 will cover expenses. Keep yourself posted by wire if necessary. You may be able to buy at \$9.50 or \$9.75, always buy as low as you can.”⁴⁴ Such negotiations required vigilance and prompt action but created opportunities for significant profit.

In addition to high costs, electronic communication was often unreliable – causing frustration for senders who sometimes mailed follow-up letters to ensure that important information was accurately conveyed: “I wired you this am as follows . . . unfortunately the lines are down between Mabou and Hawkesbury and I doubt the message has yet reached you.”⁴⁵ Unreliable service prompted an Eastern Harbor agent to appeal to the Western Union office in Saint John, New Brunswick:

On the 24th . . . we forwarded a telegram to the Cheticamp Telegraph Office for transmission to Arichat & the operator informs us it was not sent to destination until the next morning as some of the other offices were tampering with the key and current taken away every minute. Often when we have occasion to send messages, the operator reports no current on the line, this state of affairs has existed a long time and we hope you will investigate this matter at your earliest convenience as the service is very unsatisfactory both to the operator & the public in general.⁴⁶

One year later, the agent asked Western Union to assume responsibility for the government-operated telegraph line between Chéticamp and Mabou in hopes that the company would enhance services and reduce transmission costs. The agent argued that Chéticamp’s bustling fishery promised high demand for telegraph

41 Eastern Harbor to Philadelphia & Reading Coal and Iron Co., Boston, 11 July 1895, p. 869, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

42 Eastern Harbor to Manager, Bank of Montreal, Halifax, 5 June 1895, p. 744, MG 14 55 A9, BI, CBU.

43 Eastern Harbor to Mr. Romeril, Paspébiac, 15 May 1894, p. 447, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

44 A.E. Collas, Eastern Harbor, to P.J. Fiott, Arichat, 22 November 1894, p. 219, MG, 14 55 A9, BI, CBU.

45 Eastern Harbor to A.E. Collas, Arichat, 18 June 1895, p. 782, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

46 Eastern Harbor to D.C. Dawson, Esq., Supt. WU Telegraph Co., Saint John, NB, 27 July 1894, p. 249, MG 14, 55 A8, BI, CBU.

services: “There is quite a lot of business along here now, especially in our harbor – we boast of 20 fishing & coasting schooners and the number is increasing yearly, then we have steamers calling here weekly. There is far more business done here than either Port Hood or Mabou where you have offices.”⁴⁷

CRC&C agents also explored possibilities for obtaining telephone service as early as 1889,⁴⁸ petitioning the local Member of Parliament and obtaining permission from the minister of Public Works in Ottawa to run telephone wires along telegraph lines.⁴⁹ Yet despite permission from federal authorities, Chéticamp’s remote geographic location and mountainous topography delayed telephone service until after the turn of the century. According to Chéticamp historian Anselme Chiasson, Chéticamp received local telephone service in 1906 and was not linked to the outside world until 1914.⁵⁰

Advancing communication technologies complemented expanding transportation technologies such as the railway and steamship. Railways never extended to Chéticamp, but rail service to Pictou, Mulgrave, and Port Hawkesbury enabled CRC&C to combine rail and water transport. A letter to John Lamey in Port Hawkesbury illustrates the value of rail transportation for expedited services: “Have ordered goods from Halifax [to replace] ‘Swallow’s’ sails, same as your memo and have requested our friends to forward them at once per Rail to your address, and trust they will reach you shortly. Please make sails as quick as possible and give her a good fit, and send bill of charges here. Please charge us with Railway expenses.”⁵¹ New modes of transportation thus co-existed with old at this point in time – the urgent need to make “Swallow” seaworthy indicates that steamships and railways supplemented rather than superseded sailing.

Like railways, steamships offered the advantage of faster and more efficient access to markets and suppliers. Steamship service began in Chéticamp in 1886. One year later, regular, government-subsidized service began operating between Chéticamp and Pictou, calling also at Port Hood, Inverness, Margaree, and Grand Étang.⁵² Though efficient and reliable, steamships could be an expensive mode of transport and agents sometimes chose sailing vessels to reduce costs for the company and its suppliers when maximum speed was not a principal concern: “You would probably obtain a cheaper freight by Schr than by SS Fastnet. Schr Ajax carries fish at a low rate.”⁵³ Steamship service was already central to the CRC&C in 1889, when the SS *Beaver* facilitated weekly transport between Chéticamp and

47 Eastern Harbor to C.H. McKee, Esq., Manager Western Union Tel. Co., St. John, 11 July 1895, p. 874, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

48 Agent in Eastern Harbor to Agent in Chéticamp, 15 August 1889, p. 404, MG 14, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU.

49 Eastern Harbor to H. Cameron, Esq., MD, MP, Mabou, 31 August 1889, pp. 442, 452, MG 14, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU; Eastern Harbor to Minister of Public Works, Ottawa, Canada, 3 September 1889, p. 452, MG 14 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU.

50 Chiasson, *Chéticamp*, 93. Chiasson states that initial service was limited to the Chéticamp community, with no connection to surrounding areas and the broader world.

51 Philip LeMontais, Eastern Harbor, to Mr. John Lamey, Hawkesbury, 27 September 1894, p. 59, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU (emphasis in original).

