

## The Newfoundland Sealers' Strike of 1902

Briton Cooper Busch

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# The Newfoundland Sealers' Strike of 1902

Briton Cooper Busch

SATURDAY MORNING, 8 MARCH 1902, about 9 a.m., the men of the SS *Ranger* left their vessel.<sup>1</sup> The *Ranger*, a 353-ton wooden steamer, had signed aboard 211 men for sealing in the ice off the northeast coast of Newfoundland; she lay at Rendell's Wharf on Water Street in St. John's, nearly ready to sail on the first date permitted by law — Monday the 10th. Led by a 21-year-old sealer named Albert Mercer, from Bay Roberts on Conception Bay, the *Ranger's* men marched east along Water Street in a procession, headed by a Union Jack or two. As they passed, the men from other vessels, to a total of approximately 3,000, joined the stream — so quickly as to argue some prearrangement, though none has subsequently come to light. The sealers walked the length of Water Street (just under a mile) and turned up Cochrane Street for Government House, cheering lustily, with every intent of speaking to the governor of Newfoundland.

Sir Cavendish Boyle, who held that august position, was caught completely by surprise. Only the day before he had paid the customary governor's visit to the sealing ships and then entertained the captains to lunch. Not a word had been said of any grievances, let alone a strike, by owners, masters, or sealers. Boyle, governor from 1901 to 1904, had only recently arrived from British Guiana and had no previous experience of Newfoundland. He was understandably alarmed to be told that a mob of 4,000 (the sealers had been joined by many bystanders) was at the entrance demanding to be heard. Boyle

<sup>1</sup> The basic source for the events of this strike is the contemporary local press, above all the St. John's *Evening Herald* and *Evening Telegram* of 8-14 March 1902. Unless otherwise identified, data are drawn from one or both of these accounts. Details on St. John's are drawn from Paul O'Neill, *The Story of St. John's Newfoundland*, II (Erie, Ontario 1976); unless otherwise noted, all data on ownership, tonnage, crews, and returns of the several vessels are drawn from L.G. Chafe, *Chafe's Sealing Book . . .* (St. John's 1923), an encyclopedic compendium of sealing statistics.

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was no doubt relieved when Inspector-General J.R. McCowen of the Newfoundland Constabulary arrived on the heels of the crowd and explained that they only wanted to speak to the governor.<sup>2</sup>

McCowen reported that he had heard the night before of the intended action, "but," according to Boyle's exasperated later account to British Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain, "he had not thought it necessary to take action, or to inform any member of the Government, any of the owners, or myself of what was contemplated."<sup>3</sup> McCowen claimed, rather casually, that the whole demonstration, including the march to Government House and the demand to see the governor, was "quite in the ordinary course of events and according to precedent." Whose precedent is not clear, but McCowen was a man of considerable experience in such matters. He had learned his trade in the Royal Irish Constabulary putting down riots in Belfast and Cork. Retiring from that service in 1871, he emigrated to Newfoundland, joined the police, organized its respected mounted force, and in 1895 was named head of the amalgamated Constabulary and Fire Department.

Realizing that the crowd was growing and that action was mandatory, Boyle gathered up his hat and coat and went outside to ask what the men wanted. The leaders, aside from Mercer, who spoke very little, were Simeon Calloway (or Kellaway), an experienced hand with over 30 trips to the ice, from Pool's Island and the SS *Vanguard*, and Robert Hall of Hallstown, Conception Bay, and the SS *Greenland*. Calloway explained that the issue was the price paid for seal fat: the 1901 price per hundredweight (112 pounds) of \$3.25 was low enough, but now the men had heard that the owners intended this year to pay only \$2.40. This was unacceptable; the men wanted \$5.00 or they would not sail (Boyle in his report said that the men first asked \$4.00, but quickly raised their demand to \$5.00, a point not mentioned elsewhere but which might indicate a lack of pre-strike planning).

Sealers were not paid wages for their work. The crew received one-third of the proceeds of the sale at dockside of seal fat and skins by weight; on the ice, the "sculp" or pelt with attached fat was taken from the harp or hood seal carcass (90 per cent of the catch was harp seals). In this era, the fat was of most value, since the rough fur of hair seals was used for leather, not for fur garments or trim. The one-third/two-thirds division had been introduced only after steam vessels were first used for sealing in 1863; experienced sealers knew that for the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, sealers were paid one-half the catch. Whatever the share, the cash paid for a few week's work — assuming their vessel found the seals — helped moderate the harshness of a

<sup>2</sup> On Boyle, see Frank W. Graham, "We Love Thee, Newfoundland": *Biography of Sir Cavendish Boyle* . . . (St. John's 1979); on McCowen, "J.R. McCowen, JP, ADC, Inspector-General Constabulary," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 2 (1902), 15, and Arthur Fox, *The Newfoundland Constabulary* (St. John's 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Boyle to Chamberlain, 12 March 1902, Newfoundland Provincial Archives, Governor-General's Correspondence (1902), G/1/1/7 (hereafter GG).

general "truck" or "credit" system in which cod fishermen, which the sealers were for most of the year, received food and supplies on credit and in return paid their fish to the supplier: a closed "company" economy which was open to obvious abuses.<sup>4</sup> Sealers were fortunate to find a berth aboard a steamer, for there were far more sealers than berths.

But the sealer's reward depended very much upon luck: while he might dream of the all-time high share per man of \$303, for which community memory had to reach back to the SS *Retriever's* 1866 voyage, a more likely figure by the turn of the century was \$30-40, and might be only \$10-15. The owners made a different sort of calculation. In a typical example of distribution of return, the SS *Diana* in 1892 brought home 40,904 sculps in two trips, paying an unusually high \$184.30 to each of the 224-person crew, or a total of \$41,283. The owner's two-thirds was \$82,566, returning a profit — deducting outfitting costs of \$15-20,000 — of at least \$60,000 from a vessel which probably did not cost that much, since most sealing steamers were retired Scottish whaling vessels. It was a chancy business, however; the *Diana* brought back 7,263 seals in the next year, for a return to the owners of \$10,738, less than it cost to send her out.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, profit was more common than loss, or there would have been no more commercial sealing.

Alas, it was not simply a question of finding seals. The owners, possessed of a seller's market for berths, collected from the sealers a fee called "coaling money," supposedly to compensate themselves for loading the necessary coal before the voyage, while in earlier days the sealers would have helped sail the vessel. In actuality, sealers would gladly have helped load coal, but most lived outside St. John's and arrived only in time for departure; "baymen" from Conception and Bonavista Bays, their distinctness from the men of St. John's would be a factor in the strike. A similar expense, claimed the owners, was required for cleaning the vessel in preparation for laying it up, for few of these steamers found employment beyond the month or six weeks of the sealing season. In 1902, coaling money was \$3.00 per sealer.

Coaling money was not the only charge. The sealer was expected to take from the owner of his vessel a "crop," or advance of money with which to buy supplies (at the company store, if there was one): such supplies included some

<sup>4</sup> On the credit system, see W.A. Black, "The Labrador Floater Codfishery," *Annals Association of American Geographers*, 50 (1960), 269 ff; Robert J. Brym and Barbara Neis, "Regional Factors in the Formation of the Fisherman's Protective Union of Newfoundland," in Brym and R. James Sacouman, eds., *Underdevelopment and Social Movements in Atlantic Canada* (Toronto 1979), 203-18.

<sup>5</sup> Figures for catches and shares of *Diana* and *Retriever* from *Chafe's Sealing Book*. The cost of the *Diana* (a Job vessel) is unknown, but the comparable *Eclipse* (296 tons to the *Diana's* 290) was valued at £12,347 in 1868, or about \$60,000 (the Newfoundland dollar was worth four shillings): Basil Lubbock, *The Arctic Whalers* (Glasgow 1937), 394, 424-7. The figure of \$20,000 for preparation costs was made in the strike negotiations; see below 16.

food, foul-weather gear, boots, goggles, knives, and the like — whatever each man would need on the ice and did not possess in the bag or box which he had brought to St. John's. A standard crop of \$9 worth of goods cost \$12 in an average markup. Owners argued that the sealer need not accept his crop, but the men knew that the next year the berth might go to a more cooperative hand, so the system continued.<sup>6</sup> Coaling charges and crop markup were useful to help insure the owners against a bad year, but the \$1200-1500 which might be collected from a 200-person crew was still under 10 per cent of outfitting costs.

