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Newfoundland Cod and English Piracy in the Early Seventeenth Century

Graham Moore

Newfoundland's cod fisheries were a vital resource in the development and sustenance of Europe's early modern maritime economies. As the fisheries preyed on cod, they in turn were preyed upon by a new threat in the form of pirates. The pattern of piracy in Newfoundland in the first decades of the seventeenth century provides an insightful foil to English activity in the region as a whole, exposing patterns of European rivalry, national collaboration, and resource extraction. This article uses Newfoundland's relationship with piracy as a focus to explore those issues, weaving together the histories of pirates, fishermen, and cod in an environmental approach that appreciates their interacting roles in the political ecology of Jacobean England, as well as the wider environment of the North Atlantic world.

Key words piracy, fisheries, Newfoundland, environmental history, High Court of Admiralty, Atlantic history, cod

In September 1618 the *Gillieflower* of London sailed out of Harbour Main in Conception Bay, Newfoundland, leaving behind a sailor named William Brancham in a small, open-decked shallop.¹ Brancham, of Horselydown in Southwark, was entrusted with 'two thousande' weight of fish destined for Carbonear, some 20 nautical miles northwest around Conception Bay.² Such activity was fairly commonplace in the growing English Newfoundland fishery, which salted and dried vast volumes of fish for transport back to European markets each year.³ The *Gillieflower* was just the latest participant in a century-long 'gold rush', as the maritime economies of Atlantic Europe reoriented themselves to take advantage of the bountiful, strategic resource of Atlantic cod, *Gadus morhua*.⁴

1 The National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA): HCA 1/48/fo. 217v. High Court of Admiralty: examinations of pirates and other criminals (1614–1620).

2 Horselydown, or 'Horsey Down', now remains as Horselydown Steps, near Tower Bridge. Assessing the exact weight of fish carried by Brancham is difficult, but an estimate of 1 ton (approx. 907 kg) is reasonable. Fenna, 'Hundredweight', *A Dictionary of Weights, Measures, and Units*; Connor, *The Weights and Measures of England*, 58, 173–5.

3 Cell, *Newfoundland Discovered*, 1.

4 Kurlansky, *Cod*, 51.

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The history of early modern maritime expansion is a history of resource extraction. Cod was the resource *du jour*, a commodity and foodstuff that propelled Atlantic Europe outwards through the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. As cheap nutrition, it was remarkable for its longevity; properly preserved, cod would outlast alternatives like herring.⁵ Unrest loomed over Europe; with meat prices high and militaries expanding, many regions were 'desperately short' of inexpensive, durable protein sources, and the growing populations of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean plantations also needed a cheap source of food.⁶ Cod was the silver-bullet solution, and Newfoundland had cod in abundance.

But, as this article argues, a second (and just as vital) resource was available in Newfoundland in the form of fishermen. The fishery was a source of labour as well as food, a key 'nursery' capable of providing up to 1,500 newly skilled seafarers per year, 'the raw material of naval power'.⁷ By 1615 250 English ships were making the annual spring voyage across to Newfoundland, bringing home 250,000 hundredweight of preserved fish in the autumn.⁸ This number would rise to 300 vessels by 1620, employing over 6,000 seafarers.⁹ In 1610 the newly incorporated Newfoundland Company was chartered to establish a permanent colony on the optimistically named 'Avalon' peninsula.¹⁰ The charter recognized a political truth, that the 'increase of navigation and trade' offered by north Atlantic cod fisheries was of paramount importance and opportunity to Jacobean England.¹¹

But England's politicians were not alone in recognizing the value of Newfoundland's fishermen as a labour pool. William Brancham, making his way quietly across the chill waters of Conception Bay, was about to get a taste of his own medicine when he found himself surrounded by heavily armed English pirates. Typical of their profession, the pirates made off with all the valuable resources at hand, and this included not only the ton of cod, but also William Brancham. The fisherman had become part of the catch.

This article uses stories like Brancham's, where criminal acts cut sharply into everyday maritime activity, to place the developing Newfoundland fishery within the history of maritime England as a whole. It does so through the framework of 'political ecology', where political action is 'defined by its relations to nature'.¹² It begins by introducing the fishery in a European maritime context, before describing early seventeenth-century piracy as a reflexive function of broader commercial, political and social changes. Piracy acts as a historical bellwether; it is a disruptive activity, but it is also inherently symptomatic of such larger phenomena. Historians of the seventeenth century maritime may be familiar with its political and social changes; I aim to emphasize that such changes also fundamentally relate to engagement with the environment and natural resources.