52 Chiasson, *Chéticamp*, 91.

53 Eastern Harbor to Messrs. Moir Son & Co., Halifax, 2 June 1895, p. 734, MG 14, 55 A 9, BI, CBU.

distant partners.⁵⁴ The SS *Beaver* was replaced by the *St. Olaf*, which served Cape Breton harbours during the 1890s. Steamships operated from the opening of navigation in spring until late autumn, typically the end of November.⁵⁵ CRC&C agents, along with other merchants, relied on steamship service to meet market demands for salted cod and ensure efficient delivery of necessary provisions. Controversy in 1895 surrounding the awarding of the annual subsidy underscores that this amenity was necessary rather than simply convenient: “The ‘St. Olaf’ is no longer on this route and will be replaced by the ‘Weymouth,’ a smaller steamer. Lawrence [a local merchant] and other interested parties are dissatisfied as St. Olaf was giving good satisfaction.”⁵⁶

Despite opposition within the community, “Weymouth” received the contract; however, CRC&C agents and other merchants maintained their resistance: “The local subsidy has been given to the SS Weymouth who replaces the St. Olaf on this route the coming season and all the merchants here are much dissatisfied at this arrangement. By offering the St. Olaf all our freight we may yet induce the company.”⁵⁷ Their persistence paid off, as confirmed in a subsequent letter: “Altho the SS St. Olaf has been unable to secure the subsidy from the local gov’t for this route we are led to believe that the Dom Gov’t will subsidize her to call at this and other Cape Breton ports. The SS Weymouth has the local subsidy and is a much smaller boat than the St. Olaf with a very small carrying capacity.”⁵⁸ Two days later, the Eastern Harbor agent informed Arichat that the St. Olaf would provide its usual service with the SS Weymouth assigned to bi-weekly trips from Pictou until late August.⁵⁹

Expanding markets

Developments in communication and transportation were essential to maintaining international markets and also to the emergence of intra-continental trade. A letter to a Chicago seller outlines the CRC&C’s global trade links: “We handle a large quantity of dried salted codfish, of our own cure, that we export to Brasil, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, and occasionally a few quintals to Boston.”⁶⁰ That agents were regularly exchanging goods not only with coastal regions but also with American companies in such locations as Ohio and Chicago illustrates changing patterns of communication and commerce as rail and steam supplemented and gradually displaced sail ship transport. Shipping routes could be quite convoluted, with dry salted cod and other fish products often shipped between Cape Breton stations, then to Paspébiac, and then on to South America, the Barbados, Europe, and the United States:

54 Eastern Harbor to Messrs. Brock & Co., Montreal, 4 May 1889, p. 176, MG 14, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU.

55 Eastern Harbor to Messrs. E.A. Small Ltd., Montreal, 30 October 1894, p. 112, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

56 Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Jersey, 13 March 1895, p. 436, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

57 Eastern Harbor to Mr. John Camiott, Arichat, 15 March 1895, p. 441, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

58 Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Jersey, 25 March 1895, p. 470, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

59 Eastern Harbor to Mr. John Camiot, Arichat, 27 March 1895, p. 473, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

60 Eastern Harbor to Messrs. King & Co., 142 Water Street, Chicago, 4 June 1894, p. 11, MG 14, 55 A8, BI, CBU.

I learn from Arichat that the quintal fish dried by you looks well and is in good order, it has been forwarded to Jersey via Paspebiac, and went by rail from Mulgrave. I am glad to hear that Porto Rico market was looking up and I soon hope to hear that our parcel sold well. The small of same lot went to Havana had remitted \$500/100 to pay cost. All expenses were paid. Hope your lot will do as well. Can you tell me if hake and haddock are admitted free into the Spanish W.I.?⁶¹

CRC&C operations in Cape Breton's fishery demonstrate the increasing complexity of trade and the importance of Brazil as a market for dry salted cod. Brazil's plantation economy ensured high demand for fish as a low-cost, high protein food for labourers and offered in exchange valuable commodities such as coffee – Brazil's most important export – and cotton, sugar, tobacco, cocoa, and rubber: "We have no large or Medium fish on hand suitable for the Jamaica market. We have some under salt which cannot be cured much before middle or latter end of May What fish is held at Gaspé this winter is all intended for the Brazil market. Should we know of any intended for your market we will advise you in due time."⁶² Brazil's central significance as a market for dry salted cod resulted from the nation's secession from Portugal (1822) and from the collapse of the Caribbean trade following the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1834.⁶³ Opposition to slavery existed in Brazil and intensified throughout the 19th century, culminating with official abolition in 1888. Yet plantations continued to operate with former slaves and immigrants as sources of cheap labour and Brazil thus remained an important destination for CRC&C in the 1890s.⁶⁴ Eruption of Brazil's War of Candos (1893-97) threatened to disrupt this lucrative trade, and agents expressed concerns and hopes for a quick resolution: "I see you are shipping another parcel of fish to the West Indies – you mentioned matters look very serious in the Brazils. Let us hope they will quiet down shortly & not interfere with the shipping."⁶⁵

Several days later, the same agent was less optimistic: "Matters do not improve in the Brazils & these serious difficulties will no doubt interfere considerably with the shipping."⁶⁶ The war continued and the situation remained uncertain, but further correspondence indicates that CRC&C was shipping fish to Brazil: "Swallow left 11th [November] for Arichat with a full load of tubs for Brazils and West Indies."⁶⁷ Company representatives anxiously awaited the safe return of ships: "The state of affairs in the Brazils is still serious – The vessels from Brazil will reach Arichat late in the season."⁶⁸ Despite domestic conflict, Brazil's demand for fish remained high and the agents' focus shifted to providing sufficient quantities. The last ship of the

61 Eastern Harbor to A.H. Whitman, Halifax, 23 November 1894, p. 224, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

62 Eastern Harbor to A.H. Whitman, Halifax, 27 March 1894, p. 479, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

63 Ommer, *From Outpost to Outport*, 150, 151.

64 Rex A. Hudson, ed., *Brazil: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1997), <http://countrystudies.us/brazil/13.htm>.

