CHAPTER FOUR

TRANSFORMATION OF THE MARITIME CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF ATLANTIC CANADA BY MIGRATORY EUROPEAN FISHERMEN, 1500–1800

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The way in which the early modern transatlantic fishery was organized, in the Old World, had practical implications for exploitation of the coastal resources of the New World. The migratory, shore-based, dry salt-cod fishery was a vernacular industry. That is to say, it was not centrally directed but a congeries of competing production units. Each transatlantic voyage was organized as much by custom as by co-ordinated long-range planning. Merchants in the part of western Europe involved in the industry brought ships, crews and supplies together from different ports, but these factors of production flowed from the collective experience of geographically-bounded local communities. At the same time, a vernacular pattern is evident in the distribution of European activity in North America. Between the early sixteenth and the late eighteenth centuries, an internationally-accepted custom allocated shore stations to the migratory crews of different European regions. This custom permitted and even encouraged fishing crews from particular ports to return again and again, in a seasonal rhythm, to particular coasts in the New World, where they used boats to fish for cod in inshore waters, rather than fishing offshore in the ships that brought them from Europe. Historians have generally assumed that labour was scarce and land plentiful in early modern North America, but the reverse appears to have been closer to the truth for transatlantic fishermen. They revisited the same harbours for centuries and transformed them,

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2 On vernacular as opposed to directed capitalism, see Pope (2004a) 30–2, 414–7; Pope (2004b).
to suit the needs of the shore-based salt-cod fishery. Between 1500 and 1800 European fishermen created distinct maritime cultural landscapes in Newfoundland and the Gulf of St Lawrence.

**Who fished where and when?**

The earliest phases of the transatlantic fishery are the hardest to parse, not simply because documentation is thinnest. The apparently simple question of who fished where is complicated by several factors. The transatlantic world was still unfamiliar to most Europeans, so that contemporaries were often vague about where crews had fished. When early documents do concede a toponym or two, they are commonly difficult to interpret. Charter parties often speak only of ‘Terre-neuve’ or even ‘Terres-neuves’, which in the early sixteenth century might be anywhere in Atlantic Canada. Many ports, large and small, sent vessels to the New World in the sixteenth century; the history of the transatlantic fishery through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is, in part, a history of concentration. Discussion of who exploited which North American coasts is also complicated by the frequent interdependence of ports one with another, for capital, equipment, victuals, salt and even labour. The European ports that developed the transatlantic fishery lie between northern Portugal and Normandy, with outliers in the west of England and south-east Ireland, a coastal zone which had already developed close regional commercial links, in the late medieval period. The intricate European geography of the industry noted, it is still worth trying to clarify who fished where in what period, even at the risk of over-simplification.

At the turn of the sixteenth century, English and Azorean Portuguese mariners made the first documented transatlantic voyages to Atlantic

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3 See, for example, the uncertainties in Biggar’s collection of early documents, which are not examined, let alone corrected, in R. Cook’s recent edition: Biggar (1911); Cartier (1993).
7 Westerdahl (1998) defines this as a single maritime transport zone.
8 E.g. Mannion and Barkham (1987) give great emphasis to the Basques.