⁵ Ibid., 22–3.

⁶ Cell, *Newfoundland Discovered*, 2.

⁷ Hubbard, *Englishmen at Sea*, 250–1; Andrews, *Trade, Plunder, and Settlement*, 334.

⁸ Starkey, 'The Distant-Water Fisheries of South West England', 97, 101.

⁹ Ibid., 97.

¹⁰ Cell, *Newfoundland Discovered*, 4.

¹¹ London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter LMA): CLC 526/MS30045/1, Trinity House transactions (1609–1625), fo. 1.

¹² Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 1.

In this fisheye lens, William Brancham and his boatload of cod become a momentary, yet illustrative, juncture in a greater web of political ecology. I advocate for treating cod, fishermen and pirates alike as component parts of a greater ecological network of relationships that both formed and shaped England's early modern maritime world.¹³ To understand the maritime, we must appreciate the environmental angle.

English seafaring in the North Atlantic context

At the time of Brancham's capture in 1618 English piracy was on the decline. Admittedly, this was after a truly momentous peak; England's maritime economy, which had increasingly incorporated modes of depredation (both legal and illegal) under Elizabeth I, initially carried those practices forwards under the new monarch despite budding peace with Spain. Newfoundland was not the only 'nursery' for seamen by 1603; piracy was another.¹⁴ A royal proclamation against piracy in 1603 had little effect, as many English seafarers accustomed to making a living through violent private ventures simply sought new justifications.¹⁵ With English letters of reprisal revoked, many sailed under Dutch commissions instead.¹⁶ When a 1604 proclamation prevented seafarers from sailing under foreign commissions, many either turned to outright piracy or moved to pastures new, taking up with the corsairing Islamic polities of the Maghreb.¹⁷ Led by the notorious John Ward, these renegade Englishmen coalesced into a well-organized community of Mediterranean pirates around several key captains.¹⁸ By 1608, when Ward's reputation soured amongst his countryfolk, a splinter group of captains under 'admiral' Richard Bishop set up their own pirate confederacy in the north Atlantic.¹⁹ The sheer scale of their operation, involving over 1,000 seafarers during its peak, quickly drew international attention.²⁰

Geography and environment were vital factors; operating out of havens in south-west Ireland and western Morocco, the confederacy preyed seasonally on the convergence of Atlantic (and greater Mediterranean) shipping routes around the west coast of Spain.²¹ Their operational scale was vast, but they were careful: they avoided attacking English shipping, preferring Spanish, French and Flemish targets.²² This was sensible; maintaining camaraderie with English communities enabled

13 Ibid., 61.

14 As was the east coast colliery; see Hubbard, *Englishmen at Sea*, 250.

15 James VI/I, 'A Proclamation to Represse all Piracies and Depredations upon the Sea' (Winchester, 1603).

16 Appleby, *Under the Bloody Flag*, 219.

17 James VI/I, 'A Proclamation for Revocation of Mariners from Forreine Services' (Thetford, 1604).

18 Hubbard, *Englishmen at Sea*, 79–80.

19 Kelleher, *The Alliance of Pirates*, 3–5, 15–16.

20 Appleby, *Women and English Piracy*, 11. Of these, 492 were referenced by name in High Court of Admiralty (HCA) depositions between 1607 and 1612; Moore, 'Jacobean Piracy in Law and Literature', 4.

21 Data taken from captures described in HCA depositions 1607–12 and limited to those explicitly occurring between years 1607–12 inclusive, with location stated, TNA: HCA 1/47, Examinations for High Court of Admiralty criminal proceedings (1607–12).

22 TNA: HCA 1/47/fos 138r–138v.

reliable operational havens and, eventually, pardons and re-integration.²³ Although short, this wave of piracy was impactful, 'More Englishmen sailed on pirate ships in James' reign than in the famous golden age of piracy a century later'.²⁴ The pirate boom hit its zenith in 1611. At this point Bishop, ever the savvy operator, jumped ship with a well-termed pardon.²⁵ The confederacy fragmented; starved of direction and resources, its pirates began to prey on English shipping with increased frequency. The Newfoundland fisheries would become a favoured target.