65 Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Arichat, 3 October 1893, p. 66, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.


66 Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Arichat, 6 October 1893, p. 73, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

67 Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Jersey, 13 November 1893, p. 154, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

68 Eastern Harbor to W.R. Cutler, Esq., Arichat, 13 November 1893, p. 157, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

year to Brazil and the West Indies sailed from Eastern Harbor in early December.⁶⁹

Different markets demanded different qualities of fish. In earlier years, European markets typically demanded higher grades of dry salted cod, but West Indian and South American markets were discriminating buyers as well:

You mention that you will ship large fish to Jamaica as soon as they are cured. Mr. Whitman tells me that Jamaica takes light salted amber colored small cod, packed in 4 Qtl soft wood casks, or, say 450 lbs in ea. cask, and that from 10 to 14% of each shipment should be large dried cod packed in boxes of 100 each, but on no account to ship Butts, Drums, or Tubs. He asks me to send him a sample of our small cod 10 to 14 in long lightly salted, and hand dried, and that he might dispose of 3 to 4000 Qtls at Halifax for export if price suited. I may do so in the fall. The Gaspé pickle small fish might suit his purpose. Kingsport, Jamaica takes a good grade of fish, our  brand would not be good enough, but Montego Bay & other Southern Jamaica ports take a lower grade.⁷⁰

A letter to Trinidad several days later also acknowledges local preferences, inquiring about the quality, size, and package dimensions preferred by local consumers.⁷¹

Changing CRC&C practices illuminate broader shifts in economic arrangements and international relations. As new technologies transformed patterns of communication and transportation, CRC&C's principal markets shifted from Europe and the West Indies (although South America remained centrally important), and its North American partners expanded to include inland regions of the continent. Centre-periphery relations remained but new centres of power emerged in North America, overtaking historical links with Europe. Over time, trade became increasingly cross-continental rather than concentrated along the Atlantic seaboard. Coastal communities – the former hub of continental trade – would become increasingly peripheral and marginalized in the long run, but in the late 19th century CRC&C representatives in Cape Breton responded to changing economic and social circumstances by experimenting with new markets, partnerships, and products.

Product innovation

In her investigations into the Gaspé fishery, Rosemary Ommer attributes Charles Robin's success in the region in part to the company's focus on perfecting the production of dry salted cod with little diversification in alternative fish species and products. She notes that conditions in Newfoundland and Cape Breton may have necessitated greater product variation⁷² and CRC&C documents confirm such diversification, revealing attempts to expand operations beyond exclusive production of dry salted cod at least in later years. Agents reported exports of frozen fish products – including cod and alternative species such as mackerel, haddock, and

69 Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Jersey, 4 December 1893, p. 213, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

70 Eastern Harbor to Mr. Romeril, Gaspé, 7 August 1894, p. 276, MG 14, 55 A8, BI, CBU.

71 A.E. Collas, Eastern Harbor, to Messrs. A. Cumming & Co., Trinidad, 9 August 1894, p. 294, MG 14, 55 A8, BI, CBU.

72 Ommer, *From Outpost to Outpost*, 159.

herring – along with experiments in canning lobster and shipping it on ice: “Let me know how your lobster venture turns out. 200 cases is a good beginning for this.”⁷³ Several days later, the agent discussed his intentions to experiment with “boneless cod” (cod fillets) in a letter to a Boston supplier.⁷⁴

The need to diversify may have arisen from the difficulties of maintaining solvency following the company’s transfer of ownership in 1886 and the withdrawal of the Robin family from fishing operations. In 1889 an agent at Eastern Harbor expressed frustration with a Boston supplier and anxiety about the business’s future: “DeLong and Seaman promised prompt shipment [of flour] and should have wired us the position of matters on the contrary; they have disappointed us to the last and have not written us a single letter. Tis too bad & we shall lose a deal of fish through this unfortunate transaction. The business is bad enough without killing it altogether.”⁷⁵ Two days later, he described the company’s vulnerability in relation to rival merchants: “We beg to call your attention to our situation. Our dealers are sadly in want of provisions; and if the ‘Florence Abbott’ fails to put in an appearance shortly at Arichat we shall be sadly disappointed. Our neighbours long ago have had goods from [another provider] and are supplying the country.”⁷⁶ Tensions between CRC&C, competing merchants, and local fishers reveal how changing economic and social conditions enabled competitors to participate in the fishery and trade. Rival buyers and a growing number of local merchants provided options for community members that reduced their dependency on the CRC&C.⁷⁷

The challenges of re-establishing a fragile and beleaguered enterprise were compounded by new representatives’ unfamiliarity with the delicate process of salting and drying cod, and this lack of experience produced variations in quality that may have compromised the Robin Company’s reputation for a consistently superior product. Such expertise was not quickly acquired. In 1894, Collas’s questions to the company’s Halifax dealer reveal the overseer’s inexperience: “You told the writer in a previous letter that the fish should be under salt fourteen days, does it matter if it is salted a longer time, say eighteen or twenty days, and do you want the fish covered with salt?”⁷⁸ Improper salting and drying resulted in an inferior product and incurred costs for the company: “Codfish. I am sorry I made a

73 A.E. Collas, Eastern Harbour to Mr. Romeril, Paspébiac, 15 May 1894, p. 447, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

74 A.E. Collas to Messrs. DeLong & Seaman, Boston, 19 May 1894, p. 457, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

75 Eastern Harbor to Arichat, 9 May 1889, p. 181, MG 14, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU.

76 Eastern Harbor to Delong and Seaman, Boston, MA, 11 May 1889, p. 196, MG 14, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU.

