

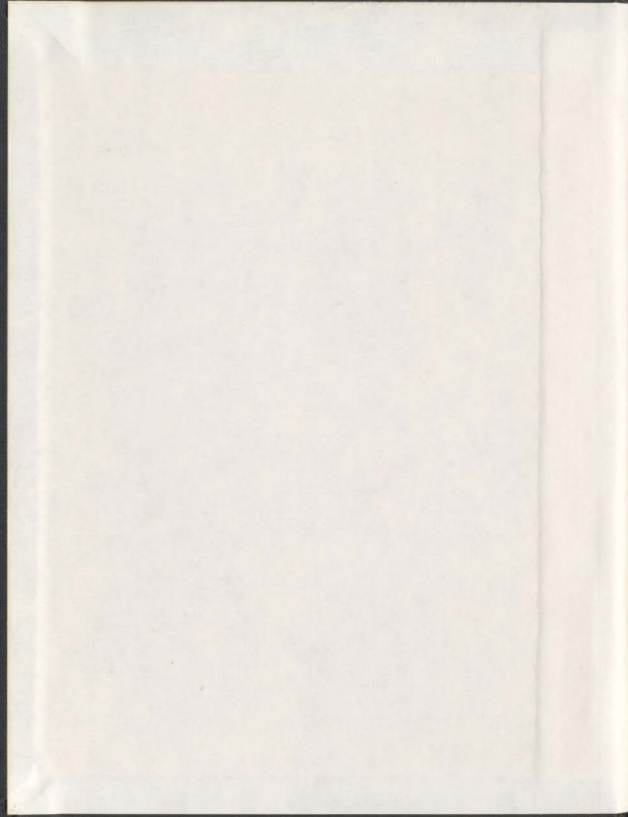
"... AS MODERN AS SOME OF THE FINE NEW  
DEPARTMENTAL STORES ... CAN MAKE IT":  
A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE LARGE WATER  
STREET STORES, ST. JOHN'S, NEWFOUNDLAND,  
1892-1949

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**"... as modern as some of the fine new departmental stores ... can make it":  
A Social History of the Large Water Street Stores,  
St. John's, Newfoundland, 1892-1949**

by

© Carla J. Wheaton

**A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Department of History  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
St. John's, Newfoundland  
2002**

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### **Abstract**

Contrary to some of the stereotypes perpetuated in the literature, early Newfoundland society and culture were not static nor unaffected by external developments, a condition supposedly engendered by its isolated position as an island in the North Atlantic ocean. Although perhaps not in the thick of the social and economic changes taking place in western Europe and in much of North America resulting from industrialization, urbanization, and social and geographic mobility, many Newfoundlanders felt the impact of these modern forces indirectly, influencing the ways in which they lived, worked and shopped. This thesis focuses on the latter activity, exploring changing consumer behaviour and rising rates of consumption among people living in St. John's over the period from 1892 to 1949 through a study of the retailing practices of the large Water Street stores.

In many ways, city consumers were adopting and adapting trends noted by contemporary social commentators in the U.S. and Canada, trends which have since been associated with a rising consumer culture and the development of consumer societies in recent scholarly works on the subject. In the absence of industrialization on the scale experienced in many nineteenth-century European and North American cities, how did St. John's society come to accept many of the practices, attitudes and values of Western consumer cultures? It is argued that as the city's largest retailers, the department stores lining Water Street played a central role in introducing elements of a modern consumer culture to St. John's through their ads, sales, promotions and displays. In addition to

importing goods for sale in their stores, store owners and managers also imported modern retailing techniques to sell merchandise, thereby altering the relationship between consumers and retailers and between people and goods, integrating Newfoundlanders into a North American way of life.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives	CNSA
Maritime History Archives	MHA
Newfoundland Patriotic Association	NPA
Newfoundland Protective Association of Shop and Office Employees	NPASOE
Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador	PANL

## Introduction

For Newfoundland, as for most nations in what is commonly termed the western world, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represent a period of significant economic, social and cultural change, largely in consequence of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>1</sup> Although industrialization failed to gain much of a foothold on the island, in spite of the efforts of the colonial government to promote industrial development, Newfoundland was influenced by many of the changes taking place elsewhere, particularly in the United States where the twin forces of industrialization and urbanization contributed to the rise of a retail giant - the department store - and the creation of a consumer society. This thesis will explore one aspect of the developing society in St. John's, Newfoundland from 1892 to 1949 which was common to much of Europe and North America, namely the introduction and adoption of a consumer culture, through a study of the development of

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<sup>1</sup>There is some debate among historians as to whether the Industrial Revolution resulted in an increased supply of goods raising demand or if rising demand encouraged the mass production of goods thereby triggering industrialization. There is also much debate over the period in which the first consumer society developed. Barthel argues that in the eighteenth century, economic growth accompanying overseas trade made England the first "real consumer society." While, in the past, people may have wanted to possess more material goods, few beyond the aristocracy could afford to. Increased trade and a rising standard of living changed the situation, making consumer goods increasingly affordable. Diane Barthel, *Putting On Appearances: Gender and Advertising* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988) 15-7. See also John Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880-1980* (London: Longman, 1994); Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, "Consumerism and the Industrial Revolution," *Social History*, 15(2), (May 1990) 151-179; Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1982).

the city's retail trade, focusing on its most influential representatives - the large Water Street stores.

### The Department Store in Modern Society

It is not coincidental that the department store arose contemporaneously in the large cities of countries such as France, Britain, the U.S. and Canada as all were experiencing, to some extent, the results of industrialization and urbanization. The mass production of manufactured goods, the use of rail and steamship to facilitate the movement of products and people, the growth of middle and later working classes with disposable incomes, and the concentration of population in urban centres, all contributed to the growth of mass merchandisers who provided an outlet for the products of industrial society, thereby playing a major role in the distribution of consumer goods. In so doing, large retailers fostered the trend towards increased rates of consumption in modern society and drastically altered the popular experience of shopping. By virtue of their dominant position in the retail trade, department stores were also instrumental in shaping attitudes and influencing customer behaviour thereby helping spread a mass consumer culture.

The department store represented a significant shift from traditional retailing and merchandising methods. Prior to mid-nineteenth century, most city shopping centres featured small, specialized shops carrying a very specific and limited line of merchandise. Due to the traditions of offering credit and haggling over prices, mark-ups were high and stock turnover low. The high cost of goods and limited means of transportation meant that clientele for the shops was restricted largely to those with at least moderate incomes

living in the surrounding area. The great increase in the populations of many cities as a result of industrialization and the growth of middle and working classes with rising disposable incomes in the nineteenth century, significantly altered the situation giving rise to larger stores with vastly different retailing practices. According to Gunther Barth, it was the "modern city, providing the economic incentive and the physical setting for new enterprise [which] produced the department store."<sup>2</sup>

The advent of public transportation with the first horse-drawn buses in the early 1800s, later giving way to electric streetcars and subways, allowed shoppers to travel outside their own neighbourhoods to visit downtown commercial centres thereby expanding the potential clientele of the retailers situated there. To offset the cost of rising rents in these districts, store owners took advantage of developments in construction involving the use of iron, steel and reinforced concrete to occupy multi-storeyed establishments. The rent paid on upper floors was much lower than street-level, giving them more retail space and spreading the cost over a greater selling area. More space gave retailers the opportunity to add new lines of merchandise and to better organize and display stock, providing a more attractive environment for shoppers than the smaller stores with their jumble of goods heaped on counters and stored in shelves. "The very

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<sup>2</sup>Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 110; H. Pasdermadjian, *The Department Store: Its Origins, Evolution and Economics* (London: Newman Books, 1954) 2-3; Brenda Newell, "From Cloth to Clothing: The Emergence of Department Stores in Late Nineteenth-Century Toronto" (M.A. thesis, Trent University, 1984) 2-3.



essence of the department store," according to Susan Porter Benson, "was the rationalization of space, through its division into departments." Departmentalization served several purposes, allowing store owners "to serve a large volume of customers effectively, while also keeping careful financial watch over each subdivision of the store's stock and economizing through the specialization of clerks in a narrow line of merchandise."<sup>3</sup> Other developments such as gas and electric lighting, elevators and escalators, plate glass windows, pneumatic tubes and cash registers encouraged the continued growth and expansion of the stores throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to their size and the variety of merchandise they carried, the new department stores further revolutionized the retail trade by introducing new practices such as lower mark-ups which in turn meant lower prices and a higher turnover of stock. They also put an end to bargaining by instituting fixed, marked prices and cash only policies. These practices, in addition to those of free entrance (allowing customers to browse without an obligation to buy) and the ability to return unsatisfactory items, drastically altered the nature of retailing and the experience of shopping in the modern cities of

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<sup>3</sup>Susan Porter Benson, "Palace of Consumption and Machine for Selling: The American Department Store, 1880-1940," *Radical History Review*, 21 (Fall 1979) 208-9.

<sup>4</sup>Pasdermajian, *The Department Store*, 2-3, 25-6; Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995) 12-3, 48; Dorothy Davis, *Fairs, Shops, and Supermarkets: A History of English Shopping* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966) 289-90.

western Europe and North America.<sup>5</sup>

Department store merchandising techniques continued to evolve in response to new pressures well into the twentieth century. In the early years, their small number and the novelty and convenience of their premises and policies attracted customers and gave them an advantage over competitors. But, as smaller retailers began adopting their innovative methods and as the number of department stores grew, they were forced to introduce new practices in order to attract new customers and maintain profits. Regular and extensive newspaper advertising, annual sales events and bargain basements served to expand the stores' consumer base beyond their traditional middle-class clientele and took advantage of the rising disposable incomes of the working class. Finally, a variety of costly services such as free delivery, restaurants, rest rooms, and even nurseries were added to meet the needs of their mainly female clientele in a bid to gain customer loyalty.<sup>7</sup>

In this manner, the department store not only revolutionized the practice of

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<sup>5</sup>These policies were later credited with helping to democratize consumption by encouraging the working class to shop without fear of embarrassment. It is more likely, however, that fixed prices and free entrance were a consequence of the growing size of store staffs and the inability of owners and managers to supervise all transactions rather than a concern for customer convenience and comfort. Pasdermajian, *The Department Store*, 3-4; Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 17.

<sup>7</sup>Department stores are now seen as central to the development of both the advertising industry and the press in the late nineteenth century due to their heavy use of advertisements in newspapers and magazines. Pasdermajian, *The Department Store*, 46-7, 56; Robert Twyman, *History of Marshall Field and Co., 1852-1906* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954) 17-9, 23, 60-1, 108-9, 115, 123-36, 146-8, 169; Barth, *City People*, 131, 135.

retailing throughout much of the western world, but also played an important role in shaping urban life and transforming the nature of consumption. Their popularity with consumers, size, and impressive architecture contributed to the downtown focus of modern cities and brought about a significant shift in the appearance of their commercial centres. Once the territory of businessmen, tradesmen and delivery boys, they now had to share the downtown area with middle-class female shoppers. Accordingly, this area of the modern city took on a cleaner, more genteel aspect with wide, uniform sidewalks, suitable for the many promenaders visiting the stores and checking out window displays.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to expanding their customer base, urbanization played another important role in the birth and success of the department store. As Michael Schudson has argued, the social and geographic mobility associated with city life contributed to the growing significance of consumer goods in society, and therefore to the importance of the department store as a major distributor of such goods, resulting in the creation of an American consumer culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He points out that, in earlier times, a person's sense of self was confirmed by their position and family status in their community but that the "geographic and social mobility [of] modern society" meant the loss of these self-affirming connections and became "potent forces for personal disruption." In short, the trend towards urbanization and the declining importance of family and community relationships with the movement of populations

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<sup>7</sup>Barth, *City People*, 129, 147.

meant less personal interaction and greater anonymity necessitating the development of new ways of self-identification. Personal income exhibited through consumption became one way of identifying and ranking oneself within society, the proliferation of mass and brand-name products allowing individuals to define themselves through the goods they possessed. As Schudson observes, "Consumer goods [have become] an index and a language that place a person in society and relate the person in symbolically significant ways to the national culture."<sup>8</sup>

The rising importance of goods "as status-conferring accoutrements" is, therefore, inextricably linked to the development and success of department stores and, in turn, the advertising industry, department stores being among the earliest and most avid users of advertising to attract customers. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, American department stores, through their window displays, special promotions and advertisements, were presenting themselves as guides to consumers, offering to educate shoppers on the correct goods to buy in their bid to present the right image.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Michael Schudson, "Historical Roots of Consumer Culture," *Advertising in Society: Classic and Contemporary Readings on Advertising's Role in Society*, Roxanne Hovland and Gary Wilcox, eds. (Chicago: NTC Business Books, 1989) 47-9.

<sup>9</sup>Schudson argues that because consumer culture is the result of changes within modern society associated with industrialization and urbanization, it is erroneous to suggest that advertisers are responsible for manipulating consumers and for creating consumer culture: "To the extent that advertising arose in response to social and economic changes in a mobile market society, it is difficult to see it as an original or prime cause of consumer culture. To the extent, however, that technological developments in industrial manufacturing precipitated growing investment in distribution and sales and advertising, advertising can be seen as a somewhat independent, not solely reactive, force in American

As cultural theorists have since pointed out, visibility became increasingly important in the nineteenth century for appearances were considered indicative of "class and status in a mobile society where such attributes were no longer self-evident."<sup>10</sup> The department store, in providing a place where people could see and be seen and in helping to establish fashion trends, was crucial to a rising consumerism which Barth sees as an essential feature of the "modern city culture" of nineteenth-century American urban centres: "The city stimulated the expansion of the retail market, improved communications systems, and generated a new building technology. Swept along by the tide of progress, residents steadily expanded the range of their consumption beyond food and material for clothing; the ambience of the large city encouraged many people of modest affluence to aspire to an air of solid comfort, if not luxury."<sup>11</sup> Department stores, due to freedom of access and luxurious appearance, created an illusion of equality among shoppers while helping to raise consumer demand through their advertisements and displays. By introducing the concept of "obsolescence," the stores also helped spread a growing obsession with being up-to-date from the well-to-do to the middle and later the working

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society." Schudson. "Historical Roots of Consumer Culture," 44-7, 59; Barth, *City People*, 142..

<sup>10</sup>Simon Gunn. "The Public Sphere, Modernity and Consumption: New Perspectives on the History of the English Middle Class." *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism: Middle-Class Identity in Britain, 1800-1940*. Alan Kidd and David Nicholls, eds. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) 17.

<sup>11</sup>Barth, *City People*, 110-1.

classes, offering themselves as guides for the fashion-conscious. According to Barth, "By its very nature, shopping in a department store became a public act that educated people for living in the city. Successful participation demanded that the shopper possess not only money but also the poise to assess shrewdly the offered goods."<sup>12</sup>

Finally, because of their grandeur and the services they offered, department stores also changed the nature of shopping from chore to pastime, one almost exclusively associated with women. Largely responsible for meeting the needs of their families through home-production, with the availability of factory-made products, women began shopping to fulfil their domestic role. Encouraged by the department store's seemingly endless array of goods, their merchandising techniques and their customer services, they came to view shopping as entertainment to be enjoyed frequently and with friends. Credited with the emancipation of women by giving them a public role and relieving them of the tedium of domestic life, the department store also helped trap women into another role, that of shopper, while reinforcing the middle-class ideal of marriage with husband as breadwinner and wife as consumer.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, the department store, wherever it arose, was central to many of the socio-economic and cultural changes taking place in modern cities as a result of industrialization and urbanization. Arising almost simultaneously in major population centres throughout

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<sup>12</sup>Barth, *City People*, 130-1, 142-4; Davis, *Fairs, Shops, and Supermarkets*, 292.

<sup>13</sup>Barth, *City People*, 129, 145-6.

the industrializing west, these mass merchandisers played an important role in the distribution of mass-produced goods, in shaping the urban landscape, in guiding the consuming habits of shoppers, and in creating a modern urban culture in which appearances were the all-important factor in determining social status.

#### Scope and Objectives

A relatively new and largely unexplored field of history, the rise of consumer societies in the various nations and cities of western Europe and North America over the course of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, has been the subject of growing interest in recent years.<sup>14</sup> Still, many historians of consumerism lament that it is an area where much work remains to be done. The explanation usually given for this gap in the historiography is that scholars have long focused on the production rather than the consumption of goods and services. Yet, some would argue that during the twentieth

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<sup>14</sup>See McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, *The Birth of Consumer Society*; Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society*; Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage Publications, 1991); Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes Towards the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997); Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern and Matthais Judt, eds., *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Maggie Andrews and Mary M. Talbot, eds., *All the World and Her Husband: Women in Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture* (London and New York: Cassell, 2000); Arthur Asa Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising's Impact on American Character and Society* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000); Lawrence Glickman, ed., *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

century, the economies and cultures of most of the nations making up the western world became consumption-driven as opposed to production-driven, in consequence making the study of consumerism increasingly important.<sup>15</sup> Should further justification need be made for the case of consumer history, its advocates have also argued that "mass consumption is inextricable from daily life and social experience" and that "consumption offers a new focus for some long-standing themes and political concerns.... The history of consumption is in this sense not a separate field so much as a prism through which many aspects of social and political life may be viewed."<sup>16</sup>

If a rising consumer society and the spread of consumer culture has been woefully neglected elsewhere, it is virgin territory in the case of the historiography of Newfoundland and the situation is only a little more encouraging for the study of consumption in Canada. Canadian historians, too, have been influenced by the discipline's focus on the forces of production in society,<sup>17</sup> but the problem is exacerbated in

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<sup>15</sup>Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 1; Strasser, McGovern and Judt, "Introduction," *Getting and Spending*, 6; Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987) 29.

<sup>16</sup>Strasser, McGovern and Judt, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>17</sup>Little has been written in Canada on the subject of consumption or related topics such as retailing, merchandising and advertising. Russell Johnston notes in his recent work on advertising in Canada that there has been no detailed historical study of the industry. Similarly, Joy Santink, in the preface to her study of Eaton's, wrote that it was an attempt to "investigate one aspect of an industry that has received little attention in Canada." She points out that Douglas McCalla's work on the Buchanans and a small section of Michael Bliss's book on Flavelle, in addition to a few popular books on companies like Eaton's and Simpson's, are the only sources available on the subject of department stores and retailing.