Maritime violence was not new to Newfoundland. Although fishermen from different communities had preferential fishing grounds in the area, the best locations for fishing (and for 'fishing rooms', processing catch ashore) were hotly contested.²⁶ There were huge profits to be made; by 1550, cod accounted for 60 per cent of European fish consumption.²⁷ At this time, Newfoundland's cod trade was dominated by the French, but this would not last. Elizabethan policymakers like William Cecil recognized a causality between fishing and the country's maritime acuity.²⁸ England's growth needed maritime trade, and maritime trade needed skilled seafarers; Newfoundland offered both. This resulted in the 'first comprehensive statutory regulation and protection of the English fishing industry' in 1563 with an 'Acte towching certayne politique constitutions made for the maintenance of the navye', instituting Wednesdays as a fish day.²⁹ For Cecil, growing England's fisheries was more than just a practical solution to the realm's economic and military shortcomings; it was a territorial 'point of honour'.³⁰ The policy was designed to enlarge English access to maritime resources while minimizing that of the country's rivals.

Cecil's fish days were not popular, and Tudor and Stuart England never developed a large domestic appetite for fish.³¹ However, Elizabethan policies were still successful in growing the fishing industry and England's maritime capabilities by boosting the export trade.³² Until 1563 English fish exports had been heavily restricted; lifting these restrictions established fishing within England's rapidly growing mercantile sector. By 1603 English ascendancy 'depended on a vibrant private shipping industry' and an increasingly complex network of mercantile connections.³³ This network was reliant on the Atlantic cod as a source of income, food and seamanship.

Clawing their way to an equal footing with more established maritime nations, English fishermen quickly 'acquired a reputation for aggressive competitiveness'.³⁴ Both the nation and its localized fishing communities developed an increasingly

23 Hanna, *Pirate Nests*, 10.

24 Hubbard, *Englishmen at Sea*, 136; Starkey, 'Pirates and Markets', 112.

25 Earle, *The Pirate Wars*, 60–1.

26 Robinson, 'The Common North Atlantic Pool', 12.

27 Kurlansky, *Cod*, 51.

28 Jackson, 'State Concern for the Fisheries', 47.

29 Sgroi, 'Piscatorial Politics Revisited', 1–2, 6.

30 *Ibid.*, 4.

31 Even by 1620, when England's Newfoundland fishery had grown to some 300 vessels per year, only 10 per cent of catch was consumed in England; Starkey, 'Distant-Water Fisheries', 97.

32 Sgroi, 'Piscatorial Politics', 22.

33 Hubbard, *Englishmen at Sea*, 252; Smith, *Merchants*, 12, 107.

34 Starkey et al., 'Introduction', *England's Sea Fisheries*, 8.

territorial approach during the seventeenth century, perhaps best encapsulated by the idea of a *mare clausum* (closed sea) contested with the Dutch in the North Sea.³⁵ A paper trail in the records of Trinity House and the High Court of Admiralty emphasizes attempts to profit from (and avoid) such protectionist licencing and export conditions, which laboured English-caught fish in English-owned ships for both Newfoundland and domestic British fisheries.³⁶ While the sheer density of traffic in the North Sea led to competition over resources, the sparsely colonized coasts of north America presented new conflicts as well as new opportunities. When England's cod fishers were pushed out of Iceland, they applied that same commercial aggression in turn to the dominant French presence in Newfoundland.³⁷ Early English ambitions for exclusive access to Newfoundland's resources culminated in a co-ordinated naval strike against French and Spanish cod fleets in 1585 under Bernard Drake.³⁸ Pushed by political expediency and pulled by the lure of bountiful resources, English seafarers, traders and politicians saw an opportunity to seize Newfoundland's cod from the jaws of their rivals and augment their maritime sector in the process.

English violence in the Newfoundland fisheries

It is against this backdrop of competition and violence that we meet our first pirate, though he is not yet a pirate, at least not to English eyes. We first spy Peter Eston at the very end of Elizabeth's reign, holding a royal commission to enact maritime violence in protection of English interests in Newfoundland.³⁹ By this time, English fishermen were slowly but surely driving their competitors away from Newfoundland's Avalon peninsula.⁴⁰ Aggressive English fishing strategies had secured them a foothold; now aggressive, private naval warfare would secure it. Commissions like Eston's allowed the Elizabethan regime to outsource this process, protecting English fisheries and diminishing its rivals at minimal cost. Eston's experiences in Newfoundland gave him a taste for maritime violence and its profits; when James VI & I's 1603 proclamations revoked his commission he soon turned to piracy, throwing in his lot with 'admiral' Richard Bishop and eventually setting his sights on the very same trade he had previously protected.⁴¹