77 Letters frequently note that fishers were informed about prices prevailing in Halifax and that some fishers transported dry salted fish to Halifax rather than accepting CRC&C’s prices. Agents do not explain the details of competition in the fishery, but scholars have examined these complex relationships. In *Fishing a Borderless Sea*, Brian Payne states that fish merchants in Nova Scotia regarded as rivals nonlocal fishers from within the province, throughout Canada, and beyond its borders (i.e. Newfoundland and the United States). Fishers, however, engaged in cooperative and competitive relations with “outsiders,” welcoming those who purchased bait and provisions, exchanged goods, and hired crews but challenging those who attempted to fish in inshore waters. See viii, xv, xvi, xviii, 20, 36, 53, 54, 93.

78 A.E. Collas to A.H. Whitman, Halifax, 2 June 1894, p. 501, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

mistake in this shipment as it will not be a paying business. . . . I don't understand this sunburning, not having tried to cure such fish before I dried them on the skin, whereas I think I ought to have spread them face up. I did not know either that Haiti fish should be thick. To what market would you ship your lot if it were well cured?"⁷⁹ New managers' ineptitude extended to relations with community members, as evidenced in more frequent and intensifying conflicts with local fishers. Disagreements surrounding payment for fish and concerns about company operations in 1889 occasioned intervention by a Paspébiac manager, who scrutinized local practices and advised managers to deal firmly with fisher-clients.⁸⁰

New product developments arose from and depended on innovative techniques and technologies. By the late 1800s, advances in railway transport and refrigeration technologies encouraged North American producers to develop fresh and frozen food products.⁸¹ CRC&C agents recognized the potential of such developments and applied techniques used for cold storage in icehouses to construct a "freezer" where fresh fish could be preserved in ice for transport to Quebec, Ontario, and the United States. Workers collected blocks of ice from nearby ponds and lakes in the winter and insulated the ice with sawdust to preserve it in warmer seasons. Fresh-frozen fish supplied both bait and a saleable commodity: "Sawdust – Hope you will manage to get some in some way as we will be stuck for our icehouse, let alone a freezer should we decide to build one."⁸² The company also experimented with preservaline, an additive applied to preserve the freshness of fish shipped on ice. Fresh and frozen fish could then be sent by steamship or refrigerated rail car to partners across the continent with surprising success: "I enclose a copy of Lockerby's letter in reply to ours re Boneless fish, they speak favorably of our fish, the secret of the whole thing is to have fish nice and white."⁸³

Innovative techniques and technologies promised to create new sales opportunities and alleviate shortages due to fluctuating weather conditions and fish migrations. Representatives in Gaspé conducted their own experiments and Cape Breton agents consulted with them to compare outcomes as they considered possibilities: "Herrings are scarce – wish you had a chance of sending us a barrel or two to try frozen herring as an experiment. . . . I am very anxious to try frozen herring as we can get any amount of them in the spring at Magdalen Islands & I think they would be better bait than squid."⁸⁴ Unpredictable catches from day to day and year to year were sometimes attributed to a scarcity of bait and at other times to absence of cod along the coast. Numerous factors likely contributed to varying catches, including unstable weather and overfishing. Historical evidence indicates that overfishing was affecting cod populations in waters of the Northwest Atlantic

79 Eastern Harbor to A.H. Whitman, Halifax, 25 September 1894, p. 475, MG 14, 55 A8, BI, CBU.

80 George Romeril, Eastern Harbor, to Mr. Walter Hamon, Paspébiac, 28 May 1889, p. 240, MG 14, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU.

81 James E. Candow, "Recurring Visitations in Pauperism: Change and Continuity in the Newfoundland Fishery," in *How Deep is the Ocean?* ed. James E. Candow and Carol Corbin (Sydney, NS: University of Cape Breton Press, 1997), 145.

82 Eastern Harbor to P.J. Fiott, Arichat, 27 September 1894, p. 486, MG 14, 55 A8, BI, CBU.

83 Eastern Harbor to A.E. Collas, Jersey, 17 February 1895, p. 419, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

84 Eastern Harbor to Mr. Romeril, Paspébiac, 24 May 1895, p. 480, MG 14, 55 A7, BI, CBU.

by the early 18th century. Yet overfishing was a cyclical problem in a hook-and-line industry where declining cod populations meant lower catches and an opportunity for stocks to regenerate. Jeffrey Bolster states that until the mid-19th century the marine ecosystem appeared able to reproduce each year what fishers harvested. This overall stability, however, “may have masked an emerging pattern of localized depletions.”⁸⁵ Human activities combined with natural factors, intensifying the impact on marine environments. During the 19th century, equipment such as long lines and purse seines transformed the fishery from a relatively passive enterprise to an efficient, rapidly expanding industry. Consistently low catches in New England, the Maritimes, and Newfoundland raised concern among fishers and government officials, and presaged the perils of unrestricted overfishing in the Atlantic fishery.⁸⁶