Newfoundland by the predominance of studies which explore the fisheries, industrial underdevelopment, the truck system, and subsistence living, conditions which would seem to preclude the existence of a consumer society.<sup>18</sup> As a result, higher levels of

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General histories of Canadian business reflect this oversight with Bliss's survey history dealing only briefly with retailing, the same being true of another by Graham Taylor and Peter Baskerville. This void in the historiography has been filled somewhat by the work of Santink and David Monod as well as several articles and graduate theses on department stores in Toronto and Montreal but the subject of consumer culture in Canada continues to be neglected despite Cynthia Wright's call in 1992 for a gender and class approach to the study of shopping in Canada. Russell Johnston, *Selling Themselves: The Emergence of Canadian Advertising* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001) 11; Joy Santink, *Timothy Eaton and the rise of his department store* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) preface; Rod McQueen, *The Eatons: The rise and fall of Canada's royal family* (North York, Ont.: Stoddart, 1998); Michael Bliss, *A Canadian Millionaire: The Life and Business Times of Sir Joseph Flavelle, Bart. 1858-1939* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1978); Douglas McCalla, *The Upper Canada Trade, 1834-1972: A Study of the Buchanans' Business* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979); Michael Bliss, *Northern Enterprise: Five Centuries of Canadian Business* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987); Graham Taylor and Peter Baskerville, *A Concise History of Business in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994); David Monod, *Store Wars: Shopkeepers and the Culture of Mass Marketing, 1890-1939* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1996); David Monod, "Bay Days: The Managerial Revolution and the Hudson's Bay Company Department Stores, 1912-1939," *Canadian Historical Association Papers* (1986); Mary Catherine Matthews, "Working For Family, Nation and God: Paternalism and the Dupuis Frères Department Stores, Montreal, 1926-1952" (M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1997); Newell, "From Cloth to Clothing"; Michelle Comeau, "Les grands magasins de la rue Sainte-Catherine à Montréal: des lieux de modernisation, d'homogénéisation et de différenciation des modes de consommation," *Material History Review*, 41 (Spring 1995); Daniel Robinson, "Polling Consumers: The Rise of Market Research Surveys in Canada, 1929-1941," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 8 (1997); Cynthia Wright, "Feminine Trifles of Vast Importance: Writing Gender into the History of Consumption," *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*, F. Iacovetta and M. Valverde, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) 232.

<sup>18</sup>See Gerald Sider, *Class and Culture in anthropology and history: a Newfoundland illustration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); David Alexander,

consumption and the introduction of a consumer culture to St. John's around the turn of the twentieth century, have been eclipsed by the traditional view of Newfoundland as a peripheral society subject to the forces of economic dependency and the declining fortunes of the fishery.

This view has dogged Newfoundland throughout much of its history. As far back as 1922, D.R. Thistle, the editor of the *Trade Review*, complained that Sir Wilfred Grenfell's plan to "conduct a begging trip in England" would present "Newfoundland and Newfoundlanders to the outside world as a beggarly country and as a race of beggars" and would create "the impression abroad that the whole of Newfoundland is in dire distress and that all Newfoundlanders are a hungry and poverty-stricken crew." Although he was willing to admit that poverty did exist in Newfoundland, as it did elsewhere, Thistle believed there was quite a difference "between those conditions amongst the settlers on

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"Newfoundland's Traditional Economy and Development to 1934" and "The Collapse of the Saltfish Trade and Newfoundland's Integration into the North American Economy." *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: essays in interpretation*. James Hiller and Peter Neary, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); David Alexander, "Development and Dependence in Newfoundland, 1880-1970." *Atlantic Canada and Confederation: Essays in Canadian Political Economy*, compiled by Eric Sager, Lewis Fischer and Stuart Pierson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983); David Alexander, *The Decay of Trade: An Economic History of the Newfoundland Saltfish Trade, 1935-1965* (St. John's, NF: ISER, 1977); Steven Antler, "Colonial Exploitation and Economic Stagnation in Nineteenth-Century Newfoundland" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Connecticut, 1975); James K. Hiller, "The Newfoundland Credit System: An Interpretation." *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective*, Rosemary Ommer, ed. (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 1990).

Labrador and those which prevailed amongst the general population of Newfoundland."<sup>19</sup> Like the Newfoundland represented in Grenfell's fund-raising campaigns, the Newfoundland found in much of the scholarly writing to date is one populated largely by well-to-do merchants on the one side and fishing families living a hand-to-mouth existence on the other, with interactions between these disparate groups contained largely within the folds of the merchant's credit ledger.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Editorials, *Trade Review*, 26 August 1922 and 30 September 1922.

<sup>20</sup>See Sider, *Class and Culture in anthropology and history*; Sean Cadigan, *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay: Merchant-Settler Relations in Newfoundland, 1755-1855* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Antler, "Colonial Exploitation and Economic Stagnation"; Hiller, "The Newfoundland Credit System."

While the merchant class appear at the centre of many Newfoundland histories, especially those with political or economic themes, few have examined the mercantile elite outside of their involvement in the fishery or in the various levels of government. Although the Water Street stores feature largely in public memory in Newfoundland and are occasionally mentioned in popular histories of St. John's, there has been no scholarly examination of their operations or their role in the development of the local community and society. There are several histories commissioned by particular merchant firms or written by members of the families which owned them but these are largely anecdotal and, given the firms' extensive interests in the cod and seal fisheries, shipping, insurance and so on, the stores themselves receive little attention. See Paul O'Neill, *The Story of St. John's, Newfoundland*, Vols. 1 and 2 (Erin, Ont.: Press Porépic, 1975-1976); David Keir, *The Bowring Story* (London: Bodley Head, Ltd., 1962); Arthur Wardle, *Benjamin Bowring and his descendants* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940); Robert Brown Job, *John Job's Family, Devon-Newfoundland-Liverpool, 1730-1953*, 2nd ed. (St. John's, NF: The Telegram Printing Co., Ltd., 1954); Kenneth Kerr, "A Social Analysis of the Members of the Newfoundland House of Assembly, Executive Council, and Legislative Council for the period, 1855-1914 (M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1973); Keith Matthews, *Profiles of Water Street Merchants* (Maritime History Group, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1980); E.W. Sager, "The Merchants of Water Street and Capital Investment in Newfoundland's Traditional Economy," *The Enterprising Canadians: Entrepreneurs and Economic Development in Eastern Canada, 1820-1914*, L.R. Fischer and E.W. Sager, eds. (St. John's, NF: Memorial University of Newfoundland,

There is another, related image of Newfoundland perpetuated in the historiography which this thesis will confront, one that suggests "pre-confederation Newfoundland was thoroughly isolated from other societies" and the society that developed there "was not only distinct but socially self-contained and impervious to much contact."<sup>21</sup> Dating back to at least J.D. Rogers' 1911 history, *Newfoundland*, this belief that "immobility ... and a fixity of character" were essential characteristics of Newfoundlanders has persisted. Subsequent histories such as A.B. Perlin's *The Story of Newfoundland*, St. John Chadwick's *Newfoundland: Island into Province*, Susan McCorquodale's "Public Administration in Newfoundland during the period of Commission of Government," and Raymond Rowe's *Education & Culture in Newfoundland* perpetuate this stereotype, one which continues to crop up in more recent histories of Newfoundland.<sup>22</sup>

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1979); Robert Hong, "'An agency for the common weal': the Newfoundland Board of Trade, 1909-1915" (M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1998).

<sup>21</sup>Malcolm MacLeod has confronted this stereotype in *Crossroads Country: Memories of Pre-Confederation Newfoundland*, a collection of interviews with Newfoundlanders who came of age prior to 1949. It provides evidence of a British and North American influence on Newfoundland prior to Confederation through imported media such as newspapers, magazines and radio. Malcolm MacLeod, *Crossroads Country: Memories of Pre-Confederation Newfoundland* (St. John's, NF.: Breakwater Books, 1999) ix.

<sup>22</sup>J.D. Rogers, *Newfoundland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911) iv-v; A.B. Perlin, *The Story of Newfoundland* (Grand Falls, NF.: Anglo-Newfoundland Development Company, Ltd., 1959) 18; St. John Chadwick, *Newfoundland: Island into Province* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 19-28; Susan McCorquodale, "Public Administration in Newfoundland during the period of Commission of Government" (Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University, 1973) 209; Raymond Rowe, *Education & Culture in Newfoundland* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Press, 1976) 15; Shane O'Dea, "Newfoundland: The Development of Culture on the Margin," *Newfoundland Studies*, 10(1), (Spring 1994) 73-81.

The emphasis placed on the changes brought by World War II and the arrival of British, Canadian and, particularly, American servicemen in these works suggests it was a major transitional stage in the development of Newfoundland society leading to the conclusion that, prior to the 1940s, Newfoundlanders were, on the whole, ignorant of and unaffected by social change occurring elsewhere. In *The Political Economy of Newfoundland, 1929-1972*, Peter Neary argued that "Accepted values and modes of behavior were profoundly challenged [by the arrival of Canadian and American forces]. Newfoundlanders were given a glimpse of North American life that they had not had before, with devastating consequences for the old social order."<sup>23</sup> This theme is repeated in Neary's more recent work as well and has found its way into other histories of Newfoundland.<sup>24</sup> A fairer interpretation of the war's impact suggests the resulting social and cultural changes were felt more in the rural areas surrounding the bases in Argentia, Gander and Stephenville, than in St. John's. The significance of the war, therefore, was not its introduction of a North American way of life to Newfoundland "but rather the

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<sup>23</sup>Peter Neary, *The Political Economy of Newfoundland, 1929-1972* (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing, 1973) 67.

<sup>24</sup>Peter Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988) 236; Peter Neary, "A Garrison Country: Newfoundland and Labrador during the Second World War," *Dispatches*, issue 4 (April 1999) 4; Malcolm MacLeod, *Peace of the Continent: The Impact of Second World War Canadian and American Bases in Newfoundland* (St. John's, NF.: Harry Cuff Publications, Ltd., 1986) 42-3; Patrick O'Flaherty, *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979) 146-7; Raymond Blake, *Canadians at Last: Canada Integrates Newfoundland as a Province* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994) 3.

diffusion of these influences throughout the island."<sup>25</sup>

World War II brought North American consumer culture closer to home by bringing Newfoundlanders face to face with its representatives while also creating opportunities for wage labour thereby providing many with the wherewithal (i.e. cash) to adopt its values, but it did not introduce a culture that was completely foreign to local inhabitants. In St. John's, the colony's largest and most economically developed urban centre, the shift towards waged employment and a cash economy had begun much earlier, providing fertile ground for spreading consumerism. For this reason, St. John's is the primary focus of this study and, consequently, the Newfoundland depicted here is very different from the image of isolation and ignorance perpetuated by certain local histories. Contrary to the accepted view, Newfoundlanders living in the capital city, not to mention the many outport people who regularly visited to purchase provisions and those who ordered goods by mail, were sharing in the modern forces of urbanization, industrialization and mass consumption, albeit on a lesser scale than much of the western world, long before World War II.

At the centre of consumption in St. John's were the large Water Street stores. Due to their wealth and geographic location, the largest of the Water Street merchants came to dominate city and, by extension, island and Labrador trade. Their business interests were extensive and, in most cases, ran the gamut from the fishery to wholesale and retail trades.

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<sup>25</sup>I.M. Stewart, "The 'Revolution of 1940' in Newfoundland" (M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1974) 79-84.

from insurance to shipping. Many also had interests in mining and shares in public gas and water companies as well as in local manufactories. In the nineteenth century, this was a necessary response to the limited size of the local market, necessitating their involvement in a variety of trades.<sup>26</sup> For those firms with investments in the fisheries, however, that industry tended to dominate business, often hindering the development of other interests, particularly retailing. Retail expansion was also hindered by certain local traditions, in particular the persistence of credit which had long been an integral component of the fish trade.<sup>27</sup> In other cities, department stores dealt solely in cash enabling them to lower prices and obtain high rates of stock turnover, allowing owners to funnel profits back into their businesses for further expansion. Yet, with a crisis in the fishery and the introduction of new industries to the island in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the importance of the fishery declined and its influence on the city's retail trade became muted.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>"Newfoundland." Vol. 10, pp.16, 25, 35 and 45, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection (Baker Library, Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University). Hereafter cited as R.G. Dun & Co.

<sup>27</sup>Ironically, there is some suggestion that many Newfoundland merchants became involved in the fish trade simply because there was no other medium of exchange in Newfoundland and therefore no other means of their being paid for the goods they sold. Hiller quotes one British firm as having stated to its Newfoundland agents: "We wish you to understand that our business in Newfoundland is not to buy Fish but to sell goods, and that we only take Fish in payment because the Planters have no money to give us." Hiller, "The Newfoundland Credit System," 91.

<sup>28</sup>According to historian David Alexander, the "inshore salt cod industry dominated Newfoundland's economic history in the nineteenth century and continued to be the single most important source of employment and market income well into the twentieth century" but a crisis in the island's traditional economy in the late 1800s had led many St. John's

During the latter decades of the nineteenth century, then, the nature of the Newfoundland economy changed as the fishery declined and the results of industrialization reached the island. The mass production of new and cheaper goods in Britain and North America made "luxury" items more accessible to the average Newfoundlander: the Newfoundland government began turning its attention to diversifying the country's economy through the introduction of new industries offering alternative forms of investment and employment to that of the fishery; and, as part of its plan for development, the government, following leads in Britain, the U.S. and Canada, hired the Reid Company

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merchants to limit their investment in the fishery or, in some cases, to abandon it altogether in favour of retailing and other more profitable trades. For this reason, Alexander has charged that the fishery's decline was due to a failure to rationalize the industry as a result of this removal of capital: "The withdrawal of the merchant houses from the outports and from direct involvement in production, together with the absence of any rural banking structures, meant that the countryside was denuded of capital other than the short-term financing provided to fishing families by the agents or dependents of the St. John's firms to pursue the traditional fishery. The St. John's firms, after almost a century of withdrawal from direct involvement in production, and with a generally jaundiced view of the industry's prospects relative to the returns in wholesale and retail trade and safe overseas securities, were unlikely to supply capital either as direct or portfolio investors." Alexander, "Development and Dependence in Newfoundland, 1880-1970," 16; Alexander, "Newfoundland's Traditional Economy," 19-23; Rosemary Ommer, "Merchant Credit and the Informal Economy: Newfoundland 1918-1929," *Canadian Historical Association Papers* (1989) 187.

The argument that the merchant community neglected the fishery resulting in its collapse has been challenged by William Reeves who noted that attempts were made to modernize the industry around the turn of the twentieth century but these met with limited success due to inherent weaknesses in the colony's position in an international economy. William Reeves, "Alexander's Conundrum Revisited: The American Dimension in Newfoundland Resource Development, 1890-1910," *Newfoundland Studies*, 5(1), (Spring 1989) 1-38.



to build a railway.<sup>29</sup> The impact of these changes was felt mostly in the metropolis of St. John's and, later, in the few industrial towns - such as Wabana, Grand Falls, and Corner Brook - created as a result of the government's efforts to encourage the development of the island's resources.

In these centres, opportunities for waged labour outside the fishery contributed to the growth of a working class, employed in mines, factories and mills and in a service sector expanding to meet the needs of a rising urban population. The middle class also increased, employed in managing shops, offices and factories, and within the growing bureaucracy overseeing the government's development schemes. The rising numbers of people earning cash wages and the availability of cheaper goods expanded opportunities for retailers, a fact reflected in the changing nature of the island's imports which included a growing variety and a rising volume of non-staple, luxury goods.

The evolution of the St. John's retail trade reflects the changes taking place in the local economy and society as the practices and appearances of department stores tend to be shaped by local circumstances and traditions. Throughout much of the Water Street stores' early histories, to the turn of the twentieth century, the firms focused heavily on outport trade, eagerly anticipating the fall and spring visits of fishing schooners, sealers and outport merchants coming to buy provisions, fishing and sealing gear, and merchandise to carry back to their home towns. Although their business continued to be

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<sup>29</sup>David Alexander, "Newfoundland's Traditional Economy," 25-7.

of considerable importance to city retailers and wholesalers (often one and the same) well into the twentieth century. by the early 1900s members of the St. John's business community could see that the situation was changing.<sup>30</sup>

New businessmen, employing new methods and catering to city consumers, were entering the trade and introducing new modes of retailing already gaining prominence in the department stores of Europe and North America. The growing popularity of low, fixed prices, fast turnover of stock, cash-only policies, sales, promotions, extensive advertising, and an emphasis on customer service and store appearance, meant that the old-time merchant had to adapt in order to survive or get out of the trade altogether. The loss of wholesale business as small retailers began buying direct from manufacturers or from Nova Scotian wholesalers as well as the loss of mail order business to Canadian and American catalogues provided additional incentives to alter their operations. So, while Water Street merchants may have made a conscious decision to limit their financial involvement in an uncertain fishery, a decision David Alexander argues contributed to the industry's further decline, simple self-interest was not their sole motivation.<sup>31</sup> Criticized

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<sup>30</sup>Although most department stores shared a number of common characteristics such as varied merchandise, departmental organization, fixed prices, and cash-only policies, they also differed due to variations in the economies and cultures of the cities in which they developed. The nature of a store's clientele, for example, usually shaped its merchandising practices as Michelle Comeau argued was the case for department stores in Montreal, depending on whether they catered to French or English shoppers and to the elite or the general public. Barth, *City People*, 112; Comeau, "Les grands magasins," 64-7.

<sup>31</sup>See footnote 28.

for focusing their attentions on expanding and modernizing their retail establishments at the expense of the fishery, this study illustrates that the Water Street merchants of St. John's were motivated as much by survival as by profit. They were, in fact, responding not just to local conditions but to forces which were also shaping the retail trades of most urban centres in Europe and North America.

In turn, store owners' efforts to modernize their retail operations influenced local patterns of consumption. Rising interest among St. John's merchants in the retailing of goods to city consumers in this period contributed to the development of a consumer culture. It is debatable whether the growth of a wage-earning population seeking goods to buy encouraged retailers to expand their operations, or if retailers raised consumer demand by increasing the supply and variety of goods they sold. Both were no doubt factors which contributed to increased consumption rates as retailers, recognizing the rising concentration of wage-earning consumers in St. John's, sought to capitalize upon the potential for profit by adopting new merchandising techniques to encourage buying. In so doing, they helped alter the consuming habits of many city dwellers so that consumption became an increasingly important aspect of the local culture, a development central to this thesis and the argument that Newfoundlanders were not wholly ignorant of life on the North American mainland on the eve of World War II.

As British historian John Benson points out, however, there are a number of problems inherent in such attempts to study consumer societies, one being to define the term "consumer society." As an economic definition, he suggests it is a society in which

the economy is "directed by the purchasing decisions of millions of individual consumers." He also provides a socio-cultural definition, describing it as a society in which "choice and credit are readily available, in which social value is defined in terms of purchasing power and material possessions, and in which there is a desire, above all, for that which is new, modern, exciting and fashionable."<sup>32</sup> As a result, many commodities once considered "luxuries" become "necessities" and goods are prized for being novel rather than durable.<sup>33</sup> As Newfoundland has historically produced few of the goods consumed locally, most products being imported primarily from Britain and North America, Benson's economic definition has little meaning in this context for consumer choice had little impact on local production. From a social and cultural perspective, however, "consumer society" is a fitting term to describe some of the changes taking place in St. John's over the period of study.