35 Thornton, 'John Selden's Response to Hugo Grotius', 108.

36 Violations of fishing limitations appeared as part of the HCA criminal court's 'standing commission' of oyer and terminer: TNA: HCA 1/51/fo. 1. High Court of Admiralty: examinations of pirates and other criminals (1674–1683). Some examples of queries raised, in Trinity House transactions and HCA miscellanea are Preventing Yarmouth herring shipped in 'Strangers Bottomes', 1614, LMA: CLC 526/MS30045/1, fos 25–28; Enforcing laws against fish in 'strangers bottomes', 1630, LMA: CLC 526/MS30045/2, fo. 80; Establishing permanent Trinity House consultation to the Privy Council, 1632, LMA: CLC 526/MS30045/2, fo. 59v; Articles for inquiry into illegal fishing [undated, 17th century], TNA: HCA 30/844/67 High Court of Admiralty: Miscellanea (1558–1685); Encountering limitations of protectivist policies, 1631, LMA, CLC 526/MS30045/2, fos 82r, 83r; Intra-national territoriality was not uncommon; for example, oyster licence troubles between Colchester and Brightlingsea, 1638, TNA: HCA 30/844/37.

37 Sgroi, 'Piscatorial Politics', 5; Starkey et al, 'Introduction', 8; Kurlansky, *Cod*, 52.

38 Jackson, 'State Concern', 47.

39 Kelleher, *Alliance of Pirates*, 118.

40 Cell, *Newfoundland Discovered*, 2.

41 Sometimes 'Easton', though not usually in contemporary sources. Eston's career trajectory is

Initially, there was no need for English pirates to make the long transatlantic voyage to Newfoundland to reap its rewards. Like the fishermen themselves, they simply picked their ideal hunting grounds and waited for their prey to stray into the trap. For example, John Pottle, a merchant hailing from Totnes, Devon, describes a fraught encounter with Eston in 1609.⁴² Pottle was returning from Newfoundland, sailing for Spain, one of the largest markets for cod in the continent.⁴³ Every autumn, Newfoundland's fishing fleets decamped the island's shores *en masse* to catch the favourable westerlies that would take them homewards.⁴⁴ These elliptical Atlantic patterns governed the passage of trade across the ocean.⁴⁵ They were also responsible for the presence of *Gadus morhua* in the first place; on Newfoundland's great banks, these weather patterns also see the conjuncture of the cold Labrador current and the warm Gulf Stream, stirring up the nitrate-rich seabed and supporting a dense ecosystem.⁴⁶ Processed by phytoplankton, these nitrates kickstart a vibrant food-chain; *Gadus morhua*, eating crustaceans, molluscs, pelagic fish species and even other cod, hoovers up the results. These feeding habits, in turn, were what made cod such a desirable food source; its white, protein-rich flesh is a result of their sluggish, bottom-feeding lives as large demersal fish. Fresh cod averages around 18 per cent protein content; after salting and drying, this concentration can rise up to 80 per cent.⁴⁷ As European fishing fleets harvested and processed cod, they redistributed Newfoundland's nutrients across the Atlantic world.

Pottle's case gives us an interesting insight into how Newfoundland cod connected to a broader network of resource distribution within the north Atlantic. The voyage from Britain to Newfoundland took about three weeks, and many northern cod fishers were likely to emulate Cabot's more northern route instead of following the trade winds west from the Canaries.⁴⁸ Afterwards, the westerlies could take a ship straight back home. However, merchants like Pottle could take advantage of favourable markets in France and Iberia by steering a 'triangular' route further south, arriving between Spain's 'Northern Cape' (Finisterre) and 'Southern Cape' (Santa Maria).⁴⁹ Here, they might run afoul of a different kind of food-chain. Any pirate worth their salted cod knew how to maximize profit and minimize risk by playing

almost stereotypical of the transition from Elizabethan to Jacobean maritime violence. Before fully emerging as a pirate, he appears sailing under a Dutch commission in 1607: Kelleher, *Alliance of Pirates*, 225.