Changes in company practice presented opportunities for increased profits in a changing industry, yet innovations also created problems as agents and workers attempted to master unfamiliar techniques and produce quality products. At times, agents expressed frustration and discouragement: “I don’t understand this ice business, and it is a very bad one so far, here we are paying a high rent for an ice house, and buying ice all for nothing. What is the use of our freezer now?”⁸⁷ Combined pressures to acquire traditional skills and experiment with new techniques heightened anxiety as agents endeavoured to uphold product standards and present the CRC&C favourably to established buyers: “Note you have ordered a lot of parchment for boneless fish packages. It may reach us before the fish is sufficiently dry to pack. It may be well to wait for the new catch before packing for Jamaica as what we have on hand is dark in color and would not be a good sample.”⁸⁸

Careful handling was particularly important when introducing frozen fish products into established markets. New preservation methods could result in inconsistent and in some cases unpleasant results: “We note your remarks on our boneless cod. The smell complained of arose from our excess of preservaline in packing.”⁸⁹ The agent responded to the complaint by apologizing, explaining the unpalatable product as an anomaly, and immediately shipping meticulously prepared samples to the offended customer. Subsequent shipments to Toronto and Chicago offered samples of boneless cod with agents’ assurances of the company’s high standards and superior product. In reassuring buyers, CRC&C agents likely hoped that the company’s established reputation for high-quality dry salted cod (the Gaspé cure) would extend to frozen fish. They also realized that economic arrangements had changed significantly and that they would have to act quickly to perfect new techniques and win loyalty from fickle buyers with access to an ever-expanding

85 Jeffrey A. Hutchings and Ransom A. Myers, “The Biological Collapse of Atlantic Cod Off Newfoundland and Labrador,” in *The North Atlantic Fisheries: Successes, Failures, and Challenges*, ed. Ragnar Arnason and Lawrence Felt (Charlottetown: Institute of Island Studies, 1995), 56; Bolster, *A Mortal Sea*, 9, 65.

86 Candow, “Recurring Visitations in Pauperism,” 142; Bolster, *A Mortal Sea*, 9.

87 Eastern Harbor to P.J. Fiott, Arichat, 10 August 1895, p. 971, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

88 Eastern Harbor to CRC&C, Jersey, 21 March 1895, p. 459, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

89 Easter Harbour to Messrs. Lockerby Bros., Montreal, 8 November 1894, p. 152, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

range of producers and sellers. Ongoing correspondence with businesses in central Canada, the United States, South America, the Caribbean, and Europe manifest both a proactive approach and a sense of urgency. In November 1894 the Eastern Harbor agent sent samples of boneless cod to Reid, Murdoch and Company, Chicago, seeking feedback on the product and contact information for other potential buyers.⁹⁰ He subsequently asked Lockerby Bros. in Montreal to evaluate a recent sample shipment of boneless cod, describing it as “A1” and possibly an advertisement for the CRC&C’s new product line.⁹¹ As they experimented with new processing techniques, CRC&C representatives compared their products with those of rival companies. Business partners occasionally assisted in these efforts by providing samples of competitors’ goods to the CRC&C. Access to competitors’ fish products could yield detailed information about preservation methods and product presentation.⁹²

By 1894, CRC&C was expanding sales of pickled mackerel and encountering challenges in maintaining its freshness during shipping.⁹³ That same year, experiments with lobster canning were disappointing in both Gaspé and Cape Breton: “Note lobster fishing was poor [in Gaspé], it is the same here. They are too small, too small to pay, I think. The fact is, these fishing stations will have to be closed periodically for a few years to allow the lobster time to grow.”⁹⁴ The volatility of the emerging lobster industry is demonstrated further in the transience of lobster canning enterprises from 1876 to 1947 – the year in which the Robin, Jones, and Whitman Company opened a lobster factory that remained in operation until the late 20th century.⁹⁵

CRC&C also experimented with non-fish food products including local game, which appears to have been plentiful: “As we propose shipping partridge to Montreal when shooting season opens, after 15th Sept. will you kindly inform us if there is a refrigerator car attached to express at Grand Narrows, we would ship via Baddeck & Grand Narrows, can we ship on strength B/L from Baddeck? And what would freight be? If expenses are not too high, we might ship from one to two thousand. An early reply will oblige.”⁹⁶ Such diversification in products illustrates how new modes of transportation and communication necessitated and nurtured innovative economic practices. New techniques and products, however, generated uncertain profits, and CRC&C’s efforts to satisfy established buyers and attract new business emphasize the company’s dependence on external economic factors. Such factors were complicated by the particularities of local circumstances and relationships.