The factors contributing to the development of consumer cultures and societies - urbanization, industrialization, new modes of transportation (railway, street car, motor vehicles), rising production, improved standards of living, and a revolution in retailing - have been thoroughly examined elsewhere.<sup>34</sup> All of these were present to varying degrees

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<sup>32</sup>Benson. *The Rise of Consumer Society*: 3-4.

<sup>33</sup>McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb. *The Birth of Consumer Society*. 1.

<sup>34</sup>A number of studies have explored the nature and causes of the retail revolution taking place in the cities of western Europe and North America in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It involved the expansion of small, specialty shops, usually selling dry goods, into large stores selling a wide variety of merchandise organized by department.

in St. John's as the colonial government attempted to encourage economic diversification by fostering the development of new industries and building a railway in the late nineteenth century. European and North American industrialization, however, were perhaps just as important, if not more so, to consumption in Newfoundland as it made imported mass-produced goods cheaper and more readily available. The introduction of regular steamship service in the 1890s was another significant development which allowed retailers and wholesalers to order and receive shipments of merchandise quickly and frequently. The arrival of the streetcar in St. John's in the early 1900s also had an impact as it made Water Street more accessible to shoppers from different parts of the city. While initially boosting trade, however, motor vehicles eventually contributed to the demise of the Water Street stores as downtown parking became a problem by mid-century.

All of these factors enabled and encouraged rising consumption in St. John's but, in general, Newfoundland's small, scattered population, its distance from foreign markets and sources of goods, continued economic reliance on primary industries (fishery, forestry, mining) and constrained capital, limited the impact of these forces on the local society. It will be argued, however, that each existed in sufficient degree to alter the nature of consumption in St. John's, and to varying extents, the rest of the island. These and other

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with fixed prices, cash-only policies, extensive advertising, and new merchandising and promotional techniques such as window displays and sales. See John Ferry, *A History of the Department Store* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1960); Pasdermajian, *The Department Store*; Lancaster, *The Department Store*.

economic changes taking place in Newfoundland throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century alerted city merchants to the need for more modern retailing techniques. The large Water Street stores were the primary benefactors of the increase in consumer activity resulting from the expansion of the city's working and middle classes, eventually reaching the status of department stores as they enlarged their operations and their supply of goods and services to meet the rising demands of consumers. As a model of up-to-date retailing, the owners of the Water Street stores turned to the North American department store as a guide in modernizing their businesses.<sup>35</sup>

While the importance of department stores in the creation of consumer societies should not be exaggerated, many scholars see the department store as central to the

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<sup>35</sup>Greater exposure to North American retailing practices due to increased trade with the U.S. and Canada was an important factor influencing the St. John's business community. Although the stores had regularly sent buyers to England, they generally bought American merchandise from visiting representatives of American wholesalers. But by the early years of the twentieth century, they also had buyers visit the United States and Canada, giving them an opportunity to survey firsthand conditions in the North American markets. Some St. John's retailers had also worked for American and Canadian firms and even those without outside retail experience were exposed to new merchandising techniques and practices through articles from North American trade journals reprinted in local periodicals.

It is not surprising, then, that during this period, many in Newfoundland's business and political elite seemed to equate 'American' with 'modern.' Reeves points out, for example, that, in the early 1900s, merchants involved in the fishery looked to the U.S. for guidance in modernizing the industry and that for Prime Minister Bond, "... reciprocity with Americans meant a fuller participation by Newfoundland in the 'modern world.'" Reeves, "Alexander's Conundrum Revisited," 1-38; Reeves, "Aping the 'American Type': The Politics of Development in Newfoundland, 1900-1908," *Newfoundland Studies*, 10(1), (Spring 1994) 44.

"development of modern consumerism."<sup>36</sup> It will be argued, therefore, that by adopting modern retailing techniques and importing elements of an American consumer culture to sell goods, the stores were responding to the social and economic changes taking place in Newfoundland as well as in much of the industrializing west, encouraging the creation of a consumer society. At the same time, however, their efforts to shape and direct consumer spending were also hindered, however, by economic realities and the public's willingness to heed store advice and dictates. Yet, whether or not most St. John's shoppers could afford to participate fully in the consumer society developing around them by consuming goods is not as important as their exposure to and identification with its values. Contrary to certain oft-repeated assumptions, the evidence suggests that Newfoundlanders were not a "race of beggars" or a "poverty-stricken crew," revelling in their isolated and ignorant state prior to World War II and Confederation, but a people experiencing many of the changes shaping modern societies in western Europe and North America around the turn of the twentieth century.

Consequently, this study makes reference to the concept of modernity, utilized by a number of American scholars as an explanatory model for the changes taking place in American society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>37</sup> Although some

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<sup>36</sup>Simon Gunn, "The Public Sphere, Modernity and Consumption," 21. See also W.H. Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market, 1850-1914* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1981); Ferry, *A History of the Department Store*; Pasdermadjian, *The Department Store*.

<sup>37</sup>See Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967); T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of*

question the utility of using a model based on a set of dichotomous terms (i.e. 'traditional' and 'modern') suggesting it is ambiguous, reductionist, deterministic and value-laden. Others defend it as a useful tool in discussing socio-economic change in the U.S. and elsewhere during the period. Admittedly, no society perfectly fits either the traditional or modern model as most exhibit elements of each, but it has been argued that societies can be classified as one or the other based on a preponderance of characteristics providing a convenient and flexible way of examining the interplay of socio-economic developments within and between societies.<sup>38</sup>

In making reference to aspects of modernization theory, this thesis follows in the footsteps of William Reeves' study of the American influence on attempts to develop the Newfoundland fishery in which he argues that the connections linking Newfoundland and the United States have long been obscured by the colony's ties to Britain and later Canada.

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*American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

Miriam Wright provides a good overview of the evolution of modernization theory in her study of its influence on the Canadian government's Atlantic fishery policy. She suggests early twentieth-century sociologists, such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, were central to the development of the traditional-modern dichotomy which grew out of nineteenth-century evolutionary theory's assumption that "society was progressing in a linear pattern toward a higher level of biological, moral or social existence ...". The concept was later taken up by economists such as W.W. Rostow, Bert Hoselitz, and Francois Perroux who devised theories which attempted to establish a series of economic stages by which traditional societies became modern. Miriam Wright, "The Smile of Modernity": The State and the Modernization of the Canadian Atlantic Fishery, 1945-1970" (M.A. thesis, Queen's University, 1990) 1-12.

<sup>38</sup>William Reeves, "Our Yankee Cousins": Modernization and the Newfoundland-American Relationship, 1898-1910" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Maine, 1987) 4-5; Wright, "The Smile of Modernity," 1-12.



By emphasizing the "cross-cultural interconnections" between Newfoundland and the U.S., Reeves raises questions about "Newfoundland's place in a rapidly modernizing world," a world being shaped by the export of American ideas, practices and products.<sup>39</sup> This study of the evolution of the local retail trade provides another opportunity to further test this thesis by illustrating the influence of American retailing practices and attitudes towards consumption on Newfoundland retailers and consumers.

Reeves's work provides a useful discussion of the differences between traditional and modern societies and a few of the more relevant characteristics of each are highlighted here. While traditional societies tend to be stable (predictable with little change) and dominated by localism, chronic underdevelopment, hierarchical social organization characterized by deference and paternalism, and a high degree of religiosity; modern societies are subject to rapid change, dislocation, technological innovation, secularization, and social and geographic mobility. Although imperfect models, these concepts reflect the general state of affairs in Newfoundland and the United States around the turn of the twentieth century and are useful tools in explorations of the "interconnections" between the two societies.<sup>40</sup> While in many ways Newfoundland society, even that of St. John's, remained traditional throughout the period of study, it was still heavily influenced by

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<sup>39</sup>Reeves, "Our Yankee Cousins," 2-3; Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

<sup>40</sup>Reeves, "Our Yankee Cousins," 3-9.

modern American society.

As this thesis will demonstrate, there were threads of a modern consumer culture appearing in the fabric of traditional Newfoundland society despite the absence of certain conditions typically associated with modernity. Although the degree of social mobility in St. John's was still quite limited in this period, there is evidence of the growing importance of goods as symbols of status suggesting the influence of American values and practices on local consumer behaviour. This no doubt had a significant impact on the growth and development of retailing in the city, contributing, in particular, to the expansion of the large Water Street stores. Influenced also by developments within the North American retail trade due to their ties to American and Canadian wholesalers and retailers, the Water Street stores imported both products and merchandising methods, in turn influencing local patterns of consumption. Therefore, even though St. John's society was in many ways traditional, offering its citizens a relatively static, predictable environment with little social or geographic mobility and, consequently, a stronger sense of community and identity, elements of a North American consumer culture were still evident in the retailing practices of city stores and, relatedly, in the shopping habits of local consumers.

#### Literature Review

Until recently, the historiography of the department store has been dominated by what may be termed "store biographies," their aim being to celebrate the successes of various retail entrepreneurs, their authors consumed by the challenge of proving theirs was

the world's first department store.<sup>41</sup> These were followed by more general histories of the department store focusing on the changing nature of retailing in the nineteenth century culminating in a retail revolution epitomized by these merchandising giants.<sup>42</sup> By the early 1980s, a number of historians had begun advocating examinations of the external factors contributing to the development of the department store "almost simultaneously in the United States and Europe," arguing that "The best histories of retailing would not be institutional history, but social and economic history broadly conceived."<sup>43</sup> Described by one historian as a "necessary form of enterprise," the department store is seen as "one of the most characteristic forms through which the new forces released by the industrial

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<sup>41</sup>Newell, "From Cloth to Clothing," 1-2.

<sup>42</sup>Influenced by the popularity of Social-Darwinism in the first half of the twentieth century, such studies viewed the department store as the superior product of retail evolution. This view declined along with the fortunes of the department store which waned in the 1950s and 1960s as it began losing ground to discount stores and specialty shops, resulting in a number of business studies seeking to address the problem of flagging growth. See Ferry, *A History of the Department Store*; Ralph Hower, *History of Macy's of New York, 1858-1919: Chapters in the Evolution of the Department Store* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1943); Pasdermadjian, *The Department Store*; Barry Bluestone, Patricia Hanna, Sarah Kuhn and Laura Moore, *The Retail Revolution: Market Transformation, Investment and Labor in the Modern Department Store* (Boston: Auburn House Publishing Co., 1981); Malcolm McNair and Eleanor May, *The American Department Store, 1920-1960: A Performance Analysis based on the Harvard Reports* (Boston: Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University, 1981); Ronald Stampfl and Elizabeth Hirschman, eds., *Competitive Structure in Retail Markets: The Department Store Perspective* (Chicago: American Marketing Association, 1980).

<sup>43</sup>Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981) 30-1; Peter Samson, "The Department Store, Its Past and Its Future: A Review Article," *Business History Review*, 55(1), (Spring 1981) 31; Newell, "From Cloth to Clothing," 1-2.

revolution sought expression."<sup>44</sup>

More recent studies have examined the department store's role in the creation of a consumer culture and, in turn, its impact on the relationship between people and goods. One reason for this shift in focus is the growing interest of scholars in gender, leisure activities and the development of consumer capitalism.<sup>45</sup> For many, the changes associated with rising rates of consumption have been largely negative. While some argue that the stores have brought luxuries and conveniences to those who could never have otherwise afforded them (i.e. the democratization of luxury),<sup>46</sup> others charge that they have aided in the creation of a culture that equates happiness with material possessions, status with tangible affluence.<sup>47</sup> Some scholars now argue, however, that consumption should be seen as an "emancipating" force in terms of "the possibilities it offers for the creation of new identities."<sup>48</sup>

In the 1980s, then, studies of the department store have become increasingly

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<sup>44</sup>Pasdermajian, *The Department Store*, 7.

<sup>45</sup>Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 1.

<sup>46</sup>Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 107; Pasdermajian, *The Department Store*, 124-7.

<sup>47</sup>William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) xiii-xiv.

<sup>48</sup>Gunn, "The Public Sphere, Modernity and Consumption," 21; James Livingston, "Modern Subjectivity and Consumer Culture," *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920*, Simon J. Bronner, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989) 413-5, 423-5.

critical, adopting interdisciplinary approaches (political, social, cultural, and economic) in an effort to gauge the department store's impact on society. Michael B. Miller's *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* was one of the earliest works to adopt such an approach. Its aim was to illustrate the role of the department store in turning bourgeois culture into a culture of consumption throughout France. Miller suggests that the department store alone did not create consumer society but

As an economic mechanism it made that society possible, and as an institution with a large provincial trade it made the culture of consumption a national one. Above all, as a business enterprise predicated upon mass retailing, it played an active role in cultivating consumption as a way of life among the French bourgeoisie.<sup>49</sup>

Through catalogues, advertising, entertainments and displays, the Bon Marché in Paris created an image of respectable middle-class lifestyle to be emulated by its customers: in fact, it made bourgeois culture a purchasable commodity. Consequently, Miller rejects the claim that the department store led to the democratization of luxury as its focus has always been the middle class.<sup>50</sup>

Since the publication of Miller's work, there has been a growing interest in writing social/business histories which focus on the role of the department store in influencing, and producing, culture.<sup>51</sup> In *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in*

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<sup>49</sup>Miller. *The Bon Marché*. 165-6.

<sup>50</sup>Miller. *The Bon Marché*. 11, 15, 48, 182-4, 237.

<sup>51</sup>Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain. "The world of the department store: distribution, culture and social change." *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European*

*American Department Stores, 1890-1940*. Susan Porter Benson studies the interface between labour, class and gender, arguing that in the department store, class and gender intersected so that interactions between customers, managers and saleswomen helped shape the role played by the department store in creating a culture of consumption for which neither group was solely responsible. She concludes that store managers were prevented from directly manipulating customers' buying habits due to the hiring of saleswomen as "middlemen" to deal with middle-class female shoppers. By resisting store managers' attempts to control their work and shopping habits, both salesladies and customers had an impact on the development of American department stores and so were not, as some suggest, the passive victims or prey of an advancing consumerism directed by American business.<sup>52</sup>

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*Department Store, 1850-1939*. Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain, eds. (Aldershot, Eng.: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1999) 1.

<sup>52</sup>There are few studies of retail workers as labour historians have exhibited little interest in the occupation, largely because of low rates of unionization and the predominance of women. Some exceptions include McBride's articles on salesladies in France and Reekie's discussion of store owners' attempts to control their staffs through various labour relations schemes in Australia. In Canada, there are several studies of attempts to organize Eaton's employees and a thesis out of McGill on workers at the Dupuis Frères department store in Montreal. Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986) 2-3, 283-8; Theresa McBride, "Ni Bourgeoises, Ni Proletaires: Women Sales Clerks, 1870-1920," *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, 5 (1977) 240; Theresa McBride, "A woman's world: department stores and the evolution of women's employment, 1870-1920," *French Historical Studies*, 10 (Fall 1978); Gail Reekie, "'Humanizing Industry': Paternalism, welfarism and labour control in Sydney's big stores, 1890-1930," *Labour History* (Australia), Vol. 53 (November 1987); Matthews, "Working

Unlike Benson's store managers whose attempts to control consumer behaviour were weakened by customer and worker resistance, Gail Reekie, in *Temptations: Sex, Selling and the Department Store*, argues that the sexualized selling practised by department store managers, mainly men, has shaped Australian society's views of gender. Using courtship practices as a model, Reekie illustrates how such practices were repeated in the department store: male managers "wooded" female customers in their stores, where their desires were aroused and the seduction, if the customer made a purchase, was concluded. Reekie charges that by creating displays and organizing their stores along sexual lines, department store managers, unconsciously and in concert with pop media, defined what it was to be male and female, thereby perpetuating male dominance.<sup>53</sup>

Yet another view of the intersection between gender and class in relation to the rise of the department store is presented in Elaine Abelson's *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* which also looks at consumer society's construction of gender. While Benson gave the women in *Counter Cultures* a

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For Family, Nation and God": Eileen Sufrin, *The Eaton Drive: The Campaign to Organize Canada's Largest Department Store, 1948-1952* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1982); Bradley Pragnell, *Organizing Department Store Workers: the case of the RWDSU at Eaton's, 1983-1987* (Kingston, Ont.: Industrial Relations Centre, Queen's University, 1989); Ruth A. Frager, "Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Eaton Strikes of 1912 and 1934," *Gender Conflicts*.

<sup>53</sup>Gail Reekie, *Temptations: Sex, Selling and the Department Store* (St. Leonards, Aus.: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd., 1993), xiv-xvii, 148-154, 173-6. For a similar discussion of femininity, commodities and consumption in Canada, see Robyn Dowling, "Femininity, Place and Commodities: A Retail Case Study," *Antipode*, 25(4), (1993) 295-319.

certain degree of autonomy in their relationship with the department store. Abelson argues that the role of middle-class women in the Victorian era was defined largely by society's views of gender, class and consumption. Prior to the rise of the department store, middle-class women's responsibility for the care of their families centred mainly around home-production. With increasing availability of factory-made goods in department stores, previously home-made goods became purchasable commodities and "assuming responsibility for consumption, women shopped." Yet, the aim of department stores was not simply to meet the needs of consumers but to create a desire to buy more. By creating an environment of luxury and elegance, department stores gave an impression of "trouble-free abundance" that encouraged women to want. This, according to Abelson, in combination with middle-class notions of status through consumption, encouraged unrestrained spending and, in some cases, shoplifting.<sup>54</sup> Physicians labelled female shoplifters "kleptomaniacs" and society's view of women and women's view of themselves became increasingly tied to their bodies in that such "manias" arose from the biological weakness and, therefore, the inferiority of women.<sup>55</sup>

Other scholars have focused less on the gendered nature of consumption, examining instead the impact of the department store on society as a whole and its contribution to the creation of a consumer culture which has come to dominate much of

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<sup>54</sup>Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 3-6.

<sup>55</sup>Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving*, 7-9, 174, 187.



Europe and North America. William Leach's *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* makes the claim that the department store, and more widely American business, has had a profound impact on development of culture in the United States and the influence of Thorstein Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption is obvious in Leach's critique of the resulting consumer society. Veblen, known for his "sharp, penetrating, mocking analysis of America's new economic elite in the late nineteenth century," argued that consumption has not only an economic impact but a cultural one as well. By the late 1800s, consumption had become an indicator of status and the 'orgies of display' common to the upper class - which Veblen termed "conspicuous consumption" - were being emulated by the rest of society.<sup>56</sup> Others have since argued that Veblen's theories advocate a "top-down model of cultural domination" which dismisses "all sensuous or material cultural forms."<sup>57</sup> Despite this recent rethinking of the Veblen perspective, Leach, in *Land of Desire*, argues that national corporations, mass

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<sup>56</sup>In contrast to those who see the democratization of luxury in the department store, Leach argues that democracy implies consent but that this culture of consumption is not consensual as it did not come from the people. Instead, it was created by business elites interested in making profits. Furthermore, it supports only one view of the good life and is, therefore, not democratic. According to Leach, the department store was a symbol of a new consumer society, its success guaranteed by its alliances with government, merchants and reformers. This is clearly a departure from the earlier view of the department store as revolutionary but also as the natural evolution of the retail industry. Leach, *Land of Desire*, 4-7, 15, 26-7.