42 TNA: HCA 1/47/fos 95r-95v.

43 Robinson, 'North Atlantic Pool', 12.

44 Kurlansky, *Cod*, 72.

45 Maxwell, 'Portugal, Europe, and the Origins of the Atlantic Commercial System', 4.

46 Kurlansky, *Cod*, 43.

47 *Ibid.*, 33-4.

48 LMA: CLC 526/MS30045/1, fo. 1.

49 Anglophone seafarers' accounts, like those in HCA depositions, typically refer to the 'Northern' and 'Southern' Iberian capes without identifying those locations. However, for the 'Northern Cape' as Finisterre (TNA, HCA 1/47/fos 280r, 285r). Meanwhile, the 'Southern Cape' as Cabo de Santa Maria: a 1610 deposition differentiates a 'southern' and 'western' cape (the latter probably Cape St Vincent); deponent describes a vessel taken between Gibraltar and the 'Southern Cape', denoting proximity, TNA, HCA 1/47/fos 97r-98r, 163v-164r. On pirates roving between St Vincent and Santa Maria see Mainwaring, 'Of the Beginnings, Practices, and Suppression of Pirates', 33; Hanna, *Pirate Nests*, 52-3.

the seasonal trade patterns, lying in wait for valuable transatlantic cargoes returning on the trade winds.⁵⁰ The trick was to work the key choke points of western Europe's maritime trade network, so it was little surprise that, in late 1609, John Pottle ran into Peter Eston some 200 kilometres out from Gibraltar.

As piratical encounters go, Pottle got off lightly, suspiciously lightly. Upon boarding, Eston simply 'demanded some water'. Pottle claims to have insisted that they had none spare; 'the pirates answered that they woulde have some water from them & woulde give them some monie in lieu of it', and 'forced' Pottle to comply. Or so he claimed; uncoincidentally, the 'Proclamation to repressse all piracies and depredations upon the sea' of 1603 had also targeted anybody 'ayding or receiving' pirates. Victualling, 'contracting, buying, selling or exchanging [with]' any individual found guilty of piracy were thus also capital offences.⁵¹ An English seafarer was unlikely to volunteer evidence of willing trade with pirates. Pottle was pointedly mortified to find that his crew had also sold some spare canvas to the pirates, and keen to stress that the transaction had occurred without his knowledge.

In general, early modern seafarers seemed inclined to help other vessels when they were safe and able to do so. A few days prior to their encounter with Eston, Pottle and his crew met a ship from La Rochelle, one of the key ports in France's own cod trade.⁵² After customarily hailing each other, the two ships exchanged pleasantries and supplies. Pottle bought a hogshead of cider from the French, who added a gammon and a dozen cakes of biscuit to the bargain. They sailed together for a day and into the night, before drifting apart in the darkness. The trade routes facilitated by Newfoundland's fisheries resulted in myriad exchanges like these; competition in Newfoundland did not necessarily equate to unfriendliness away from the Banks.

Indeed, with Eston around, safety in numbers may have been sensible. Even his fellow pirates were surprised by his appetite for plunder. Thomas Coward, who plied the Spanish hunting grounds with Eston in 1608 and gained his own ship thanks to the latter's patronage, drew on Eston's poor reputation to his own advantage when he was brought before the High Court of Admiralty in 1610.⁵³ When asked if he had taken any goods from the *Grace Bonaventure* of Bristol, Coward said that while he had detained the vessel off the Irish coast with that aim in mind, he 'tooke nothinge from her for shee had nothinge left'; Eston had already 'robbed her of all that ever shee had'.⁵⁴ In fact, she was in such a sorry state and 'much distressed for wante of victualles' that Coward took pity on her, giving the company 'a barrell of beveridge and a bagge of breade to carrie them home'. Seafarers were ever in need of resources, but Eston's scorched-earth tactics surprised even his comrades and, of course, Coward hoped that his comparative generosity might placate the Admiralty, even so far as gaining him a pardon.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Kelleher, *Alliance of Pirates*, 119.

⁵¹ James VI/I, 'A proclamation to repressse all piracies . . .' (1603).

⁵² Kurlansky, *Cod*, 51.

⁵³ TNA: HCA 1/47/fos 138r-138v.

⁵⁴ TNA: HCA 1/47/fo. 149v.

⁵⁵ It did not. Coward was hanged on three piracy charges that year: Senior, *An Investigation of the Activities and Importance of English Pirates*, 386.