All of these charges and fees were irksome, but above all, in 1902, the rumoured cut in the price of fat was critical in explaining the strike. The price had fallen steadily since the coming of steamers (Table 1), though the cause was falling demand, not the new vessels. A reduction to \$2.40 would be the lowest ever paid, and would cut each man's return by nearly 25 per cent. A hypothetical share of \$40 would now be only \$30, still further reduced by the deduction of the coaling charge (\$3) and crop money (\$12) to only \$15. It is no surprise, therefore, that the mere rumour of reduction initiated the strike, with or without preliminary organization.

The rumoured price was the immediate trigger, but the 1901 price of \$3.25 was already exceptionally low, reflecting not only slipping world demand but also a general slump in Newfoundland's economy in the 1890s, from which the colony had not fully recovered at the time of the strike. The heart of the economy was cod, and the export price for salt fish had fallen 32 per cent in the years 1880 to 1900, with production chasing demand downward 20 per cent.<sup>7</sup> Roughly 30 per cent of the 60,000 person labour force left fishing for other work over the period 1884 to 1911, and the figure was even higher for the north side of Conception Bay, a particularly important source of sealers. Partly as a result, Newfoundland lost a steady 1,500 per year to emigration in the years 1884 to 1935.<sup>8</sup> The decline of the fishery, it bears repeating, led to emigration, not vice versa.

The issue of why the cod fishery declined is complicated and is not the focus of this paper. Put overly simply, Newfoundland cod sales lost ground to new competition from Iceland and Norway (seriously undercutting the argu-

<sup>6</sup> George Allen England, *Vikings of the Ice* (New York 1924), is the best general account of methods, gear, and the like; a more recent supplement is Chesley W. Sanger, "Technological and Spatial Adaptation in the Newfoundland Seal Fishery during the Nineteenth Century," unpublished M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Remarks on the cod fishery are based on Shannon Ryan, "The Newfoundland Cod Fishery in the Nineteenth Century," unpublished M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1971; see also David Alexander, "Newfoundland's Traditional Economy and Development to 1934," *Acadiensis*, 5 (1976), 56-78.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Thornton, "Some Preliminary Comments on the Extent and Consequences of Out-Migration from the Atlantic Region, 1870-1920," in Lewis R. Fischer and Eric W. Sager, eds., *Merchant Shipping and Economic Development in Atlantic Canada* (St. John's 1982), 185-218.

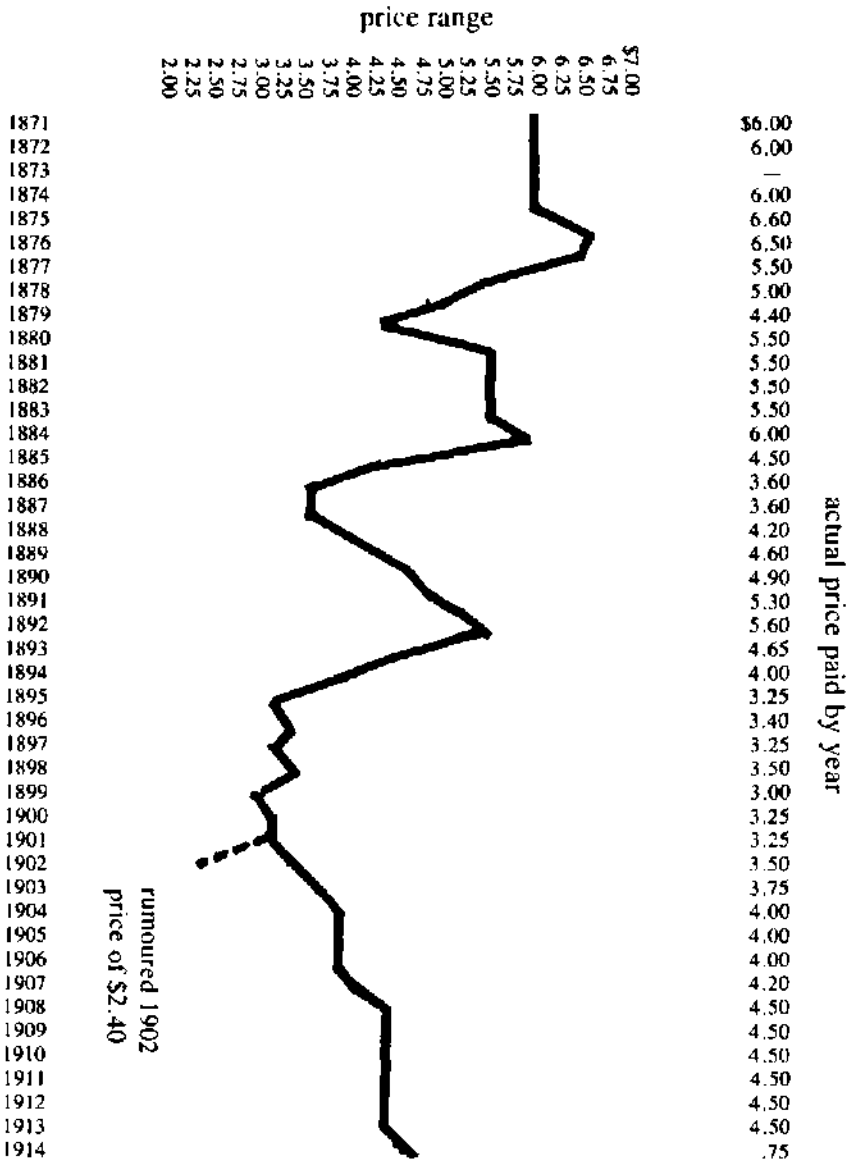


TABLE I  
Price of young harp seal fat  
per cwt., 1871-1914

Source: L.G. Chafe, *Chafe's Sealing Book* . . .  
(St. John's 1923).

ment that Newfoundland's poverty was due to scanty resources, for Iceland and Norway were hardly more generously endowed). These countries sold a better product which matched the increasing sophistication of world demand. Above all, unified marketing procedures which permitted greater quality control in both competing countries were undreamed of in Newfoundland, where the credit system and its causes did not encourage modernization of catching and curing methods.

The decline of the cod fishery not only raised the cost of public relief of the needy. It also meant construction and repair of fewer vessels, thus affecting the remaining shipping industry: "remaining," since the coming of steam with few exceptions had driven out of business the outport entrepreneurs who had built and maintained the mid-nineteenth-century fishing and sealing schooners. Only the Water Street merchants, again with very few exceptions, could raise the capital for investment in steamers. Steam was inevitable, but the shock to the outport economy was great: "... sealing skippers and schooner owners were bankrupted, outport seal oil refiners shut down their vats, and the artisan class found itself reduced to the ranks of fishermen."<sup>9</sup>

The number of steamers — or equally important, berths — was finite. Experience showed that a fleet bearing 5,000 to 6,000 sealers to the ice, as in the years 1880 to 1883, was less efficient per person than a fleet of 3,500 to 4,000 men (the total for the twenty vessels sailing in 1902 was 3,978 men), just when the demand for both fish and seal products was falling.<sup>10</sup> It is understandable that Newfoundland after 1881 plunged into an enormously expensive railway project, designed in part to offer alternative means of development in such areas as forest products and mining.<sup>11</sup> The costs were huge, the immediate expectations overly optimistic, and the result a steady slide towards bankruptcy under the burden of relief and railways. The merchants borrowed in the hope of better days, and (again, simply put) the major bank crash of 1894 was the result. That crash altered the Newfoundland banking structure, but not the sealing industry.

Fewer berths, less pay, dislocated economy: such depressed times are not normally conducive to labour aggressiveness. There were, moreover, still other factors which made the 1902 strike unlikely — impossible, one might

<sup>9</sup> Ian McDonald, "W.F. Coaker and the Balance of Power Strategy: the Fisherman's Protective Union in Newfoundland Politics," in James Hiller and Peter Neary, eds., *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Essays in Interpretation* (Toronto 1980), 152.

<sup>10</sup> The actual number of men involved in the years 1880-83 was on the order of 4,700 per annum, but many vessels made second trips in the same season. For man/seal ratios, the total manpower figure for the total number of sculps taken must be used, thus counting many men twice, a method used by J.S. Colman in his useful study, "The Present state of the Newfoundland Seal Fishery," *Journal of Animal Ecology*, 6 (1937), 145-59. After 1898, when second trips were prohibited, Colman's figures correspond to those of *Chafe's Sealing Book*.