90 Eastern Harbor to Messrs. Reid Murdoch & Co., Chicago, 9 November 1894, p. 163, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

91 A.E. Collas, Eastern Harbor, to Messrs. Lockerby Bros., Montreal, 28 November 1894, p. 245, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

92 Eastern Harbor to A.E. Collas, Jersey, 19 January 1895, p. 379, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

93 Eastern Harbor to Arichat, 17 November 1894, p. 241, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

94 A.E. Collas, Eastern Harbor, to Mr. Romeril, Gaspé, 9 June 1894, p. 29, MG 14, 55 A8, BI, CBU.

95 Chiasson, *Chéticamp*, 70-75.

96 Eastern Harbor to Freight Agent ICR, Moncton, NB, 7 August 1894, p. 274, MG 14, 55 A8, BI, CBU.

Community relations

The letterbooks reveal complex and co-dependent relations between the company and the community. Robin-Collas agents were committed to the company and to profiting from Cape Breton's abundant cod stocks, but they understood that the company's very survival depended on recognizing and responding to local needs, problems, and perceptions while negotiating broader market and environmental fluctuations. They established fish prices and purchased provisions with fishery workers' circumstances in mind. In setting prices for fish and merchandise, agents considered customers' responses to their decisions; during times of scarcity, they were acutely aware of the difficulties facing local inhabitants. CRC&C customers, in turn, challenged inequitable company practices and negotiated more advantageous economic exchanges with rival merchants and traders. Community members' ability to influence company decisions demonstrates that workers were not passive victims in economic relations; their agency is visible in protests and demands for equitable employment conditions.

Changes within the industry and the company brought about changes in relations between agents and community members. In earlier years, the Robin Company had few competitors in fishing and merchandising; yet, by the late 1880s, the incorporation of the company, enhanced communication with distant markets, and changing modes of transportation created more competitive economic circumstances that enabled local entrepreneurs to gain a foothold in the fishery. In 1889, Cape Breton agents reported conflicts with fishers concerning prices for fish and pressure from rival merchants: "The fishermen appear decided not to give their fish under \$1.20 per 100 [pounds] fresh. This is a high figure considering the state of the markets; but, if we wish to secure the spring fish, we must try and agree with them, otherwise our neighbours will get it."⁹⁷

Accounts of interactions with fishers reveal their unwillingness to back down from their demands:

We drove in the afternoon to Cheticamp and in the evening the fishermen congregated in the room to know the price of green fish. They first asked same price as last year – \$1.35 per 100 lbs then came down to \$1.20 which we refused to entertain and offered \$1.10 which is even too high in proportion to the price of dry in Halifax; this the fishermen would not accept and as a compromise we offered to divide the difference and to pay \$1.15 and we now wait to see what they will do as some of them threatened to take their fish elsewhere so we may have to give the \$1.20 rather than lose the fish, but will wait to see what the other merchants will do.⁹⁸

The seriousness of the CRC&C's situation is accentuated by a visit to Eastern Harbor from a Paspébiac administrator who arrived at month's end to examine Cape Breton business practices and instruct local agents on the importance of controlling negotiations with fishers:

97 Eastern Harbor to CRC Ltd., Paspébiac, 18 May 1889, p. 212, MG 14, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU.

98 Eastern Harbor to CRC Ltd., Jersey, 21 May 1889, p. 228, MG 14, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU.

I arrived here last Friday per SS Beaver and intend leaving on Thursday for Arichat. I have been busy since I arrived examining into the working of the business and explaining how the books are to be kept in future but have not yet been able to study the matter fully and shall have to return in July for a longer stay and more thorough examination. The present system of business here is decidedly erroneous and one sided as the fishermen make their prices and until this is changed no profitable or safe business can be done.⁹⁹

Fisher families would likely have described the situation very differently. CRC&C was not by reputation a compassionate employer and exchanges between local agents attest to managers' prioritization of economic considerations: "Fishery slack these days. No bait –Mr. Romeril will assist you to establish your fish prices. . . . Owing to the high prices of fish see all your goods are [priced] as high as possible."¹⁰⁰ Charging fishers higher prices for goods would offset high prices paid by the company to secure their catches. Agents complied with managers' requests but realized the predicament they faced: "Have increased the price of goods as much as possible. In the meantime we do not think these high prices will be altogether in our favour as our neighbours sell cheaper, and pay fish same prices as us."¹⁰¹ Overpriced merchandise also did not favour customers whose indebtedness to the CRC&C limited their options for obtaining household necessities and equipment for fishing.

By August, CRC&C agents were forced to negotiate with local merchants in order to obtain their fish: "At Cheticamp and along the shore, bait is plentiful and they have done fairly well. Our neighbours, the merchants have a few hundred quintals of dry fish each. Have had a talk with them respecting purchase of same and hope to secure it at a reasonable figure, say: about Halifax quotation. . . . Owing to a bad season for curing fish, the quality of the fish this season is not as good as last."¹⁰² Negotiations seem to have gone well for the company as the agent later reports "We have had a talk with merchants here regarding their fish, and they have promised to give us preference before shipping it to Halifax."¹⁰³ Yet such negotiations illustrate the CRC&C's vulnerable position in the context of an interconnected and highly competitive market. Merchants, and in some cases fishers, could accept CRC&C's prices or consult with other buyers, as demonstrated one week later: "Last Monday our neighbor at Big Pond offered us his fish again @ \$4.25, fifteen cents lower than first offer. This is too high and have not purchased it. It is likely he will ship it to Halifax. . . . We would gladly purchase it at a reasonable

99 George Romeril (Eastern Harbor) to Mr. Walter Hamon, Paspébiac, 28 May 1889, MG 12, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU.

100 Chéticamp to Arichat, 30 May 1889, p. 244, MG 14, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU (emphasis in original).

101 Eastern Harbor to CRC Ltd., Paspébiac, 22 June 1889, p. 302, MG 14, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU.

102 Phillip LeMontais, Eastern Harbor, to CRC Ltd., Paspébiac, 20 July 1889, p. 352, MG 14, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU.