Coward's deposition was part of a broader investigation into the confederacy's *modus operandi*. The *Grace Bonaventure* case was vital to this investigation because it directly implicated otherwise legitimate merchants, such as one Thomas Benson of Bristol, in receiving goods from '*eorum socios piratas Anglos super alto mari*' (their allies, the English pirates upon the high seas).⁵⁶ Benson was just one of many merchants who trafficked with pirates.⁵⁷ Colonial ventures like Newfoundland had their own shady connections to piracy. Multiple High Court of Admiralty depositions implicate Humphrey Slany, a London merchant who contributed a large portion of the Newfoundland Company's capital, in trading with pirates – though always at a safe geographic and social distance, separated by various intermediaries and beyond English jurisdiction.⁵⁸

As the Admiralty began to unpick the strands linking the pirate confederacy to England's maritime sector, we also glimpse that web of connections through the court's records. In turn, it is possible to better understand the role of the *Gadus morhua* within that network. The confederacy's habitual havens in southwest Ireland were an ideal destination for ships returning from Newfoundland, and many a pirated cod catch made landfall there. The pirates' trading networks then funnelled illicit goods into Bristol and Pembrokeshire.⁵⁹ Otherwise, the pirates could take advantage of favourable prices and friendly reception in the Maghreb, favouring Mogador, Saphia and Fdala.⁶⁰ A staple protein source across the north Atlantic, stolen cod could be diverted to any of these markets.

By 1609 English piracy was already making inroads into Newfoundland itself, albeit with mixed results. Demonstrating the pirates' knowledge of trading patterns, Tibalt Suxbridge, one of Eston's protégées, utilized the Atlantic ellipticals to their full extent in a hubristic 1609 voyage.⁶¹ From Plymouth, Suxbridge visited the confederacy's customary hunting grounds on Spain's west coast. Finding little success, he continued southwards to Mogador (Essaouira) to resupply before following the winds to the Caribbean, far off the pirate piste.⁶² This gamble did not pay off; upon arrival his crew were 'allmoste famished for wante of victualles', and an abortive shore expedition was betrayed to the Spanish with eight lives lost.⁶³ Suxbridge headed north to Newfoundland where, true to the traditions of cod rivalry (and the confederacy's habitual temperance towards its countryfolk), he set his sights on the French fishery, only to be killed in a bloody boarding attempt on a French vessel. Disheartened and diminished, with their captain slain and their ship 'leakie',

⁵⁶ TNA: HCA 14/40/46. High Court of Admiralty: instance and prize courts: exemplars (1609–1610).

⁵⁷ TNA: HCA 1/47/fos 6r–6v, 123v–124v.

⁵⁸ Andrews, *Trade, Plunder and Settlement*, 334. Including the *Godspeede*, selling ordnance to pirate John Jennings in Morocco, TNA: HCA 1/47/fos 64r–66v, 83r–84r.

⁵⁹ E.g. 'Thespian pirate' Lodowick Barry brought a Flemish pinnace laden with 'ten thowsand or thereabouts of Bancke Cod' into Berehaven, 1614. TNA: HCA 1/48/fos 107r, 108v; Bristol, TNA: HCA 1/47/fos 45r–46v, 78r–84r, 85v–87r, 252v–253r; and Pembrokeshire, TNA: HCA 1/48/fos 165v, 167v–168v, 242v–244r, 281v.

⁶⁰ Mainwaring, 'Of the Beginnings, Practices, and Suppression of Pirates', 34–6.

⁶¹ Sometimes 'Saxbridge': Senior, *An Investigation* . . . , 427.

⁶² TNA: HCA 1/47/fos 117v–118v.

⁶³ TNA: HCA 1/47/fos 117v–118v, 134r–135r.