<sup>11</sup> James K. Hiller, *The Newfoundland Railway 1881-1949* (St. John's 1981).

have said on the dawn of the event. Here was an island, the population of which (217,037 in 1901)<sup>12</sup> was spread along 6,000 miles of coastline in 1,200 settlements, many remote from everything but the sea, its resources, and its communications (and perhaps also the telegraph). Such settlements were individually homogeneous ethnically and religiously, but in sum divided by substantial schisms of Protestant and Catholic, of Irish, Scots, and English origins. Hardy these fisherfolk were, but self-reliant from a formal institutional standpoint they were not. Beyond the permanent economic bonds which linked them to St. John's steamship owners or fish buyers or credit merchants (often the same firm rolled into one), they had virtually nothing in the way of self-governmental authorities to act on their behalf.<sup>13</sup>

There was no municipal government, for example. Even school boards in a colony without state-run educational institutions were confessional, selected by the churches. There were no district-level governmental operations at all; the only intermediary between outport and St. John's government was the Assembly representative. Relief payments, medical treatment, communication development, sealing berths — all depended very largely (though not exclusively) upon the relationship of the community to its representative in the Assembly, and if that link broke, there was really no other means of political expression. Only in the more densely populated St. John's and the Avalon Peninsula was there anything like a meaningful political opposition.

St. John's, with a relatively stable population of 30,000 at the turn of the century, was another matter. Here the dominant mercantile elite was primarily English and Protestant, the working class predominantly Irish and Catholic. Real power was held by the Assembly, and the Assembly — save for an occasional well-known sealing master or Labrador captain who was given a quiet back-bench seat — was run by the English Protestant professional men, lawyers, doctors, and smaller manufacturers. In close alliance with the larger fishery-controlling merchants, whose viewpoint on fishery matters was seldom challenged, they ensured that the highly centralized and conservative system remained intact. These arrangements explain Newfoundland's longstanding opposition to federation with Canada. The oligarchy feared for its position and the Catholic element for its independence in a predominantly Protestant (and English) Canada (French Catholics of Quebec had little attraction for the Irish of Newfoundland). It was perhaps awareness of these realities which led the men to appeal to Governor Boyle, not Premier Sir Robert Bond.

For the outport fishermen, there was almost no chance for active political expression. It is arguable whether such a chance would have been useful in any case owing to the low level of literacy (30 per cent of Newfoundlanders over

<sup>12</sup> See *Report of the Census of Newfoundland, 1901*.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to S.J.R. Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto 1971), see Peter Neary, "Democracy in Newfoundland: A Comment," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 4 (1969), 89-108.



the age of ten were illiterate at the end of the nineteenth century): "as a country Newfoundland was like a workman sent out to do a job without his tool box."<sup>14</sup> Illiteracy, economic dependency in the credit system, political dependency in the governmental system — all of these argued against militant labour action, above all in a generally depressed economy.

On the other hand, it cannot be said that the sealers were all unknown to each other. In a general way, they shared poor and often remote backgrounds, on the whole with little experience of urban society, anticipating a month or more on the ice and hoping for a bumper catch and maximum financial reward. Some, the experienced sealers, probably had met before either on the ice, on the Labrador, or in the winter logging (though pulp mills and their logging were not really significant until after 1905). Others travelled together to St. John's for sealing berths. (Hall and Mercer, for example, who lived not far from each other, might have discussed conditions during such travel.) Baymen met in these ways, less common in the south, where the standard fishing method was the two-person banks dory, and the means of pay the dory's catch, not a share in the vessel's total — a system which always pitted the sealers against each other.<sup>15</sup> Above all, however, the sealers must have had a shared distrust of the owners for their continued omnipotent role in the decline of prices for cod and seal, and the decrease of berths in every Newfoundland fishery.

There was little organized labour action in Newfoundland's history to inspire the sealers to action. An earlier generation had protested berth money in the 1840s and again in 1860, apparently with some success, but sealers had not been active for over 40 years.<sup>16</sup> There were unions in Newfoundland at the turn of the century, but they were skilled craft organizations such as the shipwrights (first to organize, in 1851), and the sealskinners (1854), with the normal limitations of such organizations. (Sealskinners separated the skin from the fat; it was a highly skilled profession normally performed by professional butchers or coopers). The skinners did strike Bowring's, an important sealing company, in 1900 to protest the introduction of skinning machines and disabled more of the same at another concern (Job's) the following year.<sup>17</sup> These actions could have contributed only indirectly to an atmosphere sanctioning labour activity, as far as the average sealer was concerned, since the groups hailed from different environments and social strata.

More influential was a strike at the Bell Island (Conception Bay) iron mine

<sup>14</sup> David Alexander, "Literacy and Economic Development in Nineteenth Century Newfoundland," *Acadiensis*, 10 (1980), 33.

<sup>15</sup> Brym, "Regional Factors."

<sup>16</sup> On earlier strikes, see R. Hattenhauer, "A Brief Labour History of Newfoundland," ms. report by Royal Commission on Labour Legislation in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1970 (Center for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University, St. John's).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 95; see also James T. Fogarty, "The Seal-Skinners' Union," in J.R. Smallwood, ed., *The Book of Newfoundland*, II (St. John's 1937), 100.

against the Nova Scotia Steel & Coal-Dominion Coal operation. From 11 June to 24 July 1900, the miners struck in an attempt to raise their pay from 10¢ to 15¢ an hour. The situation became dangerous when the 1600 miners tried to block the company's use of imported longshoremen, and later clerical staff, to load ore. A substantial share of McCowen's constabulary was brought from St. John's but calm prevailed in the end. While the top three officials of the "Wabana Workmen & Labourers' Union" spent a week in a St. John's jail, the workers emerged with a compromise increase of 12.5¢ for skilled and 11¢ for unskilled labour.<sup>18</sup>

The Bell Island strike ended without serious violence, but it left a bitter taste and long-lived memory in Newfoundland, proving that the island was not totally remote from the problems of labour relations common to the rest of North America. Some 1902 strikers may well have been 1900 Bell Island miners; others doubtless remembered, and resented, the harsh conditions and occasional troubles associated with the building of the railway.<sup>19</sup> In both instances much of the labour force came from the same Conception Bay settlements which provided the men of the sealing fleet. On the whole the structure of Newfoundland economic life in the inshore and Labrador fisheries, often conducted by small family-based units, jealous of the details of their own operations, stressed the value of individualism. Collective action was a uncommon concept in this colony, but there were enough examples of labour activity overall to satisfy those seeking a scapegoat for the sealing strike in its aftermath.

As the *Trade Review* put it, experience in the mines, or on the railroad, or in Nova Scotia (not without labour troubles itself), or in the United States, all did its part, and "the home schoolmaster did the rest."<sup>20</sup> But of working-class activity there was little, and of socialism even less. George Allen England, who himself went to the ice on the *Terra Nova* in the 1920s, had it right: "I have never known a country where employers enjoyed such a sinecure as in Newfoundland. Labour there has hardly begun to dream that it has any rights."<sup>21</sup>

The remark, written in 1924, was perceptive, but at least sealers had dreams of a rewarding return from their trip to the ice. The rumoured reduction was likely to write an end to such expectations, and the sealers on that March 1902 Saturday morning had taken matters into their own hands, for better or worse. The effect of the rumour is clear; its origins, like those of the first strike action, remain obscure. The course of events which followed, on the other

<sup>18</sup> Fox, *Newfoundland Constabulary*, 91-2.

<sup>19</sup> Hiller, *Newfoundland Railway*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> *Trade Review* (St. John's), 15 March 1902.

<sup>21</sup> England, *Vikings*, 53-4. Socialism is discussed in David Frank and Nolan Reilly, "The Emergence of the Socialist Movement in the Maritimes, 1899-1916," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4 (1979), 85-113, which notes in a one-page appendix on Newfoundland (112-113), that the first socialist society in the colony was organized in 1906.

hand, can be traced through the substantial report later filed by Governor Boyle and the several contemporary newspaper accounts.<sup>22</sup> Though the Newfoundland press was the property of the establishment, it seems on the whole to have been relatively impartial — if somewhat breathless — in its coverage. It is hard, at any rate, not to conclude that the pent-up grievances of years, coupled with the sudden fear of loss of 25 per cent of what was at best a hoped-for income, faced Boyle as he heard the strikers' demands.