103 Eastern Harbor to Paspébiac, 3 August 1889, p. 382, MG 14, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU.

figure. . . . Have not yet purchased from merchants. They hold on to their parcel and expect better prices later on.”¹⁰⁴

In many situations, directives from Paspébiac and Jersey did not adequately account for the particularities of company/community relations in Cape Breton and the challenges agents faced in their negotiations with fishers and competing merchants. Managers removed from local, day-to-day operations seemed unaware of the ways in which increasing competition and enhanced connections to the world were fueling a shift from the credit system to a cash economy:

While at Arichat Mr. LeBrun told me that in order to collect the advances of last winter and this spring sold at old rates it was absolutely necessary to pay the fish same prices as the other merchants . . . I replied that it would be better to pay the \$4 and collect the advances rather than make debts and this refers only to a few dealers as you will see by the collection. I must say that I agreed with Mr. LeBrun because I saw it was absolutely necessary to do so, so as to collect the payment of the advances at once and before the traders would swap the fish – The cash system is now introduced at Arichat & Mr. LeBrun will attend to it. It is a very plain and simple arrangement and understood by all the parties . . . Mr. Romeril wrote you that I bungled prices of fish – I certainly did not do so, & will never do it . . . I have always attended to his instructions strictly & will always do so, of course, there are some instances in which a person may deviate a little, but, if I have done so (tho I am not aware I have done it in a single instance), I would say that it was for the benefit of the company – at Arichat they often change their fish prices so as to make a little trade & secure payment of accounts. Dry codfish is received on account the majority is paid cash & the dealers often pay their bills with haddocks and herring, & this season a very small amount of business will be made there in trade the majority of the fish will be paid cash. Mr. LeBrun and I explained matters to Mr. Romeril & trust that our explanations will be satisfactory.¹⁰⁵

Further disclosures intimate that customers’ criticism of company practices were warranted and that competing merchants were offering more acceptable economic terms: “I don’t think we can get more than 4.25 for flour on credit to be paid next year Renauf writes that Point fishermen will not take flour at 3.65 & if we do not give it at 3.50 same as other merchants they will take cash. I wrote him to let it go at 3.50. I am afraid we may have to sell it at this figure by the single barrel.”¹⁰⁶ Organizational and technological changes enhanced the flow of information to

104 Eastern Harbor to Paspébiac, 10 August 1889, p. 389, MG 14, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU.

105 Letter from Philip LeMontais, Eastern Harbor, to CRC Ltd., Jersey, 24 August 1889, p. 420, MG 14, 55 A1, book 381, BI, CBU (emphasis in original).

106 DeGruchy, Eastern Harbor, to A.E. Collas, Arichat, 20 October 1894, p. 60, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

fishery workers, enabling them to challenge the CRC&C's rates of sale and payment by demanding higher prices for their catch and lower prices for goods sold in the company store. Fishers' knowledge of fish prices in Halifax strengthened their power to negotiate with company agents for better arrangements. Some circumvented the CRC&C by dealing directly with Halifax merchants and other traders. In January 1895, an agent at Eastern Harbor informed representatives in Jersey of increasing dissatisfaction among local fishers:

Our fishermen are rather dilatory in signing agreements, only two boats have signed as yet but I feel confident that others will do so shortly. I have reduced laborers wages all around from \$2 to \$4.00 per month, at the Point those at 20.00 & 21.00 have been reduced to \$18 and \$17 . . . Mr. Moses Muse may not return for \$16.00 & I may have to give him \$17.00, last summer his wage was 19.00.¹⁰⁷

A more competitive fishery might have been less profitable for CRC&C but cost cutting through reduced wages provoked opposition, necessitating negotiations that reveal complex power relations in which workers' demands shaped company decision-making and practices.

Similar disputes in Île Madame, Gaspé, and Caraquet during the 19th and early 20th centuries further demonstrate fishers' agency and the conditional – though still significant – power of the merchant-client system.¹⁰⁸ In 1866 financial difficulties prompted CRC managers in Paspébiac and Caraquet to close stores during the winter months; this action provoked riots among clients dependent on the company for food, who demanded explanations for agents' decision. Bernard Thériault suggests that escalating tensions signal the approaching end of Jersey control within the Atlantic cod fishery and the emergence of new forms of economic relations.¹⁰⁹

A prolonged conflict over access to waterfront properties and rights to fish intensified independently of each other in 1894. A group of fishers led by Marcellin LeHuedé claimed ownership of waterfront property at LaPointe and attempted to establish a public landing for fishing boats at the location. The conflict centred on the CRC&C's professed ownership of waterfront property at LaPointe and fishers' blatant noncompliance with CRC&C's proprietorship in the community and the fishery. LeHuedé and his allies had earlier circulated a petition within the community and obtained signatures supporting their demands for a public landing. They approached municipal officials and obtained a resolution granting community members' rights to fish independently out of the site. Fishers' demands for access to local waters and rights to fish illustrate their perceptions of cod as a communal resource, of the fishery as a moral economy, and of local inhabitants' entitlement to harvest natural resources as the means to sustain themselves and their families.¹¹⁰

107 Eastern Harbor to A.E. Collas, Jersey, 19 January 1895, p. 379, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

108 Frenette, *Anglo-Normans in Eastern Canada*, 9, 13.

109 Bernard Thériault, "La Compagnie Charles Robin à Caraquet," *Société historique acadienne : les cahiers* 41, n° 1 (mars 2010): 15.