Suxbridge's crew availed themselves of the hospitality of Newfoundland's English fishermen and 'shipped themselves into other shippes' for home.⁶⁴

Suxbridge's failed experiment tells us a little about the English situation in the western Atlantic. It is evident that, while English pirates had the navigational knowledge to reach Newfoundland and the Spanish West Indies and pick out targets there, they were still opportunists prone to 'failures and disasters'.⁶⁵ In both engagements Suxbridge utilized subterfuge, approaching quietly in small boats.⁶⁶ This was the opposite of the pirates' typical approach, which normally relied on intimidation (through perceived superior force) to minimize risk.⁶⁷ Evidently Suxbridge did not expect the French to put up such a stalwart defence of their ship; perhaps he didn't bank on the increased Anglo-French rivalry in Newfoundland. Despite their new foothold in Avalon and the scale of the pirate menace, English seafarers held a tenuous position on the far side of the Atlantic.⁶⁸

If the English were still Atlantic underdogs, then their willingness to aid their piratical countryfolk attests the fact. In European waters, maintaining good relations with one's countryfolk was piratically expedient; here, it was a lifeline. 'Englishness grew stronger in faraway places', particularly places with a history of international rivalry; this is true of Newfoundland.⁶⁹ But this was not to last. Soon the still-growing fishing industry, augmented by private colonies, would assert English presence at Newfoundland. As circumstances shifted, cod was no longer the prey of choice for opportunistic pirates. Instead, seafarers themselves would become the target.

Seafarers as resources

Two years after Suxbridge's death, Newfoundland's political ecology was changing. On 2 May 1610 the Newfoundland Company was awarded letters patent to settle the entire island in the name of King James. Like most early modern colonizations, it was bigger on paper; settlement was effectively limited to Avalon, with small beginnings in Cupid's Cove.⁷⁰ Meanwhile the pirate confederacy was slowly depleting, with key personnel pardoned, killed, or quietly leaving for other employment.⁷¹ With Bishop's departure in 1611 it began to fragment in earnest, splitting into three factions. The largest, and most vicious, formed around Peter Eston.⁷² But Eston had a problem; the Jacobean pirate bubble had burst. Ex-pirates were being drawn to England's growing legitimate maritime sector, and he was constantly short of skilled seafarers. Mirroring the designs of the very maritime policy that depleted his ranks and drawing on his own experience, Eston sought a remedy in seafaring's great 'nursery', Newfoundland. Eston arrived in 1611 and remained for several months,

64 TNA: HCA 1/47/fos 121v-122r.

65 Andrews, *Trade, Plunder, and Settlement*, 1.

66 TNA: HCA 1/47/fos 120v-121r.

67 Senior, *A Nation of Pirates*, 22.

68 *Ibid.*, 11.

69 Hubbard, *Englishmen at Sea*, 15.

70 Cell (ed.), *Newfoundland Discovered*, 5-6.

71 TNA: HCA 1/47/fos 98v-100r; Senior, *Nation of Pirates*, 36, 42.

72 Other factions under William Bauge and Thomas Francke, though the latter would rejoin Eston. Senior, *Nation of Pirates*, 71.

even building a 'Pirates forte' in Harbour de Grace.⁷³ From this foothold he took 'beere and bred and men' from English ships, replenishing his fleet to put himself in a strong bargaining position as he sought either an English pardon or employment with Savoy.⁷⁴

Richard Whitbourne, a captain who had spent decades working Newfoundland's waters, described the tension between the pirates and fishermen.⁷⁵ The inequalities in physical power were clear: Eston 'had with him ten saile of good Ships, well furnished'; as a result Whitbourne was 'kept eleven weekes under his command'.⁷⁶ The fishery's loose structure did not help. Ex-pirate Henry Mainwaring remarked, 'if [pirates] be of good force, they will command all the land, in regard that the Fishermen will not stand to each other'.⁷⁷ England's Newfoundland seafarers may have helped each other ad hoc, as with Suxbridge's stranded crew, but they were not an organized community. This left them vulnerable to piracy. But the relationship was not wholly one-sided: Eston needed a reputable man like Whitbourne to act as liaison and organize his pardon, and gave him 'many golden promises, and much wealth offered to be put into my hands'. Despite the pirates' depredations, they still exhibited a reliance on individual relationships with Newfoundland's fishermen.⁷⁸

By 1611 pirates did not really come to Newfoundland for cod. Instead, Eston was taking advantage of the area's second key resource, seafarers. Eston ran a sort of 'protection racket', taking one-fifth of all provisions landed and every fifth seafarer from the fishing crews.⁷⁹ The pattern of extraction set by Eston continued throughout the decade; Mainwaring spent much of 1614 augmenting his fleet with 'perforstmen' from Newfoundland.⁸⁰ Eston was a parasite, but a careful one; he understood that Newfoundland's fishery was a valuable resource, not to be depleted. When hunting for men, it was important not to overfish. Such qualms did not extend to the non-English fisheries, however, and when Eston finally turned eastward in spring 1612 he made captures at will from the newly arrived French and Dutch fleets.⁸¹ However

73 'John Guy's Journal of a Voyage to Trinity Bay', in Cell (ed.), *Newfoundland discovered*, 68.