Boyle's confrontation with the strikers on the steps of Government House can only be approximated since his account differs somewhat from that of the press. It appears, however, that Boyle asked the men why their demands were so sudden (at least from his standpoint) and for such a substantial increase — and why, above all, had they acted *after* signing for berths and accepting crops, which in effect were advances on pay. Robert Hall, who replied, focused upon the price of fat, which had once been \$6.00 (in 1884; a price exceeded only by the \$6.50 of the mid-1870s), and — a more relevant argument — still held at that level for fat delivered overseas in the form of oil. The men therefore asked for \$5.00 or they would picket the ships. To this threat the *Evening Telegram* quoted Mercer as adding, "If we don't get more, we won't go, we'll all leave the country and go to the States," a remark demonstrating the general awareness of the steady flow of emigration from the colony.<sup>23</sup>

Boyle, all accounts agree, asserted strongly that the government could not allow picketing. He advised the men to put their grievances in writing. He apparently felt that there was some division among the sealers: some would be satisfied with a guarantee of last year's price of \$3.25. According to Boyle, the men told him they would not create a disturbance or interfere with those who were unwilling to join the strike. "The Inspector of Police assured me that these promises might be relied on, and he repeated this assurance afterwards when we were alone, and when I informed him that, whilst giving every consideration to his experience, I did not hold the same opinion." Boyle's best suggestion, and one warmly approved by the crowd, was that the men appoint delegates to meet the owners and state their case. They agreed to choose one from each ship, "and after some further remarks they went away, not satisfied as I feared, but certainly in as orderly a manner as was possible for such a crowd."<sup>24</sup>

The men now dispersed with cheers for Boyle and the King. Ten sealers (four of the fourteen vessels scheduled to sail from St. John's had not yet chosen representatives) went off with McCowen and several reporters to the former's office at the Central Fire Hall. Here McCowen telephoned to Walter Baine Grieve, suggesting that the owners meet with the sealers' committee.

<sup>22</sup> See Boyle to Chamberlain, 12 March 1902, GG, and newspapers cited in note 1 above.

<sup>23</sup> *Evening Telegram* (St. John's), 8 March 1902.

<sup>24</sup> Boyle to Chamberlain, 12 March 1902, GG.

Grieve was the principal merchant concerned; he directed the long-established firm of Baine, Johnston which owned five of the St. John's vessels — SS *Greenland*, *Vanguard*, *Panther*, *Iceland*, and *Southern Cross*. The equally venerable firms of Bowring's and Job's each had four ships in the hunt that year. But Edgar Bowring, head of the former, was in New York, and no one apparently had the authority to act on his behalf in such a matter. William C. Job, local partner for his Liverpool firm, was a considerably younger and probably less influential man.<sup>25</sup> Grieve said he had heard nothing of all this until that very morning, and agreed to meet at 3 p.m. At his suggestion, the sealers' committee was reduced to six, including Calloway, Hall, and Mercer, the original leaders; Edgar Kean from SS *Eric* (a James Baird vessel); Jacob Bishop from Job's SS *Neptune*; and N. Waterman from Bowring's SS *Aurora*.

The committee realized the need for the help of an educated man — a lawyer, in short. On leaving McCowen's office, the sealers made straight for the *Gazette* building to speak to A.B. Morine. Morine, a Nova Scotian, was a qualified lawyer and KC with his own firm (Morine & Gibbs). Many times returned from Bonavista to the Newfoundland House of Assembly, he had already occupied several important posts, among them Newfoundland Colonial Secretary. He had also run unsuccessfully for the Canadian House of Commons. A man with influence, he was the ablest speaker in the Assembly; the legal counsel for R.G. Reid, concessionaire for the Newfoundland Railway; and finally leader of the official Conservative opposition in the Assembly to the Liberal government of Bond, Premier since 1900. Morine was impulsive, genial, friendly, and distrusted. To this day, his reputation in Newfoundland is unsavoury, less perhaps for his subsequently leaving Newfoundland to its fate and moving to Toronto after having been Newfoundland Minister of Justice and Attorney-General, or even for questionable financial dealings (he was already closely associated with Reid when as Minister of Finance he negotiated Reid's concession), than for an attitude of condescension towards Newfoundlanders — "too green to burn," he is supposed to have said of them, though he always denied it. His sights were set too clearly on success in Canadian public life to win general confidence, but his abilities, his pince-nez, and his walrus mustache added considerable colour to Newfoundland politics. He was an obvious and wise choice for the sealers, already known to them for his Bonavista representation. The speed with which they acted in contacting him demonstrates their comprehension of the realities of Newfoundland power. Morine, it should be added, was not paid for his help; Rev. E. Hunt, writing in 1970, reported that the men offered Morine 10¢ per sealer and were refused.

<sup>25</sup> Biographical data on the several owners, and on A.B. Morine, are taken from Henry Youmans Mott, ed., *Newfoundland Men* (Concord, NH 1894) and *Who's Who In and From Newfoundland* (St. John's 1927 and 1937 editions).

Morine had some sympathy for the strikers, and perhaps calculated as well that the political capital was worth far more than an unguaranteed \$300.<sup>26</sup>

The 3 p.m. meeting took place as scheduled in McCowen's office, but of the owners only Grieve was there. The others at first refused to meet with the sealers,<sup>27</sup> and as the *Herald* subsequently reported, at least one of the other merchants had ordered his captains away from the wharf "into the stream," that is, out into the middle of the harbour, there to call the roll of all non-strikers and to sail for another Newfoundland port to complete crews. The masters, summoning their men, found a goodly number still present. Convinced that all would muster at the appointed hour of sailing Monday morning, they remained at the wharves, to the later regret of their employers.

Morine listed for Grieve the men's demands, now gathered into four points. First, they believed it was unfair that sealers who had received half the catch in the days of sail now were given only one-third and at a lower price. The men asked either \$5.00 per cwt. or a guarantee of half the catch at last year's price (\$3.25). Grieve, for his part, was willing to guarantee \$3.25 for the men's third of the catch, but no more. Second, the men felt that the \$3.00 coaling charge was unjust and should be abolished; Grieve agreed only to look into the matter. Third, the 33 and 1/3 per cent markup on the crop was too high; here Grieve was uncooperative, arguing that this was a justifiable margin for something the men did not have to take. Finally, many sealers were forced to be at St. John's for days before sailing. They asked that they be allowed to live on board the vessels for a reasonable time such as five days, and be fed for at least a day or two. Grieve believed that this was already the practice for his own and Job's ships; the men admitted this to be true, but asked for uniformity among the owners.

The discussion was not without promise of settlement, but the results were clearly meaningless without the agreement of the other owners. The group decided to meet again in two hours. By that time Grieve had managed to persuade two other owners to attend. James Baird, an elderly Scot (born in 1828, he arrived as a draper's assistant in 1844 to build a successful business and a considerable reputation for brusqueness), spoke for Baird, Gordon, & Co.'s SS *Leopard* and *Labrador*. William Job was responsible for the SS *Diana*, *Erik*, and *Neptune*, and, sailing from Greenspond, the SS *Nimrod*.

<sup>26</sup> "The Great Sealers' Strike of 1902," *Newsweek* (St. John's *Daily News* magazine), 6 March 1970. Morine's remark was supposedly made while he attempted, at an earlier stage of his career, to persuade sealers to insure their clothing and gear (at a cost of 50 cents for six weeks) against the loss of the vessel. Unsigned note accompanying photographs, Kenny Collection, Provincial Reference Library, Newfoundland. There is no useful study of Morine and his interesting career, but on Newfoundland politics in general, the essential guide is Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland*, which see (28) on Morine and the Reid contract. Morine's own work, *The Railway Contract, 1898 and Afterwards, 1883-1933* (St. John's 1933), has nothing to say of the strike.

<sup>27</sup> Boyle to Chamberlain, 12 March 1902, GG.

Thus ownership of ten of the St. John's vessels (and eleven of the 22 steamers from all of Newfoundland which sailed that year) was represented — but the additional voices, particularly Baird's, did not contribute new harmony to the negotiations.

Morine once more explained what the sealers wanted. Baird began by objecting to the presence of reporters (fortunately for this account, he was overruled). He then asked why the demands had been left so late. Morine could only answer the obvious: there was no use, indeed no way, for the men to strike until they were in a position to force something from the owners. The main argument, however, was simply cost versus profit. Grieve argued that \$3.00 per man did not even pay for preparation costs. Expenses for a vessel were \$20,000, and two-thirds of the take was essential just "to square the yards." Of the 1901 total catch of 400,000 skins, he pointed out, only 100,000 had been sold, and the rest were still costing warehouse fees in St. John's, England, or the United States. As for crops, if there were no seals, the debt was uncollectable: the owners preferred that the men not take crops at all. Finally, if the northern men objected to existing terms, the ships could always be filled with St. John's men — a clear attempt to divide the northern "baymen" who made up the bulk of the sealers from the men of St. John's.

