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The Newfoundland Fishery: An 1813 Memorial

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James MacBraire



Synopsis

“The Newfoundland Fishery” was an 1813 letter written to Sir Richard Goodwin Keats (1757-1834), the governor of Newfoundland at the time. The author of the letter, or memorial, was James MacBraid (1757-1832), a British army officer, merchant, and philanthropist. MacBraid was born in Londonderry, in what is now Northern Ireland, to a family of Scottish origin. The MacBraid family of Northern Ireland was descended from a 16th century Edinburgh merchant named Robert MacBraid. James MacBraid’s father, John MacBraid, was a military officer who was killed in the Irish Rebellion of 1798, during the 28 May Battle of Enniscorthy against the Irish rebels. James MacBraid followed his father’s footsteps into the army. He served during the American Revolutionary War in the 1770s, and was discharged with the rank of sergeant in 1780. He went on to work as a clerk in a Bristol-based company that traded with Harbour Grace in Newfoundland. MacBraid married Elizabeth, the daughter of Joseph Bower of Bristol, in the early 1790s. When her father died soon afterward, Elizabeth inherited his estate, which included property and vessels in Harbour Grace. So, through his wife, MacBraid acquired a bit of wealth and property in Newfoundland. Over the next few decades, MacBraid established himself as a relatively prosperous merchant in the Newfoundland import/export trade. MacBraid set up the Benevolent Irish Society (BIS) to help poor Irish fishing families there. In his later years, he returned to the British Isles, settling in Scotland. In this 1813 Memorial, written during the War of 1812 and the Napoleonic Wars, MacBraid supports the British policy of excluding enemy traders and fishermen from Newfoundland, especially Frenchmen and Americans. At the time, Great Britain was at war with much of Europe, which was under the domination of Napoleon, as well as the United States, which had attacked British-ruled Canada in 1812. Newfoundland, a North Atlantic island off the east coast of Canada, was, for centuries, economically important because of its fisheries. The island was settled by Inuit, First Nations, and Scandinavian people centuries before Columbus. The Beothuk First Nations people occupied the island, and it was visited by Inuit and Micmac (Mi’kmaq) people from the north and south, respectively. Vikings from Greenland set up a camp at L’Anse aux Meadows around 1000, making it the earliest generally accepted evidence of European settlement in the Americas outside of Greenland. Around 1500, Europeans returned to Newfoundland, this time to exploit the rich fishing and whaling grounds of the Grand Banks near the island. Basque, Portuguese, Spanish, French, and British fishermen all exploited Newfoundland’s fisheries. Both Britain and France laid claim to the island, but, after decades of warfare, the British took control over the island. Newfoundland remained a British colony until 1949, when it became a Canadian province after a controversial referendum. For centuries

Newfoundland's fisheries played an important role in the local economy and in the British Empire. Codfish, caught in huge numbers in the Grand Banks, were salted, dried, and then exported to different parts of the empire. In the British Caribbean colonies, for example, Newfoundland salted cod (saltfish) was a cheap source of protein. Even today, salted cod is part of traditional recipes in some Anglophone Caribbean countries (i.e. Jamaica's ackee and saltfish, or the coucou of Barbados, which is often eaten with salted cod). After centuries of exploitation, Newfoundland and Labrador's lucrative, once-abundant cod fishery collapsed in the early 1990s, devastating the local economy. Cod fishing was banned to allow stocks to recover, but they never rebounded. With high rates of unemployment, many Newfoundlanders emigrated to other parts of Canada. Offshore oil production in the 2000s helped to revive the province's economy.

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