

The North Atlantic Fisheries:  
Supply, Marketing and Consumption,  
1560-1990

Edited by  
David J. Starkey &  
James E. Candow

*Studia Atlantica*, 8

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# Introduction

Since its inception in 1995, the North Atlantic Fisheries History Association (NAFHA) has organised a series of international conferences. These meetings have been one of the means by which NAFHA has pursued its mission to enhance knowledge and understanding of the character and significance of human fishing activities in the North Atlantic over the last thousand or so years. In its first decade, NAFHA organised nine conferences in eight different countries: Iceland (1995 and 1998); Faroes (1996); Norway (1997); Sweden (1999); Greenland (2001); The Netherlands (2003); Canada (2004); and Portugal (2005). The research findings presented to these *fora* have been disseminated in the publications that comprise NAFHA's *Studia Atlantica* series.

This is the eighth *Studia Atlantica* volume. It contains edited versions of ten papers that were originally presented at the Eighth NAFHA Conference, which was held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in September 2004. This event was generously sponsored by the following organisations: Parks Canada; Historic Sites Association of Newfoundland and Labrador; Nova Scotia Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage; Industrial Heritage Nova Scotia; and the Fisheries Museum of the Atlantic. In all, 26 papers were presented during the three-day conference by researchers hailing from eleven different countries (Canada, the USA, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain and the UK). The theme of the meeting – 'Production and Consumption of Fish and Marine Products since the Twelfth Century' – attracted contributions on a variety of topics relating to the extraction and utilization of the North Atlantic's marine resources from the Middle Ages to the recent past.

The papers selected for publication in this volume range widely. In chronological terms, the scope of the study extends from the late sixteenth century to the 1990s, with three of the papers (Piquero and López, Ter Brugge and Candow) covering long stretches of this period, while others (notably Leavenworth, Ferguson and Abeledo) focus on much shorter timeframes. The essays also cover a broad spatial expanse. While five papers consider aspects of the fisheries of continental Europe - from Spain to the Low Countries to Sweden - one concentrates on the fishing interests of the UK, and there are four contributions on the catching, merchandising and consumption of salt fish (cod) on the eastern seaboard of North America. With regard to sources and methodology, moreover, a number of different types of evidence and technique have been deployed by the authors of the volume's constituent papers. Accordingly, as well as conventional analyses of documentary sources, oral testimony informs Ferguson's examination of fish culling in Newfoundland, while Söderlind utilizes archaeological evidence from the wreck of the *Vasa*, and Ter Brugge and Heidbrink draw upon literary and visual information to underpin their respective analyses of fish promotion in The Netherlands and Germany.

The volume addresses four broad themes – production, processing, marketing and consumption – which together form the core of the process whereby living marine resources are transformed into products that humans not only can, but want, to eat. This process is neither uniform nor unitary; rather, it is complex, fragmented and subject to major fluctuations over time and space, a volatility that is reflected in the papers that constitute this collection. The first two contributions are concerned with the production facet of the fisheries conducted in the northwest Atlantic. Focusing on the amount of cod extracted from the waters off Newfoundland, Peter Pope uses evidence from British and French archives to estimate the effort expended, and catches made, by European fishers during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He compares his findings to those relating to the same grounds in the 1850-1980 period to infer that the early modern Newfoundland fishery was large in scale, but not to the extent that it inflicted lasting depletion on the stock upon which it relied. William Leavenworth's study of technological change in the Scotian Shelf cod fisheries during the 1850s provides the basis for further long-term comparisons. Here, as longlining superseded handlining, precipitous declines occurred in catch

rates and the average size of cod taken, although in both regards the fishery was far more productive in the 1850s than it proved to be in the late twentieth century.