Job focused upon the market price for fat, which had never been so low. This was a weak argument, quickly pounced upon by Morine: it was the local combine that fixed dockside prices which served as the basis of pay, and not impersonal foreign demand. As for the one-third/two-thirds distribution, Morine continued, this was less of an issue before second trips to the ice were disallowed by law in 1898 (primarily to conserve mature breeding seals),<sup>28</sup> causing the potential return to the men to dwindle significantly. With Baird's *Labrador* and *Leopard* giving returns on investment of 33 per cent, it hardly seemed justified to plead poverty. As for the threat to use St. John's men, Morine concluded, everybody in Newfoundland knew that there were no sealers like those of the northern outposts.

Job was not silenced. If the men were to get one-half the proceeds, he asserted, no ships would go to the ice. His company paid profits of 10 per cent over a ten-year average (presumably he meant on sealing operations, not necessarily all operations of his company, though this point is not clear from the accounts of witnesses), although some ships on some voyages paid much more. And some less, added Baird, including the *Labrador* and *Leopard* in the last three years. (Who was right cannot be known; much depends on precisely how profit was calculated.) With the ships laid up for eleven months of the year, the expenses of watchmen, maintenance engineers, and the like all had to be calculated. In sum, Grieve, Baird, and Job stood firm. They denied that there was any plan to lower the price to \$2.40: they were optimistic that it was likely

<sup>28</sup> "Seal Fishery (Prosecution) Act." Newfoundland House of Assembly, 61 Vic., Chapter 4, 3 March 1898.

to remain at \$3.25; they were willing to rectify the \$3.00 coaling charge if on inquiry it proved unfair — but they were not willing to pay \$5.00 or give the men half the skins at \$3.25. At 7 p.m. the meeting recessed. When it resumed at 8:30, Baird, now chairman of the owners' group (precisely how and why is not clear; no reporter was present at any owners' meeting), made it clear that no further concessions would be made, and no further meetings would be held.

Thus passed a day of considerable excitement, with heavy expectation in the air. Sunday, on the contrary, seems to have vanished from the historical record. It was, of course, the day of rest, and no newspapers were published. Monday journals pick up events only from Sunday midnight on. Only speculation fills the gap. No doubt the men mingled among themselves, increasingly nervous about the immediate prospects for food and shelter, the potential for confrontation when orders were given to sail on Monday, and the jeopardy to their future association with merchants not only in the seal hunt but in all their economic relations. The latter concern was obviously more important to the older married men than to the younger. In this industry, skill was not a distinguishing feature the owners could use to divide the strikers — but age, responsibility, and need could have been.

Two points are clear: there was no further negotiation on Sunday, and there was no attempt by the governor or the government to intervene on either side. Boyle had no desire to talk with the men. He distrusted them, above all for complaining to him only of the price of fat but then adding other grievances when meeting with the owners.

This discrepancy in their demands may have been in part due to their inability to express themselves to me, but I have reason to believe that the spokesmen, at all events, of the strike, knew full well what was to be asked, and, following the usual practice of the working man here, kept back part of their case when making their first appeal for redress of their grievances. . . .<sup>29</sup>

Boyle in his report gave no further explanation for his belief, failing which it seems more reasonable to assume that the full list of demands had only been articulated in discussions once the action had begun. Point four — housing and food on the vessels — might well have been occasioned by news that Baird "one cold wet night last week," as the *Herald* put it, had ordered the men of the *Leopard* and *Labrador*, some of whom had been many years to the seal fishery, off their vessels.

Boyle did talk to the owners, apparently individually, on Sunday, but they only repeated in private what they said in public. "It seemed to me, as then informed, that I could not urge them to go further, especially as they argued that they would be taking a serious risk in yielding to any greater extent under the pressure which had been forced upon them suddenly and illogically."<sup>30</sup>

Just after midnight, as Sunday came to an end, the first of several crisis

<sup>29</sup> Boyle to Chamberlain, 12 March 1902, GG.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*



*'The Old Scorcher'*; Capt. Arthur Jackman. Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador



points of a memorable Monday arrived. The captains had been given orders to haul off the wharves at 4 a.m. At the noise of steam being raised, the men bundled off the vessels, to which they generally had returned, quickly heaving their already-packed bags and boxes ashore in the pre-dawn darkness. By the appointed hour, it was clear that few vessels were able to move, not least because most of the firemen had gone ashore with the sealers. At 6 a.m. (or 7:50 according to the *Telegram*), the captains sounded their steam-whistles in a rather ineffective display of solidarity. The *SS Aurora*, under her famous fire-breathing master Abraham Kean, pulled away and twice circled the narrow harbour before dropping anchor in the "stream;" the *SS Ranger*, with half a dozen officers on board, made a similar demonstration; the *Terra Nova*, *Ice-land*, and *Kite* also lay off and anchored, all watched by the crowd of sealers on Water Street.

At 10:30 a.m. the owners met at the City Club to reassess an alarming and unexpected situation. Baird, Grieve, and Job were now joined by representatives of the remaining owners, including R.G. Reid's eldest son, W.D. Reid (the Reids owned the *SS Virginia Lake*). They continued to insist that they could make no concession. The sealers' committee met separately at 11 a.m., agreeing to accept \$4.00 per cwt. and no coaling charge. When Morine reported this concession to the owners, they responded — perhaps sensing that the sealers were giving way — by announcing that their vessels had been ordered north to Harbour Grace to tie up, presumably for the season. The captains, according to the *Telegram*, had shored up the owners' resolve by insisting that the men would give way when they got hungry enough; most had little or nothing to eat since sharing whatever they had aboard Sunday evening.

From Government House, the view was less optimistic. The bulk of the men remained on strike, the majority of vessels fixed firmly to the wharves, "and on all of these vessels were considerable numbers of rifles and firearms, with ball and ammunition, for use in the sealing operations, but ill-secured, if any determined attempt were made by the men to seize them," as Boyle put it later (public expression of such concern might well have inflamed the situation, but none was made by either Boyle or the press). Pickets of strikers were working successfully to keep everyone, whatever their intent, off the vessels. Everywhere, the men remained calm; at some point, probably on Saturday, the city magistrates had ordered all saloons closed, a decision which may help explain the continued peaceful demeanour of the strikers, though the sealers were famous for post-sealing celebrations, not pre-season festivities.

By 1 p.m. the owners' intransigence was generally known. Edgar Kean addressed the men outside the *Gazette* building,<sup>31</sup> pointing out that they had

<sup>31</sup> The *Gazette* building was built in 1892, and was a landmark henceforth. In its tower was the laboratory of a photographer named Vey, who took several pictures of the strike at various stages, apparently from the roof of the building. O'Neill, *Story of St. John's*, 835. Two, in the form of picture postcards (both showing the crowd milling below) are the only visual record of the strike I have found.

been put off again and again; they might as well start for a train station and home. The crowd cheered, took gear in hand, and headed east along Water Street (the station was then located at Fort William Depot, at the east end of the main business district), cheering as they went, and once again adding more groups as the various company wharves were passed. A half-hour later, the men were gathered at the depot, faithful to a rumour that if no settlement were reached, the Newfoundland Railway would provide transportation. As Reid the younger explained to a reporter from the *Herald*, however, it would be a strange procedure for the Reid-controlled railway to send the men home free of charge and thus insure the incapacity of their own SS *Virginia Lake*. There was no train, and only six cars, at the depot, hardly enough for 3,000 sealers. It was obvious that free tickets were a myth, and the mood of the crowd began to sour, with talk of boarding the regularly scheduled 5 p.m. train with or without the railway's cooperation.

Grieve explained in a private note to Boyle, written at 2:30, that the intent of the men was clear: they were determined to force the government to pay their fare home, since Reid would certainly not give them free passage.<sup>32</sup> The owners, he added, would meet again at 4 p.m. Boyle, now thoroughly nervous, advised conciliation apparently for the first time and suggested specifically that the owners promise full consideration of all points at issue after the ships returned from the ice — a useless idea at this stage. "The incident is much to be regretted," he wrote Grieve:

It is deplorable that neither the Government nor the owners were forewarned of what was taking place. I cannot believe that this was impossible. Had they been apprised of the determination of the men before the events of Saturday morning, the settlement of the difference would have been far easier.