<sup>57</sup>Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 159-60; Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Fairfield, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley, Publishers, 1991) 81-100; T.J. Jackson Lears, "Beyond Veblen. Rethinking consumer culture in America," *Consuming Visions*, 73-5.

market retailers (department stores), and banks have transformed American society into a consumer society hostile to tradition, creating a dominant culture in which the "good life" is equated with the ownership of goods.<sup>58</sup>

In *The Department Store: A Social History*, Bill Lancaster warns that theories like those proposed by Leach are too simplistic in their generalizations about consumers who defy "the embraces of even the most complex social scientific models." He also argues that women were not brainwashed by advertising and aggressive merchandising as Abelson and Reekie have suggested and that writers in the Marxist tradition, such as Stuart Ewen who claimed that modern conveniences had stripped women of their domestic skills forcing them to rely on beauty for a sense of self-worth, present women as "passive economic actors."<sup>59</sup> Lancaster suggests that women were much more rational in their spending habits than they have often been given credit for and concludes that it was the freedom and anonymity afforded to women shopping in large crowds which created

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<sup>58</sup>In the mid-1970s, Stuart Ewen had proposed a similar argument regarding the use of advertising in creating a consumer culture in the United States. Like Veblen and later Leach, he saw the roots of consumerism in American business. No longer were American businessmen satisfied with being the captains of industry, by the 1920s they had become "Captains of Consciousness" in their attempts to create a cooperative workforce through a program of socialization centred around consumption and promoted by advertising. The main difference between their theories is that Leach shies away from the idea of a capitalist conspiracy while Ewen states that the creation of a consumer culture was the expressed aim of American business. Leach, *Land of Desire*, xiii-xiv; Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976) 19, 79-82.

<sup>59</sup>Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 172.

unease in patriarchal society, leading to such criticism.<sup>60</sup>

Although department stores and consumer culture have attracted significant attention in the U.S. and Europe in recent decades, in Canada these subjects still await adequate exploration despite Cynthia Wright's call for a gender- and class-based examination of shopping in Canada.<sup>61</sup> Joy Santink has published perhaps the only scholarly study devoted solely to the development of the department store in Canada. In her examination of the early history of Eaton's, Canada's preeminent department store for much of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Santink briefly discusses the external factors such as urbanization, industrialization and improved transportation which contributed to the firm's success in the city of Toronto and, later, throughout much of the country. Eaton's exponential growth is attributed primarily to the shrewd business sense

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<sup>60</sup>Lancaster. *The Department Store*. 159-69, 171-92.

<sup>61</sup>Wright. "Feminine Trifles of Vast Importance," 232. Also see footnote 17.

Wright's 1992 thesis offers a starting point for Canadian historians in that it examines the intersection of class and gender in one of Eaton's Toronto stores by looking at the construction of middle-class womanhood. Dianne Dodd has also made a contribution with her study of Hydro Electric Power Commission of Ontario advertisements which, she argues, implied the democratization of consumption through the availability of electrical appliances that would ease the work of housewives while lending the impression of prosperity. According to Dodd, this would mean continued male dominance of technological advancement as well as the compliance of the working class in producing and purchasing such conveniences. Cynthia Wright, "The Most Prominent Rendezvous of the Feminine Toronto: Eaton's College Street and the Organization of Shopping in Toronto, 1920-1950" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1992); Dianne Dodd, "Delivering Electrical Technology to the Ontario Housewife, 1920-1939: An Alliance of Professional Women, Advertisers and the Electrical Industry" (Ph.D. thesis, Carleton University, 1988).

of its owner, as evidenced by the reinvestment of profits into the store and the targeting of a new market, the working class. Consequently, *Timothy Eaton and the rise of his department store* is largely a traditional business history and includes little discussion of the company's role in the creation of a consumer culture in Canada or its impact on society.<sup>62</sup>

One of the most recent works on retailing in Canada provides a counterbalance to Santink's study in that it focuses on some of the department store's most vocal opponents. Also unlike Santink's book, David Monod's *Store Wars: Shopkeepers and the Culture of Mass Marketing, 1890-1939* raises questions about culture although it is primarily an examination of petit bourgeois culture rather than consumer culture. In tracing the opposition of small business to the retail revolution, Monod argues that, contrary to popular belief, these businesses were not destroyed by competition from mass merchandisers but evolved in order to survive and that the threat from mass merchandisers was more perceived than real.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Santink, *Timothy Eaton*.

<sup>63</sup>While this is the thrust of Monod's argument, he also includes a brief but interesting discussion of the feminization of consumption in keeping with Reekie's examination of sexualized selling in Australia and Abelson's study of the female shoplifter. Monod argues that in the latter half of the nineteenth century, shopping was seen not as a necessity, but as a female pastime, noting that women were prevented from actually participating in the largely male domain of shopkeeping because they were seen as 'fickle' and male retailers were considered necessary to keep women's buying urges under control. As Monod writes, "Selling came to involve grave and manly social obligations," and like Reekie, he uses courting terms to illustrate the sexualized nature of shopping with department stores being described as "corporate 'seducers'" despite attempts to dispel their "Lothario image."

While it has been slow to gain a foothold in Canada, the study of consumption and consumer culture have clearly acquired many adherents among American and European academics, a situation reflected in the historiography of the department store. Unlike early institutional histories, many recent studies have begun to explore nineteenth-century concerns for morality and tradition in order to determine the impact of the department store on society, culture and gender identity. Such works seek to uncover the realities behind these concerns, to determine the extent to which the department store has shaped the landscape of society and its role in the rise of a consumer culture which has come to dominate much of the western world.

#### Sources and Chapter Outline

Historians of retailing and consumerism have often lamented the limited sources available to them but argue such studies should not be discounted, suggesting scholars just need to be more imaginative in the kind of evidence they use. While those who have compiled histories of large firms like Sears, Macy's, and Marshall Field's have been fortunate in having access to extensive company records, others have come to rely upon alternative sources such as trade journals, newspaper advertisements, store catalogues, and photographs in writing retail and consumer history. In fact, business historians who have utilized company records to the exclusion of other evidence, as a result ignoring the

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Monod, *Store Wars*, 1-15, 44-6, 116-7.

wider world in which companies operated, have been criticized for not considering the impact of external socio-economic factors on business development.<sup>44</sup>

There is little fear of the latter charge being levelled in this instance as, among the Water Street firms discussed in this study, only Bowring Brothers and Job Brothers have left archival collections of any significance. Although relatively large, there is actually limited relevant material in these collections due in part to the firms' extensive business interests. As a result, many of the reports, letters and ledgers contained in the collections refer to the cod and seal fisheries, shipping, and insurance. Despite this, they do offer some important insights into the attitudes and actions of the firms' owners and into their plans for retail expansion. In this regard, the Bowring Family Papers, primarily a collection of personal letters written between family members held at the Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives (CNSA), have proven invaluable.

Due to the paucity of records for the Water Street stores, I have therefore relied heavily on contemporary descriptions of the businesses found in travel literature, newspapers, trade journals and credit reports as well as store ads and magazines in writing this thesis. Where possible, I have attempted to supplement this information with personal accounts of experiences either working or shopping in the stores, some contemporary, found in letters and published sources, and others from recent interviews conducted with

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<sup>44</sup>Samson, "The Department Store, Its Past and Its Future," 26-7, 31; Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck, *Catalogues and Counters: a History of Sears, Roebuck and Company* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950); Hower, *History of Macy's*; Twyman, *History of Marshall Field's*.

informants having some connection with the stores during the period of study. Another valuable source, one particularly complimentary to a subject in which surroundings, appearances and layouts are extremely important, are photographs of the stores, store owners and sales staffs which are dispersed throughout the thesis, providing visual evidence for the arguments being presented.

Additional sources include the census, used as evidence of a growing St. John's consumer base, and customs returns which indicate a rising standard of living in Newfoundland as the nature and volume of imports change. Directories and city and fire insurance maps have also been consulted as indicators of retail development and store expansion as owners attempted to meet and further increase the demands of city consumers by enlarging their premises and opening branch stores. House of Assembly debates over proposed government legislation to regulate store hours provide insight into labour relations in the retail trade and the early closing movement. In the absence of extensive store records, Board of Trade reports provide some indication of the business community's perceptions of and concerns about local trade.

The nature of available sources and trends within the historiography have contributed to this being primarily a social history of the large Water Street stores rather than a traditional business history. Like Miller's history of the Bon Marché in Paris, it is not "concerned with questions of entrepreneurship, investment, growth, markets, private

and public constraints, and the like."<sup>65</sup> Rather, it seeks to examine business enterprise as reflective of the economic and social changes taking place while also considering how institutions like the department store, in turn, help shape society and culture. As a result, its focus - unlike many early business histories - is less the personalities behind the stores and more retailers' response to developments in the retail trade, both within and outside of Newfoundland, and their role in the introduction of a consumer culture to St. John's.

Because it seeks to break new ground, the thesis begins with an exploration of the evolution of retailing and consumption in St. John's around the turn of the twentieth century. A short preface at the beginning of Part I outlines the early history of St. John's and the Water Street stores, providing context for the discussion which follows. Chapters in this section examine the changes taking place in the retail trade as a result of new methods of transport, the introduction of new industries and alternative sources of employment outside the fishery, the increasing production and, more importantly, importation of new and varied goods, and the rising standard of living experienced by the city's growing working and middle classes. The diversion of outport trade from city firms resulting from the transferral of business to North American wholesalers and catalogues is also examined. The focus of these chapters, then, is on the development of the Water Street stores and the adoption of modern retailing techniques signifying their status as department stores in response to changing economic and social conditions.

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<sup>65</sup>Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 6-7.



The study starts in 1892, during the aftermath of the Great Fire which destroyed much of the city's business community, resulting in the wholesale reconstruction of Water Street's mercantile establishments. It had become clear to the city's business community in preceding years that trading patterns were changing in Newfoundland, requiring that they adapt to a new economic environment, and their post-fire retail establishments reflect this knowledge. World War I is a convenient starting point for Chapter Two as store owners were somewhat distracted from the expansions and modernizations characterizing the two previous decades by the international conflict and their role in the colony's war effort. Increased exposure to North American trends and practices in the 1920s and '30s and rising competition from new stores and foreign catalogues, however, gave retailers an incentive to resume efforts to attract customers and encourage consumption through the adoption and adaptation of new merchandising methods. Chapter Three begins in 1939 and explores the development of the stores throughout the 1940s, providing evidence that, while World War II heightened the influence of a North American lifestyle on local society, it did not introduce previously unknown habits or values. Although an important decade in Newfoundland's social, cultural and economic development, the '40s did not, in this regard, constitute a watershed period as has long been thought.

While Part I is arranged chronologically, Part II takes a thematic approach to the subject of consumer culture and the role of the St. John's department store in its introduction to the local society by examining its impact on the groups most affected. In these chapters, the evolving modes of retailing in St. John's are used as a lens through

which to view some of the socio-cultural changes taking place as the island adapts to a pervasive and highly influential consumer culture.

Chapter Four looks at the practice of retailing and the experience of consumption in St. John's during the period from a class perspective. Did the stores help democratize luxury as many of their admirers and defenders have argued, thereby enabling working-class consumers to experience the "benefits" of mass consumption and allowing them to participate fully in the consumer society developing around them? Or in joining the middle class in consuming an ever-expanding array of material goods, was the working class simply trying to emulate their social "betters" thereby contributing to the destruction of their class consciousness as Ewen argued? Or, similarly, were they aiding in their own subordination to the dominant historical bloc by adopting its values and behaviour thereby reaffirming the distribution of goods and power in society according to the concept of cultural hegemony?

Chapter Five explores the gendered nature of consumption, focusing on women as the primary consumers in modern society. While shopping in the department store gave women not only a public role but a position of authority within the home as the person who made most of the purchasing decisions, it also reaffirmed traditional gender roles with woman as housewife and man as breadwinner. Despite their economic importance and the importance of their budgetary skills in making ends meet and meeting the needs of their families, women shoppers were characterized by retailers, advertisers and the press as fickle, wasteful, and erratic with shopping seen as a non-productive, leisure activity.

Recognition of women as the primary consumers, therefore, did not necessarily entail recognition of the time, skills and energy which went into analyzing the rhetoric of advertisers and retailers, evaluating the merchandise on offer, and selecting goods which fit the family budget but which also allowed the family to present the correct image to the rest of society.

Although recipients of only a fleeting mention in most histories of consumerism, retail workers were also affected by rising consumption and the expansion of the Water Street stores which resulted in the feminization and bureaucratization of store staffs. Consequently, no study of the stores and their impact on the local society would be complete without considering the consequences of changes to retailing for clerks and salesladies, the subjects of Chapter Six. As the stores grew to meet the socio-economic challenges accompanying urbanization, industrialization, and increased exposure to North American retailing practices and consuming habits, the number of workers employed in the stores rose necessitating new methods of labour management. At the same time, the number of salesladies increased significantly while that of clerks decreased proportionately. Shifts in the size and composition of store staffs necessitated the hierarchical organization of employees to compensate for the hiring of inexperienced workers and the inability of owners to adequately supervise them. This, along with downturns in the economy, government regulation and unionization, contributed to the adaptation of paternalistic methods of labour control to suit changing conditions in the retail sector, significantly altering the relationship between worker and owner.

The study ends in 1949 as Confederation introduces several new factors contributing to and further altering patterns of consumption in Newfoundland. Particularly important were the island's incorporation into Canadian political, social and economic spheres, the influx of Canadian business and capital, and the injection of federal money through development schemes and social welfare programs. The changes accompanying Newfoundland's adoption of provincial status created a host of new conditions, briefly discussed in the conclusion, which encouraged already established trends and led business in new directions which would shape the destinies of the large Water Street stores until their demise in the 1970s and '80s.

**Part I: The Evolution of Retailing  
in St. John's, Newfoundland, 1892-1949**

Since department stores are shaped by their economic environments, local traditions and cultural practices, it is important to consider the particular context in which each arose. Early St. John's department stores were no exception to this rule and their development was, in fact, very much influenced by the nature of the Newfoundland economy and society. It is, therefore, useful to consider briefly the history of St. John's in terms of its growth and development as well as the origins of the firms in question prior to 1892.

Newfoundland's primary attraction for the Europeans, who first began visiting its shores in the sixteenth century, were the fish in its surrounding waters. During the early history of their exploitation of the island's ocean resources, Newfoundland served only as a temporary home to the visiting fishermen who came ashore to cure the fish they had caught before returning home at the end of the fishing season. It should not be surprising that English shipowners and sea captains from the West Country were the first to invest in the migratory fishery, and were responsible for organizing and sponsoring the voyages to Newfoundland. As the industry grew so, too, did the extent of their property on the island, necessitating the presence of a caretaker year round to protect and maintain the stages, flakes, etc., that were essential to the successful prosecution of the fishery. This continued to be the case for much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but events in Europe, particularly those of a military nature, contributed to the growth of permanent

settlements in Newfoundland starting in the mid-1600s and progressing throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup>

The West Country of England merchants, who had directed and supplied the early migratory fishery, then turned their attention to supplying a resident population. Although most settlers were scattered throughout various small outposts along the coast, a number of larger centres arose, serving as bases of operation for the representatives and branch houses of English mercantile firms from which residents obtained supplies on credit in advance of the fishing season. At the end of the season, the fishermen brought their produce - dried, salt cod and cod oil - to the merchant or, as was more often the case, his agent, to settle accounts and obtain winter supplies.<sup>2</sup> This system of truck, although long criticized due to an imbalance of power favouring the merchant, enabled settlement and the development of a resident fishery. As the size of these settlements grew, so, too, did the retailing activities of local merchants.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Shannon Ryan, "The Newfoundland Salt Cod Trade in the Nineteenth Century," *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 47.

<sup>2</sup>Ryan, "The Newfoundland Salt Cod Trade," 47; Hiller, "The Newfoundland Credit System," 86-7.

<sup>3</sup>Scholars such as Rowe, Cadigan and Ommer provide a different interpretation of the exploitative nature of truck, arguing that the high prices merchants often charged for goods given on credit were necessary to compensate for the financial risk they faced due to the uncertainty of price or catch in a given year. Frederick W. Rowe, *A History of Newfoundland and Labrador* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, Ltd., 1980) 354-5; Cadigan, *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay*, 19-22, 29; Ommer, "Merchant Credit," 170.

St. John's, located on the Avalon Peninsula, became, by far, the largest and most important of these centres to develop in Newfoundland. Yet, its future status as the island's commercial hub was far from assured in these early years as the first settlements arose elsewhere, in places like Cupids and Ferryland. St. John's was not even considered important from a military standpoint but gained significance as a centre of communication due to its location in the middle of the English shore. The decision to build a fort and place a garrison there during King William's War in the late 1690s, gave the town a military and administrative role which was further encouraged by the arrival of governors, magistrates and other officials. Despite its administrative importance, however, St. John's did not control island trade. In fact, there were wealthier merchants operating from Trinity and equally important merchants in Carbonear, Harbour Grace and Placentia who traded directly on the international market.<sup>4</sup>

During the Napoleonic Wars, however, St. John's achieved commercial significance due to the growth of trade with Canada and the West Indies, the rising number of traders and merchants settling in St. John's, the decline of outport trade with the loss of the migratory fishery, and its easily defended harbour. The residence of partners from parent British firms was also in St. John's favour as they were able to directly oversee operations unlike the situation in the outports where mercantile establishments were generally overseen by the agents of firms back in the mother country.

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<sup>4</sup>Keith Matthews, *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland, 1500-1830* (St. John's, NF: Breakwater Books, 1988) 166-8.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, St. John's merchants gradually withdrew from the troublesome merchant-fisherman credit relationship, choosing instead to focus on the wholesale trade by supplying smaller outport merchants (who in turn supplied the fishermen) or traders who travelled along the coast purchasing fish. As the size and number of St. John's mercantile establishments grew, the city gained a commercial importance which continued to increase, contributing also to its rising social and political importance in island affairs. Eventually, St. John's became "the Emporium of the Island," with most of the country's economic, political, and cultural institutions situated there.<sup>5</sup>

At the forefront of community life were the merchants, particularly those involved in the general trade of the island, who dominated these institutions. Their mercantile establishments, housed in large premises facing Water Street and backing onto the waterfront, were, in a sense, the focal point of Newfoundland trade. Here, outport schooners docked in the spring to take on their supplies for the fishery, returning in the fall to unload their catch, paying off accounts and picking up winter provisions before returning home. The merchants, in turn, loaded the cured fish aboard larger boats to be taken to markets in Europe or the Caribbean where it was exchanged for fishing supplies and consumer goods.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Matthews, *Lectures*, 168-9; Ryan, "The Newfoundland Salt Cod Trade," 48-9.