74 TNA: HCA 1/48/fos 52r-54r.

75 Cell (ed.), *Newfoundland Discovered*, 22-3.

76 Whitbourne, 'A discourse and discovery of New-found-land', in Cell (ed.), *Newfoundland Discovered*, 113.

77 Mainwaring, 'Of the Beginnings, Practices, and Suppression of Pirates', 37.

78 Eston was offered a pardon in 1612, which he refused, taking employment with the Duke of Savoy. Possibly it paid better. State Papers Online (SPO) Vol. LXVIII (541), no. 119, Gale MC4323601606 (6 Feb. 1612); Earle, *Pirate Wars*, 62; TNA: HCA 1/48/fos 52r-54r. English pirates' relationships with North Sea fishing communities could be even more symbiotic, as North Sea pirates were often short-range, short-term opportunists themselves embedded in those same communities. A divergence between long-distance and short-distance piracy clearly emerges in the latter half of James' reign, particularly comparing TNA: HCA 1/47 and HCA 1/48.

79 Kelleher, *Alliance of Pirates*, 180.

80 Mainwaring, 'Of the Beginnings, Practices, and Suppression of Pirates', 22. It is difficult to establish to what extent being 'perforst' was merely 'a common and cheap form of insurance'. Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty*, 120. Of the 492 named individuals implicated in piracy by the High Court of Admiralty 1607-1612, only 81 ever appeared before the court. 44 (54 per cent) claimed coercion; 20 flatly denied involvement in any acts of piracy, while the remaining 17 made no claim in their defence. TNA: HCA 1/47.

81 TNA: HCA 1/48/fo. 315v.

these captures were purely for quick profit. Eston sold their cargoes of fish and salt upon arrival in Ireland, providing him with additional funds while he organized his future employment. If Eston had been interested in making profit from cod alone, he would have made his captures in the autumn as the fully laden fleets departed. These pirates placed themselves higher up the food-chain; their prey was man, not cod.

This adds another dimension to the dynamic exchanges propagated by Newfoundland's political ecology. Labour, too, was a desirable resource, skilled labour in particular. If the Newfoundland fishery was a 'commodity frontier', then its commodities were two-fold.⁸² Newfoundland's ecosystem produced cod, and those cod in turn produced seafarers. Piracy's shift from depredation to recruitment reflects its own decline; it was also an indicator of the English fishery's increased productivity and sophistication. Pirates preyed on fishermen out of necessity, not just opportunity. As other industries like the fisheries provided increased employment, established pirates had to adjust their recruitment tactics or go extinct.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to use the lens of piracy to explore a broader ecological network, examining resource extraction in Newfoundland. Piracy is necessarily a political act; it is defined by its exteriority to established political sovereignties. As such it necessarily exists within a 'political ecology'; the politics of piracy is also the politics of the environment within which they were embedded. Studying instances of piracy against the context of Newfoundland cod lays bare that political ecology and its myriad roots in the environment of the north Atlantic. Environmental forces, namely the great winds and currents of the Atlantic and the sheer volume of nutrients traversing Newfoundland's ecosystem, shaped human activity across the ocean's vast domain. The influence of such forces is visible here in the successes and failures of pirates. As participants in that ecosystem, we can also use their interactions to examine the developing confidence of English seafaring in the early seventeenth century.

A political ecology is a grand tapestry, but it is also made up of innumerable interactions. My aim in applying such a framework to history has been to view that macroscopic context, without losing track of the little things that truly matter; the exchanges that add life to the ecosystem. See, again, William Brancham. When William Douglas, master of the *Gillieflower*, appeared before the High Court of Admiralty, his deposition was short and formulaic; on Brancham's current whereabouts, Douglas simply remarked that he 'is still detained amongeste them'. We never hear more of Brancham afterwards, though anonymity was not uncommon for the ordinary seafarer. The deposition was designed to justify the sailor's involvement in piracy and enable his eventual return; in that regard it is deeply personal. But it is also part of something greater. In the grander scheme of the Atlantic political ecology, Brancham was just another fish caught in the net.

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82 Beckert et al, 'Commodity frontiers and the transformation of the global countryside', 437.

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