The second theme of the volume relates to the processing and merchandising of fish. This broad topic is addressed from three contrasting perspectives in papers pertaining to the very different contexts of the UK, northeastern Newfoundland and Spain. Martin Wilcox locates his study of the British trawl fishery during the 1850-1939 period in the literature on the relationship between business organisation and economic performance. Examining the degree of connection between the different components of the fish trade, he argues that the industry developed a unique organisational structure marked by a shift towards the integration of vessel owning, processing and wholesaling down to 1890, when the partial disaggregation of cognate interests emerged as the main trend. A lack of coherence also characterised the relationship between fishers and fish merchants in mid-twentieth century Newfoundland, as Mark Ferguson demonstrates in his analysis of the means by which fish caught by one party was graded (culled) and purchased by the other. The mistrust, injustice and animosity felt by fishers towards cullers were rooted in the practices of merchant capitalism, and this militated against harmonious interpersonal relations, let alone vertical integration. In contrast, fishing and fish processing in Spain developed along industrial lines during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Setting her analysis in the context of the 'standard of living debate,' Luisa Abeledo examines the real wages of the workers engaged in the fishing and canning industries to shed light on the welfare of families living in the coastal regions of Spain.

Marketing fish is the third theme of this volume. While it is generally perceived that advertising is a modern phenomenon, Jeroen ter Brugge shows that in The Netherlands fish merchants have deployed various strategies to encourage people to buy fish since the late sixteenth century. Whether such promotional efforts succeeded in stimulating fish consumption is uncertain, but annual celebrations of the arrival of 'new herring,' poster depictions of fish as a symbol of 'Dutchness,' and the advocacy of fish as a healthy option for children have added a notable marine edge to Dutch popular culture over the centuries. A similar pattern is evident in Germany. Here, as Ingo Heidbrink demonstrates, fish has never been a basic item in the diet of the population, and so marketeers have sought to raise awareness of the price competitiveness, health attributes and variety of fish as a food. Even so, in the twentieth century, their greatest success has come through concealing the flavour of the product by packaging it as fish fingers.

Eating fish and marine products, the fourth theme of this work, is examined by three contributors. Ulrica Söderlind focuses on the role of fish in the provisioning of Swedish warships during the seventeenth century. Using material evidence retrieved from the wreck of the *Vasa*, together with documentary information, she concludes that fish was an important source of fat and protein for Sweden's naval seafarers, although contemporaries were largely unaware of its nutritional quality. The export of salt fish from Newfoundland to Britain's Caribbean islands is the subject of James E. Candow's investigation. While he confirms the conventional wisdom that this food served as an important source of protein in the diet of slaves – a fact acknowledged by masters, drivers and slaves alike – he also argues that the significance of the Caribbean to the economy and culture of the northwest Atlantic region has been underestimated by scholars. The interaction of supply and demand in the fisheries is also examined by Santiago Piquero and Ernesto López, although their focus is on the mechanism that relates these market forces – that is, the price of fish. Using evidence drawn from the account books of various religious and state institutions, they have assembled a price series with regard to the Basque Country from 1560 to 1900. This series points to the volatility and complexity of the market for fish, a finding that should encourage researchers to refrain from making general statements about the status of cod in the food hierarchy over the long term.

In preparing this volume, the editors have been aided by various people. While the support of the sponsors of the Halifax conference is gratefully acknowledged, we would like to thank the local organisers of the meeting – James E. Candow and Bernadette Samson of Parks

Canada's Atlantic Service Centre; Janet Maltby and Lee Ann Crouse of the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History; and Ralph Getson of the Fisheries Museum of the Atlantic – for their invaluable work in hosting the event. Thanks are also due to the speakers – including those whose papers are not included in this volume – for entertaining and educating the 31-strong audience which assembled in the splendid setting of the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History, where the conference sessions were held. Lastly, we owe debts of gratitude to Josephine Affleck for assisting in the preparation of the papers, and to Steve Wilson and Carl Schofield of the University of Hull's Central Print Unit for their efforts in producing this volume.

David J. Starkey  
James E. Candow  
April 2006