<sup>6</sup>As local booster P.T. McGrath described it in 1900, St. John's was the "clearing-house for the whole island": "The great fish merchants, the descendants of those who originally controlled the industry, are established in St. John's, which is, indeed, practically the sole town in the colony. The fishery is directed from here; the fishermen obtain their outfits



By the end of the nineteenth century, St. John's had grown into a small port city with a population of nearly 25,000, its commercial centre situated on the waterfront from which the rest of the community radiated. Local boosters were aware of the city's less attractive features but believed improvements were being made with regard to the appearance of residential and commercial buildings, the widening and numbering of streets, the digging of drains, the electrification of some areas, and proposed plans for a street railway.<sup>7</sup> Visitors to the city, viewing it more dispassionately than its citizens, were perhaps more realistic in their descriptions, one traveller describing St. John's in 1890 as

... crescent-shaped and built upon the steep slope of a hill. The houses rise one behind another in a series of irregular terraces.... The base or waterfront section ... is dingy, filthy and old without being picturesque. The modern and residential district is on a plateau at the top of the hill. At the foot of the city an irregular line of wharves and piers extends for a mile or two, and parallel with the shore-line thus formed is Water Street, the principal thoroughfare. The harbor turns to the west from the Narrows, the northeastern shore curving around to the city, whose extreme wing only skirts the base of Signal Hill. On the opposite shore the only buildings

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and barter their catch here; the annual seal-hunt is prosecuted from here, and the oily harvest is handled at the city wharves. Almost all the colony's imports - food, clothing, fishing requisites, etc. - enter this port and are distributed to all the fishing hamlets around the coast, and every minor industry or factory is established within the city limits. Hence it is clear that it must be a busy, bustling, commercial centre, with active, keen-witted business men, hundreds of trades-people, and hosts of operatives, fishermen, and laborers." P.T. McGrath, "Newfoundland's Chief Town," *The Newfoundland Magazine* (July 1900) 10.

<sup>7</sup>"Scrapbook" (n.d.), Moses Harvey Collection, MG 339 (PANL); Joseph Hatton and Moses Harvey, *Newfoundland, the oldest British colony: its history, its present condition and its prospects in the future* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1883) 125-6; Elizabeth Oliver, "The Rebuilding of the City of St. John's After the Great Fire of 1892: A Study in Urban Morphogenesis" (M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1983) 59-60.

are light framed huts and storage warehouses, the rocky soil and rugged surface affording no foundation for heavier structures. Above these buildings [are green hills with herds of goats, pine-clad summits, and the occasional farm and garden. At the riverhead.] villas are to be seen dotting the slope like dolls' houses on the mossy bank. In strange contrast to this rural picture is the line of wharves over the harbor. They are somewhat carelessly built, are in state of more or less dilapidation, and are generally redolent with a fishy odor that, indeed, pervades all the business quarter of St. John's. Water Street is as dirty and shiftless-looking a thoroughfare as one could find in America. It abounds with general stores, all most old-fashioned in themselves and in their wares. The street is not properly paved, and owing to the humidity of the atmosphere is usually extremely muddy....<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the wharves lining the St. John's waterfront stood the merchants' premises consisting of fish flakes, warehouses filled with fish and provisions for the fishery, offices, and wholesale and retail stores, the latter fronting onto Water Street. The landward side of Water Street was lined with more commercial structures and some residences, most buildings housing a ground-floor shop with living quarters above. Among the businesses were fish merchants, wholesalers, a variety of retailers (selling books, clothes, crockery, dry goods, etc.), insurance agents, restaurateurs, saloon-keepers, and artisans like cobblers and harness-makers.<sup>9</sup> As one travel book described it in 1891, Water Street's "lower side is occupied by the great mercantile houses which supply 'fish-and-fog-land' with provisions, clothing, and household requirements; and the upper side is lined with an

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<sup>8</sup>Anonymous, "Newfoundland: From a Traveller's Notebook." *The Illustrated American* (30 August 1890) 353-6; Oliver, "The Rebuilding of the City of St. John's," 60-1.

<sup>9</sup>Oliver, "The Rebuilding of the City of St. John's," 90.

alternation of cheap shops and liquor-saloons."<sup>10</sup> Out of these "great mercantile houses" grew the large retail establishments which eventually became St. John's first department stores. (See Map 1)

First established as dry goods, draperies or grocery stores, each had gradually expanded into other lines of merchandise and could easily be described as large general stores at the end of the nineteenth century. Exactly when they became department stores is open to question as the adoption of policies and practices characteristic of this form of retail enterprise were piecemeal in all of the stores and the lack of extant business records prevents a study of accounting methods which would indicate when the stores began

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<sup>10</sup>Gradually, as one moved away from the harbor and further uphill, the streets became more residential and, unlike businesses along the waterfront, shops situated on the upper streets (mostly grocers and butchers) were patronized by those living in the immediate area. While the next street up from Water Street, Duckworth, was still fairly commercial, succeeding streets - Gower Street and Military Road - were progressively less so, but while Gower was home to less affluent families, the homes on Military were larger and more attractive in appearance. Because St. John's was a walking city, most people lived near where they worked. In consequence, the few who lived along Water and Duckworth Streets were primarily middle-class shopkeepers and their lower-middle-class clerks. Furthermore, because most consumer- and service-oriented businesses and offices were located in the east end of the city, it was largely inhabited by members of the middle and professional classes while the west end was home to most of the city's factories, workshops and working class. The residential areas of the city, therefore, differed according to the relative wealth and occupations of their inhabitants although most houses in late nineteenth-century St. John's were considered unimpressive, being unflatteringly described as "low and unpainted wooden buildings, crowding out on the sidewalks, and the general appearance is that of poverty and thriftlessness. Even the wealthy merchants occupy houses far beneath their station ..." Moses F. Sweetser, *The Maritime Provinces*, 8th ed. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1891) 191; Oliver, "The Rebuilding of the City of St. John's," 63-4, 94-5.



Map 1: City of St. John's, ca. 1900.

Source: *Plan of the City of St. John's*, compiled by W.R. Ryan (Halifax, NS: McAlpine Publishing



calculating profits and losses by department. City directories provide few answers for their categorization of businesses was irregular, with a 1908 directory listing at least three departmental stores in the city, and directories for 1915, 1919 and 1932 not listing any but describing several of the owners as general merchants.<sup>11</sup> It is clear by the late 1800s, however, that by virtue of their volume and variety of wares, these firms were well on their way to achieving department store status.

The expansion of their retail operations was no doubt related to the active, forward-thinking men at their helms but was also the result of the firms' position in local trade. As wholesalers as well as retailers, they had an advantage over other shopkeepers in St. John's. Not only could they import their own stock, buying direct and in bulk from markets in Britain, the U.S., and Canada, giving them a cost advantage and allowing cheaper retail prices, but profits from their wholesale divisions could also be used to

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<sup>11</sup>*McAlpine's St. John's City Directory, 1908-09* (Halifax, NS: McAlpine Publishing Co., Ltd., 1908-08) 484; *McAlpine's St. John's City Directory, 1915* (Halifax, NS: Royal Print & Litho, Ltd., 1915) 421-4; *St. John's City Directory, 1919* (Halifax, NS: Royal Print & Litho, Ltd., 1919); *St. John's Classified Business and City Directory, 1932* (St. John's, NF: St. John's Publicity Co., 1932).

Similarly, the Dun & Bradstreet books of commercial ratings describe the businesses in question as general stores or general merchants until the 1940s when some are categorized as department stores. *The R.G. Dun & Co. Mercantile Agency Book - Dominion of Canada*, March 1901, March 1911, March 1921, and March 1931; *Dun & Bradstreet Books of Commercial Ratings - Dominion of Canada*, March 1941 and March 1949.

Perhaps the most reliable source for determining when certain businesses became department stores are city fire insurance maps which depict Ayre & Sons as a department store as early as 1902 but only in the 1925 map is it joined by Bowring Brothers, George Knowing, and The Royal Stores. *St. John's Fire Insurance Atlas, 1902* (PANL); *St. John's Fire Insurance Atlas, 1925* (PANL).

develop their retail interests. Most firms, like Job Brothers, partners in The Royal Stores, and Bowring Brothers, also had their own fleet of ships adding to their advantage over other importers.

In this way, the Water Street stores had more in common with department stores in the American West than with stores in Toronto, for example. Brenda Newell has argued that department stores in Toronto developed out of dry goods stores because of that city's expanding ready-made clothing industry in the nineteenth century, giving them direct access to goods becoming increasingly popular and profitable in this period and a line of merchandise eminently suitable to the department store's policies of convenience, low prices, and high turnover. Yet, stores like Marshall Field's in Chicago and T.C. Power & Bro. in Montana, as well as the large Water Street stores in St. John's, developed out of general stores with extensive wholesale departments because they were situated in areas with little local production of manufactured goods. Consequently, stock had to be imported giving wholesalers, able to buy goods directly from foreign manufacturers to sell in their retail departments, a price advantage over smaller retailers who bought their stock from them. In these cases, profits made from wholesaling funded the firms' expanding retail operations, enabling greater emphasis on store and product promotion as well as customer service.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Newell, "From Cloth to Clothing," 24; Twyman, *History of Marshall Field*, 25-9, 169; Henry C. Klassen, "T.C. Power & Bro.: The Rise of a Small Western Department Store, 1870-1902," *Business History Review*, 66 (Winter 1992) 682-3.

Although much smaller than the shopping emporiums of Toronto or Chicago, the Water Street stores performed a similar distributive function in providing an outlet for mass-produced goods and, through their marketing activities, helped spread a modern consumer culture. The particular policies and practices of individual stores, however, tended to vary somewhat according to local custom and circumstances and, in this regard, the stores had much in common with small department stores in the American West. Like the stores in St. John's, T.C. Power & Bro. introduced typical department store policies such as fixed prices and rapid turnover to Fort Benton, Montana, while continuing to meet local needs by offering credit and bartering in a region where cash was in short supply and banking facilities negligible. The firm also limited its susceptibility to downturns in the economy by diversifying its interests into transportation with their own steamship and stagecoach services as well as branching out into banking and ranching.<sup>13</sup> There are many similarities between Power & Bro. and the Water Street stores for they operated in places where transporting goods was difficult and the cost of freighting high. And, while situated in growing urban centres, the local markets were still relatively small necessitating their branching out into other businesses thereby achieving economies of scope through "diverse and mutually supporting activities." In addition to their importing and wholesaling activities, they expanded into the surrounding hinterlands either through branch stores or mail order departments, extending their distributive function and thereby

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<sup>13</sup>Klassen, "T.C. Power & Bro.," 672-7, 680-3, 687.



spreading aspects of consumer culture into more rural areas.<sup>14</sup>

This, then, was St. John's and the large Water Street stores at the start of the last decade of the nineteenth century. Two disasters in the 1890s - the Great Fire in 1892 and the Bank Crash of 1894 - would forestall city growth yet both, in diverse ways, contributed to its development. The Great Fire of 1892 provides a convenient bench-mark, not only to the historian but also to local commentators in the years that followed the conflagration. To them, St. John's before the fire was very different from the modern city rising from its ashes as city officials, businessmen and home-owners set out to improve upon the old as they rebuilt. In fact, geographer Christopher Sharpe notes that it was the area of St. John's not burnt out in the fires of the nineteenth century which became the city's worst slums with the most run-down and dilapidated buildings.<sup>15</sup>

The fire, therefore, gave city leaders the opportunity to demand improvements to its layout, its services and its architecture while giving city merchants an opportunity to reorganize their operations to address the changes accompanying industrialization and the declining fortunes of the fishery throughout much of the 1880s and '90s. In this sense, then, the 1892 fire was not so much a disaster which left business in rubble and many

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<sup>14</sup>Klassen, "T.C. Power & Bro.," 683, 695-6.

<sup>15</sup>Christopher Sharpe, "... to arouse our city from its deathlike apathy, from its reproachable lethargy, from its slumber of industrial and social death.' The 1939 St. John's Municipal Housing Scheme." *Newfoundland Studies*, 16(1), (Spring 2000) 49.

homeless and destitute, but an opportunity to start over, to build a more modern capital city that would be a vast improvement upon that of the past. Three years after the fire, the editor of *The Daily News* described the results of their efforts:

To-day, St. John's presents an undoubted far better appearance than it did before the fire. The buildings erected to take the place of those destroyed are in many cases larger, more substantial and more modern. Streets are straighter and better graded, and we can now look on a city that has risen Phoenix-like from the ashes of its predecessor; and although not as yet completed, the New St. John's, of '95, is quite a quarter of a century in advance of the Old St. John's, which existed in '92.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>"St. John's 1892 and 1895." *The Daily News*, 9 July 1895.

### **Chapter One - The Large Water Street Stores in the Aftermath of the Great Fire, 1892-1913**

The 1890s and early 1900s were a definitive period in the development of the large Water Street stores for it is during these years that retailers in St. John's began adopting some of the new merchandising methods gaining ground in the commercial centres of Europe and North America since the middle of the nineteenth century. A crisis in the fishery in the 1880s and the Great Fire and Bank Crash in the 1890s encouraged many local businessmen to reconsider their position in the Newfoundland market, some deciding to drastically reorganize their business interests to suit changing socio-economic conditions. Declining outport trade and a growing city consumer base resulting from greater opportunities for waged labour, led some of St. John's most prominent merchants to refocus their efforts on retailing to local shoppers at the expense of the fishery and provision trades. Changes to the layout and appearance of their stores in the years following the fire, improvements in such promotional techniques as advertising and window display, and the introduction of new customer services, provide evidence of this shift as well as of foreign influence on local business methods.

The Great Fire began on 8 July 1892 and destroyed two-thirds of the city, much of it in the east end, home to the downtown business district.<sup>1</sup> Not only were many private,

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<sup>1</sup>Reverend Moses Harvey later provided an eyewitness account of the disaster: "Ere long this column [of fire] burst into Water Street - the business part of the city - at Beck's Cove, cutting it in two, and leaving one-third untouched to the westward. Now the work of destruction commenced in earnest. Bowring's huge premises, shops, stores, warehouse, wharves, were soon enveloped in sheets of flame. The beautiful shops, full of valuable

public and religious buildings destroyed, but also gone were the factories, docks, and other places of employment that had provided work for city inhabitants, and, in turn, a market for city stores. Losses were estimated at \$20,000,000 with only one quarter of that total insured.<sup>2</sup> Immediately following the disaster, however, there was a great rush to acquire new premises and to order stock, the work of rebuilding providing employment and the destruction of household goods raising demand.<sup>3</sup> On 9 July 1892, Bowring Brothers telegraphed an order to England for new merchandise and within two weeks resumed business in a temporary building. Campbell Macpherson, the first to reenter the burnt area of Water Street, reopened his dry goods business in just five days while Ayre & Sons began rebuilding the week following and had opened a temporary store by mid-

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goods: the stores behind, containing thousands of barrels of flour and provision of all kinds; the fish stores; the wharves, which it had cost immense sums to erect, - disappeared one by one into the maw of the destroyer. Goodfellow's, Ayre & Sons', Baird's, Baine Johnston's, Thorburn & Tessier's, immense premises; Marshall & Roger's, Job Brothers' great block, - all fell a prey to the flames, and the whole of Water Street, on both sides, was 'swept with the besom of destruction.'" Moses Harvey, "The Great Fire," *The Great Fire in St. John's, Newfoundland, July 8, 1892*, Fred Adams, ed. (St. John's, NF.: Creative Publishers, 1992) 17.

<sup>2</sup>Fred Adams, "Introduction," *The Great Fire*, 2; McGrath, "Newfoundland's Chief Town," 10.

<sup>3</sup>A conflict between the municipal and colonial governments over funds and authority delayed rebuilding and frustrated merchants who wanted to get ready for the fall trade. Another source of conflict was city council's plan to widen several streets, including Water Street, which the colonial government refused to allow for it would mean confiscating property from some of their merchant supporters. Melvin Baker, "The Government of St. John's, Newfoundland, 1888-1902" (M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1975) 120-1.

August.<sup>4</sup> Most businessmen with the ability to do so (generally those with insurance) were eager to start trading immediately, not wanting to be left behind while others took advantage of the rising demand for building supplies, clothing, furniture, food, and all the other many things reduced to rubble and ashes.

In fact, many, among them M. Devine, editor of the *Trade Review*, marvelled at the volume of cash trade, much higher than that of the previous year, done on Water Street in the months following the fire. Some merchants claimed to have receipts twenty-five, fifty and even one hundred per cent higher than those of 1891, with the increase being largely attributed to the fire for, despite a poor fishery, employment was up and wages were higher due to the work of rebuilding.<sup>5</sup> Not only did many businessmen establish temporary stores to take advantage of the increased trade, but some expanded their operations into new lines of goods and new men opened businesses, so many that it became a cause for concern. This was especially true of the clothing and furniture trades, leading Devine to remark that "Nearly every house in the dry-goods trade imported double stocks [of ready-made clothing] this fall, and men not previously in the business at all ordered large stocks." He later cautioned against overexpansion, noting that "Beside the regular men engaged in [the furniture] business here for years there, [sic] are nine or ten

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<sup>4</sup>"Bowring Brothers" and "C. Macpherson," *Trade Review*, 3 October 1892; "Ayre & Sons," *Trade Review*, 31 October 1892; "Jas. Baird," *Trade Review*, 1 July 1893.

<sup>5</sup>"Scale of Wages," *Trade Review*, 3 October 1892; Editorial, *Trade Review*, 14 November 1892; "Trade Outlook," *Trade Review*, 7 January 1893.

new men gone into it.... there is such a thing as overdoing the business."<sup>6</sup>

Yet, the large Water Street stores received only praise and admiration from the local press. As the editor of *The Daily News* noted in early 1894, "... although many of the largest business houses in town were swept away, our business men still retain their reputation for energy and enterprise, and have indelibly stamped that fact on the very city itself, as shown by the large and handsome premises that have arisen on Water Street, and on what, a few months ago, were heaps of ruins."<sup>7</sup> City papers marvelled over the size, appearance and organization of the new stores, built to reflect their expanding interests, with each the subject of prominent articles indicating their commercial importance as well as their importance to the press as advertisers.

According to the *Trade Review*, James Baird enjoyed perhaps the largest general trade in the city at the time of the fire which destroyed his dry goods, provision, wine, and grocery stores. Immigrating to Newfoundland as the agent for a Scottish firm in the 1840s, Baird later opened a dry goods and grocery store in 1853 with his brother, David. The partnership was dissolved in 1872 and James Baird started his own dry goods and provisions firm, later expanding into groceries and liquors with investments in a number of local industries.<sup>8</sup> While occupying a temporary building on Water Street, he began

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<sup>6</sup>Editorials, *Trade Review*, 14 November 1892 and 10 February 1894.

