

# ***Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World.* Mark Kurlansky.**

Peter Pope

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## REVIEWS

*Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World.* Mark Kurlansky. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada. 294 pp., illus., bib., index, 1997, \$27.95, cloth, 0-676-97061-3.

### PETER POPE

MARK KURLANSKY had an excellent idea when he devised this book. *Gadus morhua* deserves a biography, if that means the story of its life and times and, particularly, of its relationship with *Homo sapiens*. Such a (natural) history would, of course, interest Newfoundland readers, for the cod is, or was, our staple. Kurlansky spins an engaging tale and this very handsome book will, alas, appeal to those curious about (but unfamiliar with) the history of the cod fishery. Why the note of professorial concern? Because Kurlansky is the E. Annie Proulx of Newfoundland history: the less you expect reality, the more you will enjoy the fantasy.

The book aims to present the story of the North Atlantic cod fishery from late medieval times to the present. The hook, to use the journalistic jargon which springs to mind, is the recent collapse of the west Atlantic cod stocks. Kurlansky frames his narrative within an account of this unnatural disaster and its effect on fishing communities in Newfoundland and Massachusetts. In the intervening chapters he trots through five hundred years of cod fishing, at an uneven pace, dwelling on certain emblematic periods and eliding others. The text is tastefully sprinkled with striking black and white pictures and larded with recipes for cod from every period, with an appended "Cook's Tale" containing six centuries of mouthwatering meals.

A former fisherman himself and now a journalist, Kurlansky's approach to history is to look for a good story. He has a nose for this. His opening chapter, for example, paints a vivid picture of the contemporary view from Petty Harbour,

putting the reader in the boots of three specific local fishermen. This works, in journalistic terms, but Kurlansky's failure to get any farther from the St. John's airport appears to be a pretty fair indicator of the effort he put into research. His bibliography has the eclectic look of a hastily assembled term paper. This might be the curse of journalism: always a deadline, never enough time. On the other hand, other journalists manage to write valuable monographs: John McPhee's wonderful profile of *Oranges*, for example (McPhee 1991). A few pages into Kurlansky's *Cod* the Newfoundland reader senses that the author actually doesn't know us very well. Here fishing stages are "tackle shops", "the package" is unemployment insurance and the musical Irish brogue of Petty Harbour is "heard up and down the Newfoundland coast". Early New England is not much better served: there they engaged in a "triangulated trade" with places like the Canaries, where they "took pipe". (Pipes were in fact large barrels of wine.) We all make little blunders when we are trying to describe something that we do not really know from the inside. This kind of infelicity might not matter (as we forgive an interesting foreign visitor for mispronouncing our name) but Kurlansky's inaccuracies run deeper than that. He does not really attempt to ground his biography of cod in history but instead affects an historical style by stitching together some entertaining myths.

Kurlansky's version of the cod fishery at Newfoundland starts with pre-Columbian Basques, for whom there was a vogue a century ago. When Selma Barkham refreshed our memory of the documented Basque mariners of the sixteenth century, some years ago, she tried to put these mythical trans-Atlantic medieval fishermen to rest (Barkham, 1982) — but they live again in this colourful story. New England's history is rewritten too, so that the Puritan elite there are mischaracterized as fish merchants. Not that cod was unknown in Boston or Salem, but few American colonial historians today would characterize it as the source of New England's eventual wealth. That history is more complex than this simplistic myth. Many of the nuggets that Kurlansky has gleaned in the drying streambeds of his dated secondary sources are time-worn assumptions which, when examined, resemble fool's gold more than anything else. These include the idea that the Portuguese fished continuously at Newfoundland from the sixteenth century until the 1980s; that the British developed the lightly-salted Newfoundland cure; that Europe was uninvolved in the New England area in the later sixteenth century; that sack ships were so-called because they carried dry wine; that the seventeenth-century fishery was primarily on the banks; that Newfoundland did not attract settlers in this period; that France lost its Newfoundland fisheries in 1763; that the French Shore was far from fishing grounds and lacked shore space for the dry cure... and so on.

Kurlansky's *Cod* fails as the history of an industry. The text jumps from early Newfoundland, to the Pilgrim Fathers' Massachusetts, to the Revolutionary War, to Thomas Henry Huxley, to Clarence Birdseye to Iceland's cod wars with Britain and to ours with Spain. The colourful accounts of these twentieth-century conflicts over stocks are interesting but, on the basis of this book's accuracy in other respects,

one hardly has the “facts” on good authority. Kurlansky’s past is not convincing. This is partly because there is so much history he misses, as when he describes sporadic violence on the Georges Bank in the 1980s as the only shooting war between Canadians and Americans since the French and Indian Wars. Worse, he misconstrues the facts he has; he has, to put it bluntly, little historical sense. Hence he can write, at one point (p. 52), of the proportion of Rochellais ships amongst the “128 fishing expeditions to Newfoundland between Cabot’s voyage and 1550,” as if anyone today could know exactly how many voyages there were, or as if the vagueries of time did not affect the sample of records we have and hence the conclusions we might draw, quantitative or qualitative, about a poorly-documented industry. Some historians would argue that by 1550 there was something in the order of 128 vessels *every year* making the trans-Atlantic voyage for cod. As for la Rochelle, we can be certain that it has better records than many ports, less certain that it dominated the early fishery. At times Kurlansky can be strangely obtuse, commenting, for example, that there is “no evidence” that John Cabot ever made his famous remark about being able to take fish by lowering a basket overboard, immediately after he quotes the letter from Raimondo di Soncino in which he says, point blank, “I have heard this Messer Zoane state so much.” Does Kurlansky have some reason to mistrust the judicious and trustworthy Soncino? Or does he just not understand that Mister John is Cabot?

As a biography this book fails because it treats seriously only a few periods of its subject’s career, there is no real life here. In the end the subtitle/subtext, “the fish that changed the world” is codswollop: fish did not change the world, western Europe, or at least its fisherfolk and fishing merchants did. They used another species to do this and Kurlansky is right in his hunch that if we are to really understand this *long duree*, we will eventually have to make sense of the long-term evolving relationship between fisher predators and fishy prey. This book does not begin to accomplish the task, derivative as it is of earlier syntheses, like Harold Innis’ seriously-dated *Cod Fisheries* (Innis, 1978). To give credit where credit is due, Kurlansky’s failed attempt might be a wake-up call for those working seriously on the early modern Atlantic fisheries: here is a history which needs to be written. What is offered in his book is, errors aside, more like the anecdotes that enliven a personal cookbook than a useful popular history.

Mark Kurlansky sounds like a fellow you might want to have a couple of pints with. He would probably share a few good recipes and you could certainly count on some wonderful stories — but of course you wouldn’t necessarily believe them.

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