We cannot, however, after what has taken place, and in a choice of evils I venture to think that conciliation will lead to the least loss.<sup>33</sup>

Boyle realized that the government would have to decide whether or not to send the strikers home by special trains at the exchequer's expense. To do so was undesirable. First, it would probably require an executive order by the governor, since a bill in the Assembly, given the composition of that body, would be unlikely to pass. Secondly, the men might subsequently appeal to the government to maintain them over the summer, in lieu of the sealing money they did not make. Altogether, it would provide a dangerous precedent, "the effects of which might be far reaching."<sup>34</sup> In the evening, Boyle's Executive Council, meeting without Bond (for reasons which are unclear, the Premier had abandoned St. John's on Saturday afternoon for his country home and thus took

<sup>32</sup> All Boyle-Grieve exchanges are appended to Boyle to Chamberlain, 12 March 1902, GG.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

no part in the early hours of the strike), decided that the government could not provide transport.

Meanwhile, at 5:20 p.m., the 5 p.m. train pulled into the station. The twenty-minute delay had allowed railway officials to station employees at every door, allowing no one to board the train without a ticket. This action might have precipitated explosion, but it did not. As the *Herald* put it, "of the thousands there five men paid their way and left for home."<sup>35</sup> Some remained at the station, still awaiting the special train they believed would appear. Others went in search of food and lodging, finding it particularly in the poorer districts, whose residents were sympathetic. Most strikers were housed in the various meeting halls: British Hall, Temperance Hall, Orange Hall . . . the majority at least were under cover by midnight. It must have been a substantial effort for St. John's to thus take in an additional 10 per cent of its population, but to the historian's frustration the very few accounts extant of the strike — mostly in the press — make little or no mention of this aspect. How were the sealers dispersed? Randomly? By vessel? By place of origin? What associational networks came into play? Temperance societies? Churches? Orange lodges or Mechanics' Institutes? It is interesting to speculate that many sealers could find physical and psychological support from such institutions, but also perhaps pressure to curb extreme forms of militancy. Unfortunately, while the questions may be asked, the data are insufficient to provide clear answers.

The apparent unity of the strikers had given the owners food for thought, and in their afternoon meeting they had begun to waver. Now they admitted that it might after all be possible to guarantee \$3.25 as a minimum price, with the actual price to be determined by public auction of fat. This offer was telephoned — and confirmed in writing — to Morine in his office, but the sealers' response came quickly: \$4.00 and no coaling charge. Seven committee members were then with Morine, and they felt the presence of the considerable crowd still outside the building at that time. The owners also had proposed that the other points be considered by a board of arbitration composed of the governor, the chief justice, and the two bishops (Anglican and Roman Catholic). "with an undertaking on the part of the proposers to accept whatever award might be given."<sup>36</sup> While interesting as reflecting the balance of religious forces, the proposal lost its relevance as events developed.

After some discussion, Grieve returned with a counter offer: \$3.25 and the coaling charge reduced to \$1.00. The owners here were each offering, it must be realized, about \$400 on a voyage costing \$20,000, but Grieve calculated rather differently, pointing out that the \$2 reduction meant an overall loss to the owners of \$6,000 (\$2 x 3,000 men), a tidy sum, after all. The offer was tempting, so much so that a committee spokesman (who is unclear, but probably Morine), addressed the crowd at 6:15 p.m., asking whether this was an

<sup>35</sup> *The Evening Herald* (St. John's), 11 March 1902.

<sup>36</sup> Boyle to Chamberlain, 12 March 1902, GG.

acceptable compromise. The answer was a clear and emphatic "no": there must be a guarantee of \$3.50 and no coaling money (the strikers, too, were feeling their way to a compromise in this 50¢ reduction). The owners would not make this final step, asserting they could not afford to operate at that price. By about 7 p.m., negotiations ended for the evening.

The strikers now settled down in the various halls or homes of sympathizers, though the *Daily News* estimated that 1,000 men were still camping out in the streets. It was a restless night for many, in any case. About 9 p.m. a report reached British Hall that some men were beginning to desert the cause and had gone aboard Reid's *Virginia Lake*, ready to sail. Some hundred men rushed off to see for themselves. On reaching the wharf, they found the gates shut and a police patrol in the way. The men swarmed over the fence and turned out six or seven men and a handful from the *Eric* and the *Ranger*. The constabulary offered no resistance. This group of strikers, a self-constituted "Vigilance Committee" (though the sobriquet may have been given them by the press), continued to patrol Water Street through the night, finding a few more turn-coats on the *Diana* and *Neptune* at Job's wharf. Even engineers and the like were not allowed aboard: the pickets, variously estimated at 50 to 220 men, were effective in preventing any slow accumulation of crews.

Thus the night passed in considerable tension though little overt violence. Tuesday, 11 March, was to prove the fateful day. At first light, Capt. Arthur Jackman came down Water Street towards his *Terra Nova*, a Bowring vessel, informing the crowd of some 200 already gathered at Bowring's Cove that he was going to sail in ten minutes. A lane was opened for him, and no word of protest was offered. Jackman, after all, was the "Old Scorcher," who had taken seals since his first voyage as master in 1871. A famous master in his own right, he was also Bowring's "ship's husband" or marine superintendent, responsible for the maintenance and preparation of all its vessels (and when not at sea, he was a fixture at the back bar of Strang's liquor store 100 yards from Bowring's).<sup>37</sup> Jackman's "second hand" (first mate) and several men with their gear who followed in his wake, were none-too-gently turned back with advice to make for home. But Jackman had already managed to put aboard some 25 St. John's men, enough to raise steam and head for Cape Broyle to sign a full crew from the south shore of Newfoundland.

Capt. Sam Blandford, equally famous (well over half a million seals had been taken by ships under his command since his first trip as master in 1874), was unwilling to stand quietly by while Jackman put to sea. At 8 a.m. he ordered his SS *Neptune* to get under way. A good many men had already gone aboard to get some breakfast (the owners still offered the men shelter and in some cases food, as the press makes clear, but men were inclined to refuse the

<sup>37</sup> Peter Cashin, *My Life and Times, 1890-1919* (Portugal Cove, Nfld. 1976), 53, gives a good picture of Jackman. *Chafe's Sealing Book* gives collected data on each master's voyages.

former for fear the vessel would make for sea with the crew trapped aboard). When they learned of Blandford's intention they carried a heavy hawser ashore to make it fast. The line was hauled up Prescott Street by a considerable crowd. Blandford put on full steam. Either the line snapped, or as popular mythology (and the *Evening Telegram*) had it, Blandford took an axe and personally cut the hawser. To jeers and catcalls from the crowd, the *Neptune* now steamed away for Bonavista Bay to attempt to recruit a crew. It was not 8:30 a.m., and another dangerous moment had been passed, for McCowen and twenty men on foot, with six of his mounted force, had been present throughout but had not interfered.

The basic situation remained unaltered, and McCowen's total force of 50 men including firemen would be most hard pressed to put down real trouble. Boyle and his Council found their earlier decision rather meaningless: should settlement fail, the men would have to be sent home or supported while they stayed in St. John's — else real trouble could be expected. Grieve was plainly scared, warning of "bloodshed to-day arising out of the riotous strike," and several times urging Boyle "to apply for Imperial assistance in the shape of one of His Majesty's Ships for the protection of property and the enforcement of the law, and failing that, for the presence of two or three companies of Imperial Troops from Halifax for the same purposes."<sup>38</sup>

By midday, Grieve had shifted his ground. Perhaps he realized that any such assistance would be likely to arrive only after the strike was settled, one way or another. A more probable cause, however, was that some men had told him that but for the intimidation of the strikers by the more militant among them, they were ready to go sealing at the terms offered. Grieve could see that the sealers were divided. A dose of force, he wrote Boyle, would turn the tide, and he himself was willing to lead the charge, on certain conditions:

1. If the Government of the Colony will afford an armed escort to bring down to my wharf the baggage belonging to the men who are willing to go to the seal fishery
2. and if they will garrison my premises for me
3. and if they will occupy my steamers one by one with an armed force I anticipate being able to quell this meeting in a very short time.<sup>39</sup>

Early in the afternoon, Grieve and Job met with Boyle. It must have been clear that there was little prospect of success in using force if they surrendered in this fashion. They asked that legislation be forthcoming "to prevent a recurrence of these existing conditions," a generalized promise which Boyle was quite willing to make.<sup>40</sup> At approximately the same time, Morine, the strikers' committee, and several hundred men appeared at Government House to ask for official assistance in the return to their homes of men without the

<sup>38</sup> Grieve to Boyle and to the Aide-de-Camp to the Commander-in-Chief, both 11 March, appended to Boyle to Chamberlain, 12 March, 1902, GG.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Boyle to Chamberlain, 12 March 1902, GG.

means to do so. Bond, now returned from the country, promised an answer by 2:30.