<sup>7</sup>Editorial, *The Daily News*, 19 May 1894.

<sup>8</sup>Baird had investments in several local factories, among them the Newfoundland Boot & Shoe Manufacturing Co., Ltd.; the St. John's Gas Co., Ltd.; the Colonial Cordage Co.,

building a new premises in early 1893 which was expected to be the "finest structure" in the city and of the "most modern style." Located at 181-183 Water Street, it housed provision, general retail and fish stores. As one of the store's ads stated in 1894, "The many modern improvements in our new establishment will facilitate the transaction of business and careful attention to our customers we hope will increase it."<sup>44</sup>

Bowring Brothers, the oldest of the city firms to achieve department store status, began as a watch and jewellery shop opened by Benjamin Bowring, a recent immigrant from England, on Duckworth Street in 1811. By 1823 Bowring had purchased two schooners and entered the coastal trade while his wife ran a dry goods store. The firm continued to grow and diversify after being taken over by their three sons in 1839 when it

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Ltd.; and the Newfoundland Nail and Foundry Co., Ltd. According to the *Trade Review*, he "... was one of the first to realize, that while the fisheries would always be the mainstay of the country, yet it would be necessary to establish factories which, by giving a large amount of employment, would remove strain on the trade in the event of the failure of the fisheries. It is scarcely necessary to explain the amount of good that policy has effected when worked to its legitimate end. It has put a great deal more money in circulation, has begotten a sense of independence in artisans and mechanics, and has practically paralyzed [*sic*] the credit system - the curse of Newfoundland commerce." "Jas. Baird," *Trade Review*, 1 July 1893.

Like most of city's largest merchants, however, Baird also invested in the fishery but did not enter the trade until the late 1880s and soon withdrew when the industry entered a crisis period. He was therefore able to avoid the fate of many fellow merchants made insolvent by the Bank Crash in 1894. Following the crash, Baird reentered the fish trade and the firm continued to be amongst the largest exporters of fish well into the twentieth century. R.G. Dun & Co., 55: "James Baird, Ltd.," *The Book of Newfoundland*, Vol. 2, J.R. Smallwood, ed. (St. John's, NF: Newfoundland Book Publishers, Ltd., 1937) 389-90; Matthews, "James Baird and Company," *Profiles of Water Street Merchants*.

<sup>44</sup>"Jas. Baird," *Trade Review*, 1 July 1893; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 27 April 1894.

was renamed Bowring Brothers. The brothers soon entered the seal fishery and in 1845 began exporting fish for the first time. By 1892, the business had extensive interests in the cod and seal fisheries, insurance, shipping, wholesaling and retailing, not to mention bank directorships and stock in the St. John's Gas Company.<sup>10</sup>

While occupying a temporary building on Water Street, Bowring Brothers built a new premises on their old site at 271-277 Water Street, opening less than two years after the fire. Since the old store had become cramped as trade had grown, the new store was a "much larger, and more commodious building" than its predecessor, "the proprietors hav[ing] made allowances for the anticipated increased trade of the years to come."<sup>11</sup> With its double-fronted windows of plate glass, Toronto brick exterior and oriel windows of cut freestone, the three-storey building attracted the attention of passers-by due to its "most late and approved" design. Its Water Street frontage measured seventy feet and was "one sheet of glass from end to end." The interior, lit with brass gas burners and heated by steam, was equally impressive, having a panelled ceiling, a polished wooden horseshoe-shaped counter in the centre of the main floor, and a "magnificent double staircase" leading to the upper floors. The first floor, at street level, housed the retail and hardware departments while the second contained bolt materials, ready-made clothing, blankets, and carpets, and the third held fishery supplies such as nets and twine. Next

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<sup>10</sup>Matthews, "Bowring Family," *Profiles of Water Street Merchants*: "Bowring Brother, Ltd.," *The Book of Newfoundland*, Vol. 2, 332-4; R.G. Dun & Co., 25.

<sup>11</sup>"Bowring Brothers," *Trade Review*, 5 May 1894.



door to the main building was a grocery store and the firm's fish stores where the season's catch was held until loaded aboard ships heading to market.<sup>12</sup>

Ayre & Sons got its start, as did many other St. John's businesses, when a clerk in the employ of an established firm left to go out on his own. Arriving in Newfoundland from England to work for the Bowrings some time in the mid-1800s, Charles Robert Ayre left the firm in 1856 to form a partnership with fellow employee, John Steer. Then, in 1859, Ayre opened a dry goods store on Water Street which became Ayre & Sons in 1884. Unlike Bowring Brothers, the firm's interests were primarily the wholesale and retail trades and a comparison of their new buildings suggests that while much of Bowring Brothers' was given over to the provision and fish trades, Ayre & Sons was intent on developing its retail store.<sup>13</sup>

Although Ayre & Sons' new premises at 231-235 Water Street also had three storeys, plate glass windows and a brick and freestone exterior, its street level dry goods department was nearly twice the size of Bowring's, in addition to which there were boot and shoe, carpet, ladies', gent's furnishings, grocery, hardware, wholesale and provisions departments as well as a packing room for filling mail orders. Lit with chandeliers and gas jets, heated by radiators and equipped with a telephone, the Ayre & Sons' building also

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<sup>12</sup>"Bowring Brothers, Their Handsome New Building," *The Daily News*, 18 April 1894; *St. John's Fire Insurance Atlas, 1902* (PANL).

<sup>13</sup>R.G. Dun & Co., 49, 59; "Ayre's Completes 100 Years," *The Evening Telegram*, 3 January 1959; "Ayre & Sons, Ltd.," *The Book of Newfoundland*, Vol. 2, 357-9; *St. John's Fire Insurance Atlas, 1902* (PANL).

had an elevator, run by a gas engine for moving goods from floor to floor (meanwhile Bowring Brothers continued to use a hoist and winch).<sup>14</sup> Pictures of the stores taken around 1900 provide further illustration of the differences between their premises, with Bowring Brothers occupying a building in a much plainer style than that of Ayre & Sons, their windows almost empty when compared to the array of stock displayed in those at Ayre's. (See Figures 1.1 and 1.2)

Perhaps the most impressive new retail establishment, however, was that of George Knowling at 211-217 Water Street. First coming to Newfoundland from England in 1858, Knowling left again in 1860, working in a variety of businesses in the United States, Canada and Britain before returning in 1868. In 1886, he bought the firm of his uncle, Philip Hutchings, for whom he had been working, but only six years later was burnt out in the Great Fire. Moving to a temporary building in the west end at 389 Water Street, Knowling designed and built a new store on the old site which received glowing reviews in the city press:

The new premises of Mr. Geo. Knowling, situated on Water Street in this city, and erected since the great fire of 1892, should furnish unquestionable proof to any who may be incredulous of what can be done by business energy, enterprise, and strict attention to the wants of the public. The premises of which we speak are second to none in this country: more than that it is questionable whether any house this side of the Atlantic can

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<sup>14</sup>"Ayre & Sons' New Building," *The Daily News*, 19 May 1894; "Ayre & Sons," *Trade Review*, 5 May 1894.



Figure 1.1: Bowring Brothers, ca. 1900  
Source: CNSA, 137.2.01.017

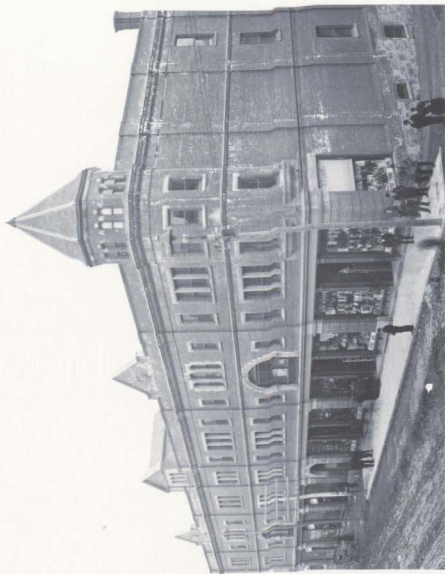


Figure 1.2: Ayre & Sons, ca. 1900 (Geo. Knowling, left)  
Source: CNSA, 137.2.01.009

compare with it in its vastness of organisation and marvellous detail, except, perhaps in the United States.<sup>15</sup>

Like Ayre's and Bowring's, Knowling's had the requisite plate glass windows with a brick and freestone exterior. But if Ayre's and Baird's retail operations were more extensive than Bowring's, Knowling's outshone them all with its dry goods, drapery, house furnishings, men's and boys', footwear, crockery, hardware, millinery, grocery and packing departments. Knowling's previous retail experience in Britain and North America was clearly evident in his emphasis on store appearance (elegant display cases, polished octagonal counter, grand staircase, skylights, etc.) and customer service. A ladies' fitting room off the mantle and millinery department, both with brass fittings and bevelled glass mirrors, ensured the comfort of his female clientele. Prices were clearly marked and the store operated largely on a cash basis, following the popular policies of many European and North American department stores. A cash railway, consisting of a series of tracks leading from the cash office to the sales counter carrying boxes containing the customer's receipt and change, was also installed to make paying one's bill more efficient and accurate.<sup>16</sup>

Despite having built one of St. John's most up-to-date retail establishments, Knowling did not rest on his laurels but continued his expansion efforts over the following

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<sup>15</sup>"Mr. G. Knowling's Extensive Stores," *The Daily News*, 26 April 1895.

<sup>16</sup>"The City and Elsewhere," *The Daily News*, 1 October 1894; "George Knowling's Extensive Stores," *The Daily News*, 26 April 1895; *St. John's Fire Insurance Atlas, 1902* (PANL).

decades. Between 1886 and 1913, Knowling's business went from a small drapery with perhaps a dozen employees to a departmental store with branches in St. John's, Carbonear, Channel and Bay of Islands, employing 200 to 300 workers.<sup>17</sup> Based on descriptions of his store in 1895, it would appear that George Knowling was one of the new businessmen who, according to M. Devine, were challenging the old trade practices of the fish merchants, raising the bar for retail establishments and forcing them to adapt to new methods or to get out of the trade:

To one who has been absent from St. John's for many years, the great change in our methods of conducting business would be surprising indeed. Say what we will, the old days of the supplying merchant are fast passing away, and a new era is dawning, nay, rather, has already dawned. Instead of the dingy shops and warehouses of former days, when long prices and longer credit reigned paramount, we now witness on all sides, emporiums of trade, unknown in the adjacent provinces, and unexcelled even by the larger cities of the world. The day of mercantile monopoly is past. The modern merchant caters to the public, consults their tastes, and dealing on a cash basis is enabled to practically illustrate the old and true maxim that 'small profits make quick returns.'<sup>18</sup>

While allowing for the obvious boosterism of the author, this quote reveals much about local business trends and an awareness of foreign developments. Clearly, some members of the St. John's business community felt that the policies and practices of those involved in the fish trade were outdated and that 'modern' times demanded modern methods. Unlike the new premises of fish merchants, James Baird and Bowring Brothers,

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<sup>17</sup>"Hon. George and Mrs. Knowling, 1863-1913." *The Daily News*, 23 July 1913.

<sup>18</sup>"Knowling's Premises, Central and West End." *The Daily News*, 21 October 1895.

those of Ayre & Sons and George Knowling did not include fish flakes or fish stores. Instead, their variety of departments, fixtures and amenities indicated an interest in attracting the attention and patronage of the city shopper who was more likely to browse in their stores, noting its attractions and conveniences, as opposed to the outport merchant or fisherman in town for just a few days to settle accounts and purchase supplies. Knowling's decision to maintain his temporary establishment in the west end of Water Street, to remodel and enlarge the premises in keeping with the style of his new central store, was evidence of the increase in city trade and the growing popularity of his retailing methods.<sup>14</sup>

The arrangement of departments in Knowling's new premises, as with all of the Water Street stores, also tells us much about the owner's perceptions of his clientele with regard to class and gender and how these influenced the spatial organization of his

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<sup>14</sup>"The City and Elsewhere." *The Daily News*, 1 October 1894; "Knowling's Premises, Central and West End." *The Daily News*, 21 October 1895.

In her thesis, "The Rebuilding of the City of St. John's After the Great Fire of 1892: A Study in Urban Morphogenesis," geographer Elizabeth Oliver argued post-fire St. John's was not drastically altered during rebuilding but that some changes in the use of space were evident. Commercial streets such as Water and Duckworth became more commercial in character as people moved out of the area. The number of property units on Water Street also fell but the total floor space per unit rose indicating that most of the new merchant establishments were larger than the pre-fire premises. So while pre-fire characteristics helped determine post-fire use of space (i.e. commercial areas remained commercial), firms also "used the need for rebuilding as an opportunity to adjust form to function," enlarging their premises to suit expanding businesses. At the same time, however, many of the consumer-oriented buildings were replaced by non-consumer-oriented units like warehouses. Oliver, "The Rebuilding of the City of St. John's." 146, 151-56.

business. As Susan Porter Benson has argued was the case among U.S. department store owners in this period, "a conventional wisdom ... developed that informed in a general way the placement of the store's departments." Similar thinking guided St. John's retailers for their stores had much in common with American counterparts. Most ground-floor levels featured small items like notions, hosiery and gloves as well as men's clothing because such "small wares would not draw customers to upper floors" and men, being reluctant shoppers, preferred the convenience of a department near the entrance. Staircases or elevators, of grand design in order to attract shoppers unused to shopping in multi-level buildings to upper floors, were located at the back of the store thereby forcing shoppers to traverse the entire length of the ground-floor to reach them, the route lined with small impulse items. Upper floors, meanwhile, housed women's clothing because retailers "were convinced that women preferred to shop in a more leisurely and private way" and home furnishings as these were objects of deliberate shopping expeditions and so were capable of drawing customers upstairs. As a general rule, cheaper goods were sold below and more expensive items on the upper floors as the basement and ground floors were less attractive and also more accessible to the public while those above were less open and accessible and therefore appeared more exclusive.<sup>20</sup>

By 1894, much of the burnt out business district of Water Street had been rebuilt and trade was moving eastward after its temporary diversion to the west end of Water

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<sup>20</sup>Benson, "A Palace of Consumption and Machine for Selling," 211.



Street. Although some sites remained empty, the street's appearance had been much improved due to the widening of the road and the uniformity in style and height of the new premises.<sup>21</sup> Retailers had also demonstrated a growing interest in city trade, organizing their new stores accordingly. Although prolific writer and local booster, Reverend Moses Harvey was forced to admit that many of the residential streets were still "exceedingly dingy and commonplace," he felt the shops and stores of Water Street were "a great advance on those destroyed by the fire.... and compare not unfavourably with similar establishments in the large cities of Canada and the United States":

Handsome shop fronts, tastefully "dressed" and exhibiting all kinds of fancy goods and more substantial articles are everywhere conspicuous. Visitors will be specially struck with the fine appearance and solidity of the new blocks, erected since the fire.... The thronged shops and general bustle and activity show that a large business is done here.<sup>22</sup>

While still recovering from the aftermath of the Great Fire, St. John's businesses

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<sup>21</sup>Editorials, *Trade Review*, 26 August 1893 and 25 August 1894.

Efforts to improve the appearance of Water Street continued throughout the 1890s. In 1899, R.G. Reid, as part of the infamous Reid Contract negotiated with the colonial government in 1898, began paving the street and laying street car tracks which were expected to introduce a "new era in St. John's business methods." The cobbled street was considered a vast improvement upon the mud that had regularly plagued business owners and customers alike and the street car noticeably increased the number of afternoon shoppers in the stores. "Notes in Brief," *The Daily News*, 20 November 1895; "The First Stone," *Trade Review*, 12 August 1899; Editorial, *Trade Review*, 9 June 1900; Baker, "The Government of St. John's, Newfoundland, 1888-1902," 165-6.

<sup>22</sup>Moses Harvey, *Newfoundland as it is in 1894* (St. John's, NF: J.W. Withers, Queen's Printer, 1894) 249-51; Moses Harvey, *Newfoundland at the Beginning of the 20th Century* (New York: South Publishing Co., 1902) 110.

were hit with another disaster on 10 December 1894 when the city's banks collapsed.<sup>23</sup> A number of factors had contributed to the economic crisis facing the colony, perhaps the most important among them being the declining quality and value of Newfoundland's fish exports. The poor cure of the colony's fish, a condition Moses Harvey attributed to the apathy of Newfoundland fishermen unable to free themselves of debt to the merchants, could not compete with better cured French and Norwegian fish on the European markets and, as a result, the fishery entered a decline in the mid-1800s. The traditional system of credit was also to blame as some fishermen sold their catch to parties other than the merchant to whom they were in debt, creating problems for firms already facing financial constraints due to the retirement of a generation of businessmen and the consequent removal of capital. Lacking sufficient operating funds, many merchant firms indiscriminately borrowed money from their agents in Britain and from the local banks, of which some of the city's most prominent businessmen were directors. Government expenditure on development schemes, the railway and public relief exacerbated the financial troubles facing the colony, leaving it on the verge of bankruptcy, requiring only a

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<sup>23</sup>Shortly after the crash, *The Daily News* editor worriedly sized up the situation: "It is just a fortnight to-night since the first sound of the coming crash broke upon the ears of an alarmed community. Banks have closed, the affairs of one being involved to a degree that precludes hope of resuscitation. Businesses, of a century's growth, have fallen to the ground, specie does not exist in any sufficient quantity; interchange is impossible; notes cannot be met; accounts cannot be settled; people's stores are diminishing rapidly, or have disappeared, and yet nothing has been done." Editorial, *The Daily News*, 22 December 1894.

minor event to tip the balance.<sup>24</sup>

This occurred when a principal partner in a London firm representing several prominent Newfoundland businesses died and the firm's commercial activities were halted. His trustees then demanding that merchants in St. John's pay their debts. The London banks also suspended any further loans to banks in Newfoundland which had provided the island's only currency, now worthless. Firms that could not pay up shut their doors as did several factories, throwing many out of work with those still employed being paid in flour and tea. According to the newspapers, many city residents were without fuel or food and the charitable organizations to which they might have turned for aid had also been bankrupted by the crash. Desperate citizens crowded the relief office and poor asylum while unemployed men besieged the labour bureau.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Melvin Baker, "The Government of St. John's, Newfoundland, 1800-1921" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1980) 290; Patrick Hickey, "The Immediate Impact of the 1894 Bank Crash." (B.A.(Honours) dissertation, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1980) 1, 6-10, 15-6, 24; P.T. McGrath, "The Newfoundland Bank Trials," *National Magazine* (September 1896) 563-72; Alison Earle, "The Bank Crash of 1894." (Unpublished paper, Maritime History Group, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1971) 9-17; Catherine Horan, "Bank Crash," *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, Vol. 1 (St. John's, NF: Newfoundland Book Publishers, 1981) 120-3.