110 Sean Cadigan, "The Moral Economy of the Commons: Ecology and Equity in the Newfoundland Cod Fishery, 1815-1855," *Labour/Le Travail*, 43 (Spring 1999): 9-42; McCay and Acheson, "Human Ecology and the Commons," in *Question of the Commons*, 1-36.

The CRC&C responded with legal action and marshaled its political influence to pressure council to rescind its decision. The process was hampered by ambiguous legalities and inefficient communication. Legal representatives advised the company to circulate a second petition asking community members to rescind their earlier claims and acknowledge the company's ownership of the property in question. As the process dragged on, agents expressed frustration with the time-consuming, bureaucratic legal process as it validated local rebelliousness and potentially encouraged wider resistance to the company's authority.¹¹¹ They realized that community bonds were strong and that obtaining fishers' support would be challenging:

I foresee some difficulty in getting fishermen to sign the petition as one half if not more of those who signed for the public landing are worthless characters and they may be induced not to sign, since my return I hear that a letter of an unsettling nature signed by one or two of the fishermen against the firm was to have been read in open council by Muse had we brought up our case, which shows that Muse is still our enemy and is doing all [he] possibly can against the firm.¹¹²

Company agents' retaliation to perceived insubordination did not extinguish community members' resistance. An agent in Eastern Harbor described LeHuedé and his followers as trespassers on company property: "What do you think of Marcellin LeHuedé trespassing on the property at the Point both yesterday and the day before? . . . We will never keep him off [the property] unless the law takes its course, the visit from the Sheriff does not seem to have made much impression. We have been too lenient toward him!"¹¹³ One month later, the agent reported escalating tensions and expressed frustration at the company's inability to assert its authority: "I am told that LeHuedé and others who figured in the strike last year are to put up a building on public landing granted the fishermen by council. They are bound to annoy and give us as much trouble as possible but I hope they will get the reward they so richly deserve."¹¹⁴

Intensifying conflicts between CRC&C and fishers indicate changing economic and social relations that eventually would disrupt the credit system and give rise to community-led ventures in Chéticamp. Central to community agency were parish priests, whose religious authority often conflicted with merchants' economic interests. In particular, Père Fiset established fishing operations and a store in 1883 that directly competed with the CRC&C. Yves Frenette states that Fiset's "clerical activism" led to the establishment of Chéticamp's fishery cooperative in 1915.¹¹⁵

111 Eastern Harbor to Paspébiac, 16 January 1895, p. 362, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

112 Eastern Harbor to A.E. Collas, Esq., Jersey, 19 January 1894, p. 376, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

113 Eastern Harbor to Arichat, n.d., p. 283, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

114 Eastern Harbor to Jersey, 28 January 1895, p. 401, MG 14, 55 A9, BI, CBU.

115 Frenette, *Anglo-Normans in Eastern Canada*, 13; Ross and Deveau, *Acadians of Nova Scotia*, 110.

Conclusion

Understanding Charles Robin-Collas & Company's operations requires one to place economic practices in the context of local circumstances and global developments. This article explores these contexts, illuminating complex and codependent relations between CRC&C and the community and between Cape Breton fishing stations and their international business associates. These investigations contribute to existing research that examines the complexities of merchant-fisher relations in Gaspé and Newfoundland. Sean Cadigan argues that the merchant-credit system was "a mutual if unequal accommodation" characterized by interdependency and conflict between merchants and fishers. Merchants did not completely control this relationship; rather, "they had to accommodate the separate purposes of their clients, who often took actions which ensured that [the credit system] continued to meet their needs."¹¹⁶ In Chéticamp, intricate social and economic networks were profoundly shaped by environmental conditions, technological advancements, and the expanding global economy. Company agents and community members adapted to unpredictable and at times destructive weather patterns and their impact on fishing, transport, and information exchanges. By the late 19th century, CRC&C was also responding to new technologies such as the railway, steamship, and telegraph that facilitated interactions with distant markets but complicated negotiations with local fishers and competing merchants. Connections to urban centres enabled workers to demand equitable wages and prices as rival dealers offered alternative markets for catches and alternative sources for needed supplies. Escalating conflicts and challenges to the CRC&C's power within the fishery anticipated further developments, including CRC&C's transition to the Robin, Jones, and Whitman Company, the transferral of company ownership and operations from Jersey to Nova Scotia, and, more importantly, the emergence of the fishery cooperative in Chéticamp.

The complex, contradictory character of these interrelated circumstances complicates questions concerning the credit system and its consequences in coastal communities, but recent investigations have begun to disentangle relationships between merchants and community members and bring to light the interplay between company strategies and workers' responses.¹¹⁷ Such arguments do not suggest that the merchants were benevolent employers, nor do they dismiss the abuses and injustices of the credit system. But they highlight fisher families' opposition to unfair economic arrangements and active participation in changing employment practices.¹¹⁸ This investigation into Cape Breton's fishery contributes to the larger body of research, revealing codependency between CRC&C agents and local inhabitants while also underscoring that social and economic relations are inevitably complex and interrelated, that power is always dynamic and negotiated, and that community members play pivotal roles in the events that shape and constrain their lives.

116 Cadigan, *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay*, 101.

117 See, for example, Cadigan, *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay*; Ommer, "The Truck System in Gaspé," in *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective*, 49-72; Robert C.H. Sweeny, "Accounting for Change: Understanding Merchant Credit Strategies in Outport Newfoundland," in *How Deep is the Ocean?* 121-38.

118 Ommer, "The Truck System in Gaspé," in *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies*, 71, 72.