With this request and the owners' concession in mind, Boyle and Bond now met with the Executive Council. An answer had to be given the men, and at this stage a simple negative response might have proved very counterproductive. The result was a compromise: a placard was issued over the signature of the Minister of Marine, assuring the men of the *Neptune* and the *Terra Nova* — the two vessels which had already sailed — of free passage home, but saying nothing of the other crews. In fact, some men who lived closer than others had begun walking home, having sent their gear on ahead by train and hoping for hospitality on the road.



*Sealing Strike: Morine Addressing Sealers.* Public Archives Canada.

By 3 p.m. Morine had received the owners' offer, which he now put to the usual crowd outside the *Gazette* building. Those accepting \$3.50 and free berths were asked to walk down McBride's Hill, while those against should walk up (a few yards either direction). Nearly all preferred up to down, insisting on \$4.00 — not, as some sealers put it, \$3.50, or \$3.75, or \$3.99, but \$4.00. At 3:15 Morine telephoned Bond; Bond in turn phoned Job and Grieve. He pointed out that the sealers really were divided internally; only the "extremists" (as the militant minority, without additional identification, was henceforth termed by the press) forced the majority to hold out, and a formal proposal of \$3.50 in writing might just turn the tide. Grieve and Job agreed, but

by 4:30 Grieve was in Bond's office to urge again the need for the government to provide protection for willing sealers to collect their gear.

Word of the settlement apparently spread rapidly without formal announcement, and many if not most of the sealers realized that they had done very well. A share of \$40 in 1901 would now be \$43.08, as opposed to the \$30 each sealer might have received if the price had been \$2.40 (or \$27 counting coaling charges). Many of the townspeople likewise felt that the sealers had won and urged the strikers to join their ships; most now moved to do so. The last holdouts made one more attempt to avoid what they regarded as surrender. Were they simply the younger sealers, with less to lose? Or all from a particular vessel, or a particular part of Newfoundland — or perhaps men with experience at Bell Island or on the railways or elsewhere? Their anonymity has not been pierced by any of the available contemporary strike accounts.



*Strikers being addressed by Morine, probably at the end of the strike. Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador*

But hearing that some sealers were even then joining the *SS Diana*, (one of Job's ships), they rushed to that wharf "in a yelling mob," as the *Herald* reported. "Seizing boats wherever they could, launching some from the cove and wading out waist-deep in the water, they started, several boats full, for the ship, ferrying themselves with thwarts torn from the boats in lieu of oars, . . ."

thus managing to bundle some men off the ship.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, McCowen had arrived and sent some of his men aboard, an action which was not challenged by the sealers when he announced that no one else, including strikebreakers, would be allowed on board.

Now the crowd, hearing that the *Vanguard's* crew also was going aboard, rushed to Grieve's with the same objective. McCowen had now arrived himself at Grieve's gate, announcing — at the owner's personal urging — that any sealer who wished to join his vessel would be protected. The crowd was forced back from the gateway by four mounted constables, then surged back behind them (the horses probably drew men to the scene). McCowen repeated his announcement. Men began to drift forward, despite hoots and catcalls, "... the crowd surging to and fro as the curveting horses swung round the circle. Citizens swelled the multitude, women and children crowded into the front, and the conditions were such that one angry blow would have precipitated a frightful riot," reported the *Herald*. Every window and nearby roof was crowded, as possibly 500 "balked and vengeful sealers" faced ten or twelve foot and four horsed constables.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, McCowen detailed several of his men to accompany some willing sealers to get their boxes and bags. That they were able to do this and return to the wharf without incident speaks volumes for the sealers' discipline, though it can be argued that the majority had already accepted the offer and the minority knew it. Perhaps the atmosphere was somewhat less tense than the *Herald's* rather dramatic account would have us believe. Every sealer, after all, knew that as in any other annual "harvest" each day counted in reaching the newborn whitecoat harp seals on the ice.

Soon a trickle of men became a flood at all the wharves. A contributing role was now played at the train station by Judge Donald Morison, who went there to urge the several hundred men still waiting for a train to go aboard their ships, subsequently moving to Mechanics' and the other halls with the same advice. Morison was an Assembly member, long active in Bonavista politics, and in addition to having held several government posts, was a former Grand Master of the Orange Lodge (1888-96) and the author of anti-Catholic pamphlets.

At 5:30, an eager crowd of several thousand was addressed by Morison, now equipped with a megaphone and standing on a police wagon near the Bank of Montreal, with Morison in attendance. The terms were agreed, said Morison, and guaranteed by Bond in writing: \$3.50 and no coaling charge. He advised that they accept at once, for all had to be on board by 6:30. The listening crowd probably included only a few hundred actual strikers; the rest were townspeople, or prospective sealers who had come to St. John's on the mere hope of finding a berth. The last holdouts yielded when it was announced that the *Neptune* and *Terra Nova* would be ordered back to St. John's to pick up their

<sup>41</sup> *Evening Herald* (St. John's), 12 March 1902.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*



crews. "To your ships, O Sealers," Morine is supposed to have concluded, rather melodramatically, and after three cheers for Morine and the settlement, the last strikers hurried off. About 6:30 or 6:45 the Aurora was first away, soon followed by the other steamers. The great sealers' strike of 1902 was over.

Owners and government alike could now heave a collective sigh of relief. For Boyle, however, the principal concern was the possibility that such a "condition of paralysis" might yet recur. "It may not always be the case," he reported to London,

that so much forbearance, as on the present occasion, will be exercised: a very slight loss of temper on either side, and especially on that of the owners and of those working with them, would have led to consequences of a most serious nature. Since the forenoon of the 8th until the evening of the 11th the town was at the mercy of between three and four thousand men, who were practically homeless, and, in many instances, without food, and who showed their power by preventing anyone from going on board the vessels, from which they were themselves to all intents and purposes, deserters.

The lesson, he concluded, was the need to increase local forces by the establishment of militia or volunteer corps, since a few hundred trained men would have prevented the recent impasse, "... as discreditable to the Government of the Colony as it was disturbing to the peace and well-being of the community."<sup>43</sup>

Because increased garrison or new militia might be long in coming, Boyle also wished for some quicker action. On 18 March he asked his Executive Council to appoint a Commission of Enquiry into the strike, its causes, its effect on capital-labour relations, conditions in the sealing industry — including accommodation in port after signing but before sailing — and the preservation of law and order in the future. The following day, the Council declined to act, on the grounds that it would "revive interest in a dispute which has, fortunately, been brought to an end, and the recurrence of which can be easily prevented by the ship owners another year."<sup>44</sup> To reopen the matter now might bring trouble just at the opening of the cod fishery season — a decisive argument. Boyle felt unable to go against his ministers' opinion that the inquiry might endanger the status quo of more than the seal fishery. Bond's government, based as it was upon Water Street merchants, was not about to undertake any searching self-examination.

The general reaction of the St. John's press, on the other hand, was to admit that there were correctable grievances, but to insist that the sealers had acted wrongly in their breach of contract. "Capital has its rights as well as labour," as the *Newfoundland Quarterly* put it: "To have backed out at such a stage was not only a legal offence, but it was a serious moral wrong — and also a breach of honour. It was too late in the day to allow of any breach of confidence; and while a protest could have been entered bearing upon the

<sup>43</sup> Boyle to Chamberlain, 12 March 1902, GG.

<sup>44</sup> Graham, "We love thee, Newfoundland," 141-3.

future, the prospects of the present year should not have been jeopardized."<sup>45</sup> An ordinary strike held up production only for its duration, added the *Trade Review*, but this one nearly cost a year's effort — which, of course, was precisely the point, since the sealers could hardly have acted before coming to St. John's, and indeed might not have struck at all but for the reported future price reduction.<sup>46</sup> A better comparison would have been agricultural labour disputes, but such disturbances were hardly familiar in Newfoundland.



*William Coaker.* Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador

But now the sealers' strike had become part of the colony's labour history and the general background for the foundation of the most important early twentieth-century labour development in Newfoundland, the Fisherman's Protective Union. A year after the St. John's strike, the founder of the FPU, William Coaker, began his labour career by organizing the Telegraphers' Union — a skilled craft, but one which shared the geographical distribution of the outport fishermen.<sup>47</sup> Coaker, born in 1871, son of a Twillingate carpenter

<sup>45</sup> Isaac Morris, "Our Local Strikes," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 2 (1902), 20.

<sup>46</sup> *Trade Review* (St. John's), 8 March 1902.