<sup>25</sup>Hickey, "The Immediate Impact of the 1894 Bank Crash," 1, 6-10, 15-6, 24.

Reverend Moses Harvey later described the desperate conditions resulting from the failure of the Newfoundland banks: "All business was suspended. The shops and stores were left without customers, the people having no money to buy. Factories and workshops had to dismiss their employees. There was no means of paying wages, and no customers for the products of industry. No one would accept the notes of the banks, of which an immense amount was in circulation." Moses Harvey, "The Economic Condition of Newfoundland," *Journal of the Canadian Bankers' Association* (January 1896) 138.

While long-time merchant firms such as Duder's, Steer's, Goodfellow's and Thorburn & Tessier's fell in the wake of the crash, those that survived struggled to operate amidst the confusion and panic, despite a backlash from politicians who blamed the disaster on the indiscriminate borrowing practices of local merchants.<sup>26</sup> On the day of the crash, some city residents headed out to the small shops beyond city limits, where the news of the collapse was yet unknown, to spend their worthless currency. In the end, they were actually better off than those in the outports for the colonial government guaranteed Union bank notes, held mostly in St. John's, at 80 cents and Commercial bank notes, held mostly in the outports, at 20 cents. Despite the devaluation of local bank notes, some businesses continued to accept them at face value, enabling people to buy food and other necessities, but many did not and frustrated crowds broke into the stores of bankrupt firms. Those merchants who continued to accept Union bank notes at full value, however, raised their prices anywhere from thirty to fifty percent.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Lord Amulree's 1933 report would later echo the charge levelled at the merchant community, suggesting the crash was the result of their constant borrowing and the prevalence of truck. Summing up the situation, the report stated that "Seven of the largest mercantile houses in the Island, some of which have been established for upwards of a century, were involved in the general ruin. Business was paralyzed; the most fantastic rumors were current; every man was the object of distrust and suspicion to his neighbour; misery and distress were widespread. These chaotic conditions were happily relieved by the entry into the Colony of the Canadian Banks." Great Britain, *Newfoundland Royal Commission 1933 Report* (London: Stationery Office, 1933) 29.

<sup>27</sup>"The City and Elsewhere," *The Daily News*, 19 and 24 December 1894; "Notes on the Crisis," *The Daily News*, 22 and 24 December 1894; "Trouble in the City. Angry and Hungry Crowd Break into Duder's and Steer's," *The Daily News*, 9 January 1894; Arthur H. Bright, "Through Memory's Eyes," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 58(2), (June 1959) 27:

With unemployment rampant, some firms arranged work schedules so that half their employees worked one week, while the remainder worked the next, ensuring them at least part-time employment. In order to pay workers, Bowring Brothers printed their own wage notes in differing denominations, negotiable only in their store. The currency situation was so desperate, however, and the firm's finances considered so secure that, for a time, the notes were accepted in many stores around the island.<sup>28</sup> For his part, George Knowing started a poor relief fund as did several other merchants.<sup>29</sup>

Two firms that survived the crash chose to drastically alter their participation in local trade, further contributing to the modernization of retailing in St. John's. In 1895, Campbell Macpherson, a dry goods merchant, and Job Brothers & Company, a firm involved in the Newfoundland fishery since the late 1700s, chose to amalgamate their dry goods operations creating a new firm, The Royal Stores, Limited. Macpherson had been born and raised in St. John's but was educated in England, returning upon his father's death to run the family firm, later being joined by his brother, Archibald.<sup>30</sup> Job Brothers' roots went much deeper into the local business community, being "an offshoot of the

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Baker, "The Government of St. John's, Newfoundland, 1888-1902," 149; Hickey, "The Immediate Impact of the 1894 Bank Crash," 15.

<sup>28</sup>Hickey, "The Immediate Impact of the 1894 Bank Crash," 24-5; Wardle, *Benjamin Bowring and his descendants*, 128.

<sup>29</sup>"Knowing Relief Fund," *The Daily News*, 27 February 1894.

<sup>30</sup>"Passing of Campbell Macpherson," *The Daily News*, 25 April 1908.

oldest concern in Newfoundland" begun by Samuel Bulley of England in 1750.<sup>31</sup>

While Macpherson, who was not directly involved in the fish trade, came through the crash relatively unscathed, Job Brothers & Company was forced to compromise with creditors, eventually repaying their debts.<sup>32</sup> Opening for business at 137-139 Water Street in October 1895 under the management of Campbell Macpherson and W.C. Job, their premises, although perhaps somewhat smaller than those of Bowring Brothers and Ayre & Sons, compared favourably in appearance. (See Figure 1.3) The new firm, independent of Job Brothers and therefore no longer hindered by direct involvement in the fishery, quickly took its place at the forefront of the "retail revolution" occurring in St. John's with *The Daily News* editor applauding their efforts:

While the crash knocked some men right out of the commercial arena, it seems to have had the opposite effect on others. So appalled were some, at the magnitude of the disaster, that they have not yet stopped staring at it. Others recognized the facts at once, and set to work to overcome difficulties; and by re-organization and thoroughness to build up more strongly than ever on the ruins of Black Monday. Talk of the elasticity of trade as we will, success in business depends more on the elasticity of business men, or rather upon their adaptability to circumstances. Several of our commercial men have proved this, none more so than Mr. Campbell Macpherson, who with Mr. Job, has launched that new and go ahead

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<sup>31</sup>John Job arrived in St. John's as an apprentice to Bulley in 1777 and married his employer's daughter in 1782, the firm eventually being renamed Job Brothers & Company by their descendants in 1845. R.G. Dun & Co., 35; Matthews, "Job Brothers & Co., Ltd.," *Profiles of Water Street Merchants*.

<sup>32</sup>Matthews, "Job Brothers & Co., Ltd.," *Profiles of Water Street Merchants*.

enterprise 'The Royal Stores, Limited.'<sup>33</sup>

Before long, it was evident that the venture would be a great success, attributable largely to the Macphersons, Campbell and his younger brother, Archibald, who were "modern business men ... alive to the changing conditions of local trade and the consequent necessity for modern methods."<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, the Jobs appear almost incidental to the firm, rarely being mentioned in newspaper articles about the store even though W.C. Job served as the firm's vice-president until 1916 and was then succeeded by his brother, R.B. Job. It is possible that they may have left the store's management to their partners, choosing to focus their attentions on the firm of Job Brothers & Co. with its varied interests, not least of which was the fishery.<sup>35</sup>

The influence of modern - which for many in the St. John's business community appeared to mean American - retailing ideas on local stores was therefore becoming

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<sup>33</sup>"The Royal Stores, Limited." *The Daily News*, 15 October 1895; "Macpherson's Sale." *The Daily News*, 11 December 1895.

<sup>34</sup>"Royal Stores, Limited." *Trade Review*, 9 May 1903.

<sup>35</sup>Following their near failure as a result of the bank crash, Job Brothers divided its interests "into separate and independent units, so that should one of the smaller parts fail then the assets of the main part of the Job business - the importing and exporting trade - would not be liable for the debts of any other branch." The firm had a 25 per cent interest in The Royal Stores but continued to operate its own Job's Stores in a number of outports. John Joy, "The Growth and Development of Trades and Manufacturing in St. John's, 1870-1914" (M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977) 46-7; "Report of Royal Stores, Ltd., Exploits Valley Royal Stores, Ltd., and Martin Royal Stores Hardware Co., Ltd., 28 August 1933." Job Family Papers, Collection #4, Box #3, File 3.54 (MHA); Matthews, "Job Brothers & Co., Ltd."



Figure 1.3: The Royal Stores, ca. 1895  
Source: PANL, A26-104



increasingly apparent by the late 1800s. This was particularly evident in the operations of The Royal Stores, the most successful of the city's new "departmental stores" where one could get everything from "a needle to an anchor." Within the store were dry goods, grocery, hardware, crockery, ladies', and gent's departments in addition to a dress-making department and clothing factory.<sup>36</sup> Like the owners of the great American department stores, the owners of The Royal Stores proved themselves adept in the use of advertising, sales and promotions to gain the patronage of city shoppers, encouraging their competitors to do likewise and further contributing to the "Americanization" of the St. John's retail trade.<sup>37</sup> As one 1905 *Trade Review* article noted, "the invasion of Yankee ideas is here, and there are visible signs that a newer generation are having to force the pace ..."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Like some department store owners such as Timothy Eaton, certain St. John's retailers demonstrated an interest in improving their economies of scale through vertical integration. While the Macphersons manufactured clothes and blankets and later opened their own woollen mills, George Knowling packaged tea and coffee on the second floor of his premises. In 1897, it was also announced that Knowling's son, Philip, was heading to the United States for two years to visit "The principal manufacturing towns" to "gain a thorough knowledge of manufacturing and wholesale business." "Royal Stores, Limited." *Trade Review*, 9 May 1903; "Tea-Packing, Etc.," *The Daily News*, 5 February 1897; "Notes in Brief," *The Daily News*, 28 January 1897; Santink, *Timothy Eaton*, 107-8.

<sup>37</sup>One local grocer approvingly described the "Americanization" of St. John's in a letter to the *Trade Review* editor in 1902, pointing to the much improved appearance of Water Street as a result of paving, street cars and modern groceries. Another sign of the American influence on city trade was the opening of James Vinicombe's five and ten cent store, "a feature of almost every town in the United States," in 1905. Letter to the editor, *Trade Review*, 18 October 1902; Editorial, *Trade Review*, 10 June 1905.

<sup>38</sup>"Successful Business Man," *Trade Review*, 6 May 1905.

In addition to the Great Fire, Bank Crash and introduction of new retailing methods, other changes were taking place which encouraged St. John's merchants to reorganize their business operations in order to adapt. Although the crash eliminated a number of firms and narrowed the field of competition, if only temporarily,<sup>39</sup> for survivors, some argued that it had also opened up city trade to new business due to the arrival of the Canadian banks in Newfoundland and had encouraged the declining role of credit in the economy.<sup>40</sup> Because of the new banks, the financial monopoly held by the city's wealthiest and most influential merchants had been broken and smaller firms could now buy internationally with the banks' aid although in small amounts necessitating a faster turnover. D. Thistle, editor of the *Trade Review*, argued in 1910 that "Under the old regime, about ten men did all the importing worth talking about, and no Gentile could get past the portico of the temple of commerce, unless he happened to marry a sister, a

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<sup>39</sup>While many of the bankrupt firms were back in business a few years later, a number of St. John's merchants chose to get out of the fish trade. In many cases, their agents took over the branch businesses in the outports. Hickey, "The Immediate Impact of the 1894 Bank Crash," 41.

<sup>40</sup>In fall of 1899, Devine announced that the banks were very busy these days for "the credit system is becoming more contracted every year, and more of the fishermen are being paid cash, straight, for their produce than there used to be." This did not mean fishermen had renewed faith in the banking system since the arrival of the Canadian banks, however, for after changing their cheques, most took enough in notes to pay for winter supplies and the rest in gold coin to bring home. This in itself was cause for concern as city businessmen feared having coin on hand made outport fishermen easy prey for travelling peddlers. Editorials, *Trade Review*, 28 October 1899 and 9 December 1905.

cousin, or an aunt of the elect." He charged that, back then, time did not matter for the local banks covered the bills of these firms and did not push for payment, seeming to imply that such practices might have played a role in the crash.<sup>41</sup>

Setting up shop was also becoming easier due to improvements in transportation and changing retailing methods. In the past, goods had been imported only twice a year from Britain so that six months' worth of stock had to be purchased at a time, necessitating more capital or a higher credit standing than most aspiring businessmen had at their disposal. But improved transportation facilities in terms of more and faster ships for carrying freight from market meant that smaller stocks could be purchased more cheaply for cash and be more frequently replenished, permitting men with less capital to enter the retail trade in St. John's. The building of the railroad in the 1880s and the

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<sup>41</sup>Thistle may not have been exaggerating the situation given that the city's most prominent merchants also served as bank directors. It is also clear from reports made to the R.G. Dun & Co. credit agency that many local firms got their start when former clerks set up shop with the aid of employers as was the case with Charles Robert Ayre and John Steer who had the backing of Bowring Brothers. Many weathered their first few years in business only by virtue of this support and without the security of such backing, aspiring businessmen would likely find it difficult to get established. Editorial, *Trade Review*, 17 September 1910; R.G. Dun & Co., 49, 59; Carla Wheaton, "The Trade in this Place is in a Very Critical State": R.G. Dun & Company and the St. John's Business Community, 1855-1874." *Acadiensis*, 29(2), (Spring 2000) 130.

Still, there is little evidence to support the claim that the Canadian banks gave loans to small business more freely than the Commercial or Union Banks. In fact, MacLeod suggests that, as they had in the Maritimes, the banks received far more in deposits in Newfoundland than were dispersed locally in loans and that Newfoundlanders' savings were "usually used to finance loans, and therefore industrial or other development, elsewhere." Malcolm MacLeod, *Kindred Countries: Canada and Newfoundland Before Confederation* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1994) 12.

introduction of the steamer to coastal shipping also affected trading patterns in Newfoundland, allowing small firms, formerly handicapped by their lack of schooners, to begin importing directly. In 1897 a ferry service was instituted between Port aux Basques, Newfoundland, and North Sydney, Nova Scotia, making "the trans-island Newfoundland Railway a de facto eastern extension of Canada's Intercolonial Railroad." In addition to creating more competition for Water Street merchants, Reeves and MacLeod have also argued that railway and steamer opened up North America to Newfoundlanders and "facilitat[ed] a return traffic of North American people, goods and ideas," an exchange impeded prior to the 1890s by Newfoundland's isolation.<sup>42</sup> City retailers felt the impact of these changes in several ways.

Although St. John's merchants had slowly withdrawn from direct involvement in the fishery during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, wholesaling to the outport merchants who, in turn, supplied the local fishermen was still a very important part of their operations. In the past, these outport merchants had travelled to the city by boat to purchase their supplies but, after 1885, thanks to railway and steamer, St. John's wholesalers reportedly began sending their salesmen to the outports to obtain orders.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>MacLeod, *Kindred Countries*, 13; Reeves, "Our Yankee Cousins," 23, 65.

<sup>43</sup>Due to rising competition in St. John's, wholesale houses also began sending representatives to city retailers as well as to the outports, the *Trade Review* noting, "At first the more conservative firms considered it *infra dig* to send out soliciting salesmen, but they quickly realized if they wanted to retain their trade, they should get out and hustle. The increased competition has led to close-cutting amongst both wholesalers and retailers, and the consumer is reaping the benefit." Editorial, *Trade Review*, 13 April

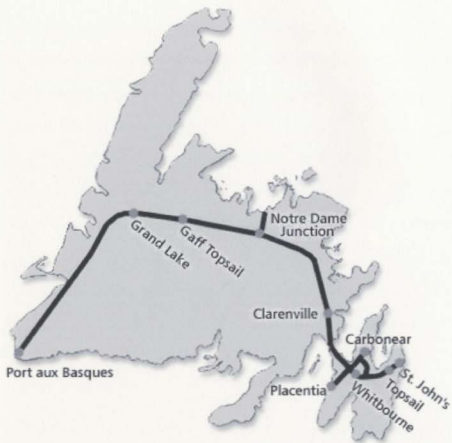
Furthermore, many of the drummers visiting the Newfoundland outports, especially those on the west coast, were from the North American mainland, particularly Nova Scotia. Evidence of growing interest in eastern Canada regarding the markets of Newfoundland created a great deal of concern among St. John's merchants who feared the decentralization of trade and its deflection from the capital city in consequence of the railway. This led M. Devine, the *Trade Review* editor, to renew the call for a Board of Trade, warning "the commercial stranger has crossed the border, and is at our gates, and, if we don't combine, the trade of St. John's is going to suffer."<sup>44</sup> He also urged city wholesalers to send out their own drummers, to follow trade "along the line" or lose out.<sup>45</sup>

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1901.

<sup>44</sup>A Board of Trade was created in 1909 but its primary concern seems to have been improving and protecting the Newfoundland fishery, still considered the mainstay of the economy. Editorial, *Trade Review*, 15 February 1902; Reeves, "Our Yankee Cousins," 23, 25-6; Hong, "An agency for the common weal," 15.

<sup>45</sup>Finding a solution to the problem of the foreign drummer was not a simple matter, however, due to the aggressiveness of competition among St. John's firms. In 1900, Devine explained that city wholesalers had not previously sent salesmen to the outports for fear of antagonizing local merchants who would consider it "an infringement on *their* trade rights, and they would boycott the man who would send a drummer to sell to *their* customers." But he charged that such attitudes were short-sighted in that Canadian drummers would quickly enter the void, selling to outport merchants in their home towns, and neither St. John's wholesalers nor merchants would get outport business. Yet, the *Trade Review* would report in 1909 that outport drumming by city firms had stopped because "too keen competition for trade led to too easy credits, with the result that bad debts became a conspicuous feature of the drummed up outport business." On the bright side, however, Canadian drummers had been restricted to the west coast of the island. Editorials, *Trade Review*, 16 June 1900, 19 January 1901, 4 January 1902, 14 January 1905, and 17 April 1909.



Map 2: Island of Newfoundland, showing railway routes, 1898.

Devine argued that the railway had altered trade in other ways as well, estimating that, by 1900, as many as three-fourths of outport customers were now mailing their orders and having the goods shipped to them by rail rather than travelling to the city to make their purchases in person. Consequently, he argued one could no longer gauge the amount of business being transacted on Water Street by the crowds, rebuking merchants in 1902 for grumbling about the slow fall trade, pointing out that business was now spread out over the year with summer sales twice what they had been in the past. This, he explained, could all be attributed to the outport buyers travelling to the city by rail instead of waiting for the semi-annual schooner trip to St. John's in the spring and fall.<sup>46</sup> More outport people also chose to buy from local merchants as, in many cases, the goods could be obtained at home almost as cheaply as in the city, making it more practical and nearly as economical to buy locally. Among them were the sealers who had once purchased supplies in St. John's after returning from the floes prior to heading home by steamer, it now being more convenient for them to buy at home since returning by rail often meant a

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<sup>46</sup>Julia Ann O'Brien of Cape Broyle (née Ryan of Calvert) recalled around 1979 the trips she would take to St. John's on the train from Trepassey in the years following her marriage in 1908. In the fall, when her husband, a fisherman, returned from settling his accounts and buying the family's winter supplies in St. John's, Julia would take some of the money left over and travel with her sister-in-law to the city to purchase materials for sewing quilts and clothing over the winter months. Staying at a boarding house overnight, the women would visit the Water Street stores where chairs lined the counters for customers to sit on while the clerks showed them a variety of materials in a wide array of colours. Julia Ann O'Brien, "Scrapbook," ca. 1979 (In possession of her daughter, Mrs. Gertrude Keough of St. John's, NF.)

trek from the station, making it difficult to carry supplies.<sup>47</sup> This must have presented quite a worry to Water Street for the seal fishery had "always been the mainstay of the spring trade," particularly that of the clothing and dry goods stores.<sup>48</sup>

The opening up through railway and steamer of the growing Newfoundland market attracted the attention of more than just the representatives of Canadian wholesalers. In 1904, the largest Canadian department store and mail order house, T. Eaton & Co., began advertising its catalogue in the local newspapers. For several months, the company ran prominent ads displaying samples of the goods available through their mail order service in nearly every issue of *The Daily News*, promising a free catalogue upon request.<sup>49</sup> In commenting on Eaton's ad campaign and rumors that "considerable business had resulted," Devine declared his surprise, dismissing it as a novelty that would soon wear off for comparative goods at cheaper prices could be had in the city. And despite Eaton's return policy, he believed few would bother to send unsatisfactory items back, it being reported

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<sup>47</sup>Editorials, *Trade Review*, 21 April 1894, 5 May 1900, 13 April 1901, and 25 October 1902.

