

Rosa Garcia-Orellan. *Terranova: The Spanish Cod Fishery on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland in the Twentieth Century.*

Dean Bavington

Volume 27, Number 2, Fall 2012

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds27_2rv01

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Bavington, D. (2012). Review of [Rosa Garcia-Orellan. *Terranova: The Spanish Cod Fishery on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland in the Twentieth Century.*] *Newfoundland Studies*, 27(2), 291–293.

REVIEWS

Rosa Garcia-Orellan. *Terranova: The Spanish Cod Fishery on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland in the Twentieth Century*. Boca Raton, Fla.: Brown Walker Press, 2010. ISBN: 978-1599425411

Some of my earliest memories involve fishermen bitterly complaining about foreign draggers taking all “our” fish. I remember seeing images of those “foreign draggers” on television and sharing the fishermen’s anger over floating factories that scooped up tons of cod and other sea life from the ocean floor using otter trawls (sometimes hauled by two boats) with openings the size of jumbo jets. I never thought about the people on those foreign draggers, their living conditions onboard, or why they were working so far from home on some of the roughest seas in the world. Rosa Garcia-Orellan’s *Terranova* provides answers to these unasked questions by detailing the history of the industrial Spanish cod fishery on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland in the twentieth century.

Through a series of chronologically organized in-depth oral histories with men who laboured on different Spanish trawlers off Newfoundland and Labrador between 1932 and 1992, Garcia-Orellan provides an important corrective to the simplified nationalist images of foreign fleets killing “our” codfish. What emerges by the end of *Terranova*’s 11 chapters is a unique history detailing the recruitment of fishing crews from Galician and Basque fishing and farming communities; the hierarchical, dangerous, and cramped living and working conditions onboard Spanish trawlers; changes introduced by new fishing and processing technologies; and how Spanish fishermen spent time while in ports in Newfoundland and St. Pierre to relax, phone home, and seek medical attention when recovering from accidents at sea. These cultural stories are connected to the technological and political changes in the Grand Banks fishery, from the first Spanish steam trawlers powered by coal in the 1920s and 1930s through to the diesel-powered pair trawler fleet pursuing cod from the 1950s through to 1977, when Canada declared a 200-mile exclusive economic zone that forced

the Spanish fleet onto the so-called “nose and tail” of the Grand Banks and then onto other fishing grounds in the North Atlantic and off West Africa.

Terranova makes clear the connection between the development of Spain’s long-distance industrial cod fishery and government subsidies and support. Throughout most of the period covered by the book fascist dictator Francisco Franco ruled Spain. At the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939 the Franco government created a fishing subsidy program, lasting until 1977, to provide grants and low-interest loans to construct a modern international fishing industry. The cod fishery off Newfoundland and Labrador became a central component of Spain’s industrial development plan. It brought together shipbuilding and iron and steel industries, generated employment, and rapidly turned Spain into an exporter of cod caught on the Grand Banks.

One of the lessons that has become clear about industrial fisheries is that they require the economic power of states to be constructed and maintained. When industrially targeted fish stocks decline, national governments are crucial to negotiate access agreements to fish in foreign waters. The industrial fisheries of Spain led this global trend. *Terranova* does not address in detail what happened to Spanish trawlers after the northern cod moratorium in 1992. Many of these vessels eventually went into southern waters off Africa and South America. Conducting oral histories with the workers on these post-cod trawlers would make for a fascinating follow-up project.

Where are the boats built by Franco operating now? Who is working on them and where are they from? What inshore fisheries existed in the places where the Spanish draggers went after the cod moratorium in 1992? While *Terranova* does include a chapter at the end of the book on the effects of the 1992 cod moratorium on both Canada and Spain, readers are only left with a good understanding of the impacts on Spanish trawlermen. More could have been said in these final chapters about the complexity of the impacts on Newfoundland and Labrador and the diverse impacts on different parts of the cod-fishing fleets (inshore, midshore, offshore, and international distant water).

More analytical attention on the unique gender and ethnic relations on-board the Spanish trawlers, and about how industrial fishery workers were recruited in Spain, would have been useful for contemporary fishery scholars interested in understanding large-scale industrial fisheries worldwide. The male spaces created on the trawlers, and the women-headed households left behind, raise interesting geographical questions. The ethnic tensions on the boats and how these tensions played into the hierarchy between the *patrons* who lived well while the ship captains and the bulk of the crews and workers

lived in crowded, cold quarters at the bottom of the boats share similarities with contemporary globalized industrial fish work. Garcia-Orellan provides a very useful explanation of what happened in the Spanish labour market to make land-based jobs more attractive to Galician and Basque trawlermen after access to Newfoundland cod was blocked in 1977. However, one is left wondering how the ethnic makeup of Spain's contemporary international fishing fleet in the twenty-first century compares with that of the Grand Banks in the twentieth.

These minor criticisms aside, *Terranova* provides an important and necessary corrective to the simplified nationalist images and rhetoric that often accompany claims of foreign overfishing while hiding Canadian complicity. Garcia-Orellan doesn't tell romantic fishing tales; she writes about homesick Spanish fishermen using alcohol to dull the fear and pain of dragger work, the lack of sleep and food on board, and the loneliness onshore in St. John's and St. Pierre. Garcia-Orellan shows us the story of the birth and death of Spain's international industrial cod fishery. Inshore fishermen in Newfoundland and Labrador have shown the consequences of this industrialization at home. The time is right to re-imagine the cod fishery in Newfoundland and Labrador as we pass the twentieth anniversary of the cod moratorium. Re-imagining the fishery will need to start from knowledge of what it has been and how this has come about. *Terranova* teaches about the destruction of fish and the degradation of fishery work under industrial modes of production and prompts us to re-imagine what progress might mean in cod fisheries of the future.

Dean Bavington
Memorial University of Newfoundland