<sup>47</sup> On Coaker and the FPU, see McDonald, "W.F. Coaker," and the same author's "Coaker the Reformer: A Brief Biographical Introduction," typescript, Center for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University, and J.R. Smallwood, *Coaker of New-*

and "masterwatch" (supervisor of a gang of sealers on the ice), grew up in St. John's where he had some experience in a strike of young fishhandlers at Job's. Coaker became a clerk, then an outpost branch manager of a St. John's firm, later buying out the branch — only to go down in the 1894 crash. Background and personal experience bred in Coaker a deep distrust of Water Street, which he carried to his new occupation of farmer on a remote island near Herring Neck. Patronage won him a telegraphist's and postmaster's job as a loyal Bond supporter, and led him into organizational activity.

Coaker, a strange, magnetic, gifted, melancholy, austere man, had a larger vision in his mind — an organization which would combine the heart of Newfoundland's workers: the fishermen, loggers, and sealers. The same workers, of course, did the same work, and shared the same "community of unrest."<sup>48</sup> In 1908 Coaker organized the first chapter of his FPU in Herring Neck, and the movement spread rapidly along the northern bays, demonstrating both the continuity of interest among these settlements and their general distrust of Water Street. Coaker was successful primarily in the northeast among Protestant fishermen who appreciated both his aims and his methods, many of which (flags, banners, parades, uniforms, and the like) were borrowed from the Orange Lodge of which he was a member, but this is another of those associations which so far remains unexplored by historians.<sup>49</sup> Coaker knew that more than cooperatives and lodges were necessary, and soon he added a newspaper, the *Fisherman's Advocate*, and entered politics. Although it would prove in time that Coaker's energy and stamina were essential to the movement's strength, in 1913 the FPU elected nine delegates to the House of Assembly, and thus for the moment became the largest opposition party.

Coaker was now in a position to press for reform legislation, particularly since Bond had retired, his party in shambles, and the remaining Liberal rump, also occupying opposition benches, was willing to cooperate with the union. FPU representatives, wearing their guernsey sweaters and oilskins (badges of working-class membership) represented a definite political threat behind Coaker, the "Moses of the North."<sup>50</sup> The result of most concern for this paper was the sealing bill of 1914, for the St. John's oligarchy saw that it could not afford total alienation of the fishermen and the loss of their own power to Coaker.

There had been sealing legislation before, regulating the opening date of the season, limiting the taking of "cats" (whitecoat pups under 28 pounds), and outlawing a second trip to the ice by steamers — but these were conserva-

*foundland* (London 1927).

<sup>48</sup> Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland*, 81 n.6.

<sup>49</sup> G.E. Panting, "The Fisherman's Protective Union of Newfoundland and the Farmer's Organizations in Western Canada," *Canadian Historical Association Report* (1963), 143, notes similarities with the Orange Lodge.

<sup>50</sup> Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland*, 88.

tion measures designed primarily to keep the industry alive. Significant sealing labour legislation had to wait until 1914, and even then the elaborate bill which Coaker proposed was resisted staunchly in the Legislative Council, where many important clauses were eliminated. Nevertheless, for the first time, there was some minimum regulation of at least the standards of food. Now, "not less than one pound of soft bread shall be served to each member of the crew three times each week," instead of the hard biscuits previously favoured; "beef, pork, potatoes, and pudding shall be supplied for dinner three times each week," and so forth.<sup>51</sup>

Food was hardly the only complaint, but further redress had to await the twin sealing disasters of 1914: the loss to the SS *Newfoundland* of 79 men separated from the vessel by a gale, and the 173 men who went down at sea without a trace with the SS *Southern Cross*.<sup>52</sup> The former horror, at least, might have been avoided had the *Newfoundland* been required to carry a radio and operator, yet that provision was not passed in the subsequent 1916 sealing bill.<sup>53</sup> Still, by that act sealers were not to be left on the ice after dark or "when the state of the weather is such as endangers life and limb." Jail terms awaited the master whose orders led to disablement of a sealer. Vessels were required to carry signal rockets, send out search parties when possible, and so on — and compensation would be paid the injured.

Other terms of this act limited catches to 35,000 seals (a good harvest indeed for a single vessel in any year), or whatever the newly-required legal load lines on the ship allowed. Equally important, as a belated conservation measure, seals were not to be taken by gun; only mature seals were so hunted, and a great many were lost in the process. Masters, second hands, and master-watches all had to be certified competent by a Board of Examiners. Not a word was legislated on sanitation, required radio communication, mandatory presence of doctors on board, or minimum wages. Tragedy, and time, and Coaker's FPU, and perhaps memories of 1902, had forced some minimal advances. But the sealers, in the meantime, had still gone to the ice, for the general rule had always been, as a bit of verse put it,

The hardy sons of Newfoundland  
Wait not for sealing laws,  
Mid ice and snow they daring go  
To try and grease their paws.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> "An Act to Regulate the Prosecution of the Seal Fishery." Newfoundland House of Assembly, 4 Geo. V, Cap. 19, 11 March 1914.

<sup>52</sup> The 1914 tragedies are described in detail in Cassie Brown, *Death on the Ice: The Great Sealing Disaster of 1914* (Toronto 1972).

<sup>53</sup> "An Act Respecting the Seal Fishery." Newfoundland House of Assembly, 6 Geo. V, Cap. 24, 4 May 1916.

<sup>54</sup> *Evening Telegram*, (St. John's), 13 March 1963 (Newfoundland Historical Society, St. John's, clipping files, sealing, folder 1).

The sealers' strike of 1902 was a memorable event in Newfoundland's history, not least for its uniqueness. Given the paucity of data and the circumstances surrounding the industry at that time, it is unlikely that the strike will ever be shown to have been the result of more than a simple and erroneous rumour — but that rumour unleashed all the despair of hard times. Sealing was an industry which appears in hindsight deceptively cooperative, in that all members of a ship's crew worked closely together for the biggest haul. But always it was ship against ship, and, more importantly, it was man against man for each berth, until the ships sailed for the ice, at least at the turn of the century. The strike was momentous not least because, contrary to Newfoundland tradition, the sealers for three days had acted in common, and for the first time, the power of the Water Street merchants had been challenged from below. The sealers had not ended the basic system under which they operated, whether credit, or crop, or shares, but they did kill "coaling money," and, more importantly, demonstrated to the owners that there was a point beyond which they would not abandon their hopes.

It cannot be shown that the strike directly caused the foundation of the FPU.<sup>55</sup> The lack of evidence demonstrating a connection between the two events, however, is not in itself cause to ignore the coincidence of the Bell Island and St. John's strikes with Coaker's activities. Perhaps most important of all, the strike entered Newfoundland's folklore. In the canon of folk songs which record the unique circumstances of outport life can still be found some memory of the time the sealers took matters into their own hands:

Attention, all ye fishermen, and read this ballad down  
 And hear about the sealers' strike the other day in town:  
 When full three thousand northern men did walk the streets all day,  
 With cool determined faces they struck out to get fair play.

Each steamer's crew did fall in line, while cheers out loudly rang,  
 Led on by one brave Calloway, the hero of the gang.  
 Free berths it was their motto, and no man would give in,  
 To fight for death or glory boys, this victory to win.

It is a revealing irony, however, that it is Morine, not the sealers themselves, who receives final credit for that victory.

They halted just before the bank, when all hands fell in line;  
 They went inside to state their case before A.B. Morine.  
 He got the terms to suit the men, and from the van did call;  
 That he secured three fifty and "free berths" for one and all.

<sup>55</sup> As Hattenhauer, "A Brief Labour History," 104-5, puts it, the FPU "may well have been created or strengthened by the sealers' success of 1902," probably as close as one can come to a definitive conclusion.

A ringing cheer the sealers gave, with hearts both light and gay.  
 And three more cheers they gave Morine, the man who won the day.  
 With happy hearts they fisted bags, as lightly they did trip,  
 With boots and bags and baking pans to get on board their ship.

Then soon around the northern head they disappeared from view,  
 Manned by a plucky, hardy race, a bully northern crew.  
 May they return with bumper trips, it is our earnest prayer,  
 The boys who nobly showed their pluck, and fought to get their share.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> James Murphy, *Songs Sung by Old Time Sealers of Many Years Ago* (St. John's 1925), 20, reprinted in Shannon Ryan and Larry Small, *Haulin' Rope & Gaff: Songs and Poetry in the History of the Newfoundland Seal Fishery* (St. John's 1978), 64. On the question of folklore, see John Roper Scott, "The Function of Folklore in the Interrelationship of the Newfoundland Seal Fishery and the Home Communities of the Sealers," unpublished M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1974.

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