<sup>48</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 8 April 1893.

<sup>49</sup>Eaton's ads, *The Daily News*, 30 May 1904, 11 July 1904, and 23 July 1904.

Letters to their Newfoundland customers espoused the many advantages of buying from Eaton's, among them low prices as a result of buying direct and in bulk, the variety and quality of merchandise, and the care with which orders were packaged ensuring safe delivery. Eaton's mail order department invited Newfoundlanders to write them with any questions they might have, declaring, "Our time is entirely at your disposal." "Letter from Eaton's mail order department to Mr. William Reeves," 15 November 1905. (In possession of Dr. William Reeves, St. John's, NF.)



that customers had already attempted to exchange mail order goods in local stores with some success. Although not particularly worried by this new source of competition, the *Trade Review* editor admitted, "There can be no doubt about it, the appetite of Canada for more of our trade has been whetted by her knowledge of the growth of United States trade here."<sup>50</sup>

Devine was no doubt referring to the rising number of American imports arriving each year in Newfoundland at the expense of imports from Britain, a situation frequently mentioned in local papers. In 1902 Devine declared that "The Americanization of our trade modes is becoming more marked every day; and the time when it would be commercial blasphemy to speak against British standard brands, is gone forever." One apparent reason for the shift was that British manufacturers sent goods they assumed Newfoundlanders could afford while American and Canadian manufacturers sent representatives to find out what Newfoundlanders actually wanted. This was quite a shift from 1893 when the *Trade Review* editor complained that St. John's businessmen were too conservative to consider buying goods from the United States even though, in many cases, merchandise of the same quality could be bought cheaper than from Britain.<sup>51</sup> A survey

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<sup>50</sup>Editorials, *Trade Review*, 27 August 1904.

<sup>51</sup>Editorials, *Trade Review*, 17 June 1893 and 11 January 1902.

British journalist, H.R. Whates remarked upon similar complaints in Canada regarding British suppliers: "The very shopkeepers will complain contemptuously of the difficulty of persuading English houses to supply what the local market requires, and will describe in glowing terms the alacrity with which United States merchants will go out of their way, even at a temporary loss of their margin of profit, to furnish what is needed."

of the Customs Returns reveals that, indeed, Newfoundland's trading patterns were shifting, with imports from the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States nearly on par at the turn of the twentieth century but Canadian and American imports far outstripping British over the succeeding decades. (See Chart 1 in the Appendix)

In addition to the changes introduced to island trade by improved transportation methods and growing ties to the North American mainland was the shift towards a cash economy. While most city shoppers had once bought primarily on credit, paying higher prices for goods, more now paid less by buying with cash. This growing practice of buying and selling merchandise for cash at lower prices and with higher turnovers was a formula adopted with much success by department store owners in the cities of Europe and North America, one with which old-style merchants, still buying and selling on credit, found it difficult to compete.<sup>52</sup> Like Aristide Boucicaut, William Whiteley, Marshall Field

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H.R. Whates, *Canada: A New Nation* (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1906) 222.

<sup>52</sup>The adoption of new retailing methods was a source of much conflict wherever department stores arose. Erika Rappaport describes the protests and demonstrations held in the 1870s and '80s against William Whiteley, a London retailer who had "strayed from the norms of the small independent shopkeeper" by selling a variety of goods under one roof at cut-prices and for cash only. His opponents charged that such stores were destroying gender and class distinctions by attracting both sexes and representatives from practically all sectors of society. David Monod has written of the rivalry between small retailers and mass merchandisers in Canada, finding evidence of similar rhetoric in use against these new 'Universal Providers,' in addition to charges of monopoly. The St. John's business community did not escape the conflict, particularly evident between the Water Street stores and smaller "second streets" shopkeepers over the issues of hours and holidays. Erika Rappaport, "'The Halls of Temptation': Gender, Politics, and the Construction of the Department Store in Late Victorian London." *Journal of British Studies*, 35 (January 1996) 58-61; Monod, *Store Wars*, 116.

and Timothy Eaton, some St. John's retailers were adopting the policy of 'quick sales and small profits.'<sup>53</sup>

The *Trade Review* encouraged the growth of a cash economy in St. John's, suggesting merchants keep credit to a minimum by offering discounts on cash purchases and dissuading them from offering goods on approbation or approval. The journal argued that most customers bought on credit out of habit and if merchants just refused to offer credit, consumers would eventually adjust and benefit from lower cash prices.<sup>54</sup> In spite of the many arguments favouring cash-only policies, few St. John's stores operated solely on that basis, for credit was a well engrained way of life in much of Newfoundland. As Devine reluctantly admitted, "Some of our fishermen have three generations of 'credit blood' in their veins, and it is hard, very hard, to get them out of the old groove."<sup>55</sup>

As the importance of the fish trade declined on Water Street and waged employment in St. John's rose, however, more stores began to advocate the use of cash, a

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<sup>53</sup>Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 9; Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 25; Santink, *Timothy Eaton*, 66; Twyman, *History of Marshall Field*, 172.

<sup>54</sup>The journal was not wholly successful in its campaign for many stores continued to allow customers to buy on credit and take goods home on approbation but it was a war it would continue to wage. The Board of Health had more success, temporarily at least, with putting an end to approbation after warning the Importers' Association of the dangers associated with the practice during an outbreak of smallpox in 1903. "Goods on Approval" and "Cash vs. Credit," *Trade Review*, 15 December 1900; "The Credit System," *Trade Review*, 1 March 1902; Editorial, *Trade Review*, 5 March 1910; "Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Importers' Association," 29 May 1903, Importers' Association of St. John's Collection, MG 634, Box 1 (PANL).

<sup>55</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 28 January 1893.

shift noted in the *Trade Review* as early as 1893:

In the process of the years a revolution has been worked, which has placed the whole commerce of the island on a completely different basis. The change had been principally brought about by the curtailment of the credit system and the consequent introduction to a large extent, of the cash system. In the days that were, there were very few importers, outside the exporters of fish. They had the whole of the trade in their hands, and did the bulk of their business on the credit system. The risks were great but to compensate them for this they charged very long prices for supplies. Thus the big margin of profit on these goods [*sic*] - even when many dealers failed to pay - paid for the handling, storing and carriage of fish to market, with a good balance on the right side. All this is now changed, however: a class of importers have entered the trade, who sell so far below the old credit prices that most men, no matter how they may struggle, endeavour to pay cash for the goods. The old-time merchants, recognizing the advent of the new order of things, had to make up their minds to come down in their prices - even when goods were given on credit - or shut up shop: thus, for the last few years, there has been very little difference in the retail cash prices in the shopkeepers' store and the merchants' supply store.... Meanwhile, the number of cash men is increasing, and it is very hard to anticipate what the end will be.<sup>66</sup>

Although not yet clear to the journal's editor and his contemporaries, the rising number of men entering the retail trade on a cash basis would result in the old-time fish merchants gradually removing themselves from the business of supplying the fishery, leaving that up to the outport merchant to whom they sold wholesale goods.<sup>67</sup> Although

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<sup>66</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 28 January 1893.

The above quote may provide one explanation for the decision of some Water Street firms, especially those also involved in retailing, to gradually limit their investment in the fish trade. The growth of a cash trade and the trend towards lower prices may have made it more difficult for them to support the fishery since the fish merchants had historically made up for poor seasons with high prices.

<sup>67</sup>Ommer, "Merchant Credit," 187.

some historians have been critical of St. John's merchants for their failure to invest capital in the reorganization and rationalization of an uncertain fishery, favouring instead a more profitable wholesale and retail trade.<sup>58</sup> there was more happening here than simply a search for greater profits by mercantile elites. The introduction of new merchandising and transportation methods, the growing emphasis on cash trade, and a crisis in the fishery in the 1880s and '90s provided the impetus for change, forcing store owners to adapt to new conditions by curtailing their involvement in the fish trade.

With the loss of outport trade to mainland druggers and catalogues, Water Street stores became increasingly dependent on city trade, the success of which depended largely on conditions in the labour market which determined the amount of money in circulation.<sup>59</sup> This was particularly true for city retailers without wholesale divisions as they were "forced back upon a city and suburban trade with a fighting chance for a share of the outport mail order trade.... and for this they must advertise as they never advertised before."<sup>60</sup> But the growth of a city market marked an important change in the nature of St. John's retailing as Devine noted in the summer of 1900:

In the principal dry goods stores there is a big rush this week, for distinctly

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<sup>58</sup>Alexander, "Development and Dependence in Newfoundland, 1880-1970," 16.

<sup>59</sup>Devine reported in 1902 that the St. John's dry goods man "has got to depend more largely every year on the city trade and his sales are becoming more and more gauged [*sic*] by the condition of the city labor market" for which he must compete with the smaller stores on the second streets. Editorial, *Trade Review*, 17 May 1902.

<sup>60</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 5 May 1906.

summer goods, and the city trade is becoming more and more a factor in local business every day. A few years ago, after the outport man had departed for his home about the first of June, the clerks had very little to do beyond smoking on the wharf or swapping lies with the porter in the basement. Now he is nearly as busy all summer as he formerly was in the fall.<sup>91</sup>

Fortunately for retailers, urbanization and industrialization were helping create a city market as the population of St. John's rose throughout the period. This was largely the result of the colonial government's efforts to develop and diversify the Newfoundland economy along western European and North American lines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This meant the building of a railway, the exploitation of the island's mineral and timber resources, and the creation of a manufacturing sector, all providing alternative sources of employment to the fishery and creating opportunities for wage labour.<sup>92</sup> Fearing that the expense of a railway would threaten the government's stability, many St. John's merchants opposed this aspect of the development plan yet took advantage of the high tariffs meant to encourage manufacturing by investing in a variety of new industries. These initially produced goods such as barrels and ropes destined primarily for use in the colony's marine industries but, by the early years of the twentieth

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<sup>91</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 9 June 1900 and 17 May 1902.

<sup>92</sup>Reeves has argued that "... efforts to diversify through railroad construction and the encouragement of secondary industry only served to widen a cash traffic and accelerate a steady erosion of the credit system." Reeves, "Our Yankee Cousins," 594.

century, also included consumer products such as footwear, clothing, tobacco and food.<sup>83</sup>

The vast majority of these factories were built in St. John's, making it "the most important center for secondary manufacturing in Newfoundland." In 1869, four-fifths of the island's factories were located there and although this figure had fallen to two-thirds by 1911, they still employed over fifty per cent of the country's factory workers and mechanics. Manufacturing, therefore, was a very important sector of the city's economy and one of its largest employers of labour.<sup>84</sup> Meanwhile, the size of the city's middle class, which included professionals, government employees and office workers, was also on the rise. Working-class consumption was, therefore, supplemented by that of a growing middle class with higher disposable incomes and appearances to maintain.<sup>85</sup>

The composition of the St. John's workforce was very different from the rest of the island where the vast majority were employed in the fishery.<sup>86</sup> During the period from

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<sup>83</sup>Reeves, "Our Yankee Cousins," 28-31; Joy, "Trades and Manufacturing in St. John's," 7.

<sup>84</sup>Joy, "Trades and Manufacturing in St. John's," 3-4.

<sup>85</sup>In 1894 Reverend Moses Harvey described this "steadily increasing" class as including those who through "industry and economy ha[d] acquired a modest competence" and which could rightfully be considered "the shield of society' ... making its influence for good felt extensively." Harvey, *Newfoundland as it is in 1894*, 197.

<sup>86</sup>Such statistics are important for they help to explain the impressive expansion of the city's retail trade throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During that period, St. John's was the island's only urban centre and therefore was the only community with a concentrated population providing the impetus for significant retail growth. That the vast majority of the city's employed belonged to the working and middle classes was also important for this meant a consuming population earning cash wages to be spent on goods and services. This was a very different situation from that of the outports where

1891 to 1945, the censuses show that the working class accounted for anywhere from two-thirds to three-quarters of employed persons living in city of St. John's whereas farmers and fishers accounted for less than one-tenth, with the number consistently falling over the years. Melvin Baker also argues that the city's population grew at a faster pace than that of the island as people in the outports gravitated to St. John's in search of employment. Over the period from 1891 to 1921, for example, the city's population rose by 53.3% while that of the colony increased 30.2%.<sup>97</sup> (See Chart 2 in the Appendix)

Among those customers helping to boost city sales were lumberjacks and the Bell Island miners, not to mention those returning from the Sydney mines and other jobs in the eastern States and Canada, with ready cash to spend, furthering the development of a cash

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most were employed in the fishery and bought goods from local merchants on credit.

<sup>97</sup>In his thesis examining the development of municipal government in St. John's, Baker writes that the city's population growth was due to "the greater availability of employment opportunities.... [arising] from the successful diversification of the local economy through manufacturing; but the public works projects of the colonial government, the Municipal Council, and the activities of the Reid Newfoundland Company after 1898 also helped. In 1891 66% of an occupied labour force of 7,215 workers were to be found in the secondary sector. The equivalent figures for 1921 were 63.1% of 13,407 workers. In the same period the percentage of workers engaged directly in fishing and farming ranged from 10.6 in 1891 to 6.3 in 1921. The largest increase in the town's labour force during these years occurred in the service sector, with those involved in clerical jobs outside the civil service leading the way. In 1891 the service sector formed 22.8% of the labour force; by 1921, it had grown to 30.6%." Baker, "The Government of St. John's, Newfoundland, 1800-1921," 315-16.



economy and encouraging the adoption of cash policies in some of the stores.<sup>68</sup> The colonial government's decision in 1899 to begin paying cash notes for social programs such as poor relief and road work provided another boost to the city's cash trade.<sup>69</sup>

That consumption was increasing as a result of a rising standard of living is clear from customs returns for Newfoundland which indicate that imports were growing in variety and value throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1902, the *Trade Review* noted that the island's imports had quadrupled since 1847 but the population had only doubled and some goods formerly imported were being produced locally, concluding that "Newfoundland has been called a pretty backward country, but when we institute a comparison between our condition to-day, and our condition fifty years ago, we will begin to realize that we have progressed very materially in many directions."<sup>70</sup> Particularly noteworthy is the fact that the value of imported "luxury" goods, such as china, musical instruments, and perfume, was on the rise relative to that of

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<sup>68</sup>Editorials, *Trade Review*, 4 August 1900, 19 January 1901, and 22 November 1902; Reeves, "Our Yankee Cousins," 92, 616; Patricia Thornton, "The Problem of Out-Migration from Atlantic Canada, 1871-1921," *Acadiensis*, 15(1), (Autumn 1985) 3-34; MacLeod, *Kindred Countries*, 3-5.

Still, restricting the use of credit could also be harmful to business. In 1899, the *Trade Review* reported that many of the Water Street stores were missing out on the business created by work on the building of the city tramway because the men were being paid monthly instead of weekly and so had to buy on credit in the second-street stores. It was expected, however, that some of the money would eventually make its way to Water Street through wholesale purchases. Editorial, *Trade Review*, 23 September 1899.

<sup>69</sup>"Cash Notes," *The Daily News*, 18 July 1899.

<sup>70</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 18 October 1902.

traditional, staple imports such as flour, molasses and salt. The changing nature and rising volume of Newfoundland's imports is indicative of higher levels of consumption representing greater opportunities for store owners to exploit. (See Chart 3 in the Appendix)

In addition to the statistical data, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that consumption in St. John's was on the rise and that the standard of living enjoyed by most of its inhabitants was improving. Even in the wake of the 1892 fire, it was noted that while some of the clothing being imported was cheap, none of it was "of the distinctively 'old clo'" type which had been common a few years before.<sup>71</sup> It seems consumers were becoming more particular about the merchandise they bought, so much so that evening trade was being affected as customers now preferred to do their shopping during the day when materials could be viewed in better light.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, fashion was becoming increasingly important, particularly as clothing styles changed frequently, meaning retailers could no longer store goods "on the top shelf to be trotted out again in next season as the latest fashion."<sup>73</sup> In this way, a rising fashion consciousness encouraged higher turnover rates in the stores as well as the introduction of sales to get rid of old stock in order to

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<sup>71</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 14 November 1892.

<sup>72</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 12 October 1901.

The *Trade Review* editor again noted in 1906 that "... city shoppers, who are more fastidious in the niceties and gradations of shadings than they used to be, make their purchases during the day." Editorial, *Trade Review*, 5 May 1906.

<sup>73</sup>"The Man in the Mart," *Trade Review*, 15 December 1906.

make way for newer styles.

That St. John's consumers were well aware of foreign trends is further evidenced by *The Daily News'* observation in 1898 that there was a gramophone craze in the city, next to which "The bicycle and other fads now pale into insignificance."<sup>74</sup> Their participation in the fads and crazes gripping Britain, the U.S. and Canada would suggest that the people of St. John's were also feeling the effects of a spreading consumer culture characterized by a fascination with novelty and fashion.<sup>75</sup> Evidence of a rising standard of living was everywhere as the *Trade Review* editor declared in 1905:

It doesn't require half an eye to see that this country has been progressing at a rapid rate for some time past. The people are, as a whole, better housed, better fed, and better clothed, and their earning power has been considerably increased. Good prices for our fish has [*sic*] done their work, and the newly-created auxiliary industries have contributed their share.... taking it all around, we are better off than ever we were.<sup>76</sup>

In 1906, another *Trade Review* editorial, this time comparing the current cost of living with that in 1893, suggested that, on the whole, the material conditions of most St. John's inhabitants had improved, attracting several letters debating the issue. The editor had argued that although the prices of most imports had not appreciably advanced in the intervening years, rents were now higher because better, more modern houses had been built after the 1892 fire and because people were living in better houses, they also wanted

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<sup>74</sup>"Notes in Brief," *The Daily News*, 11 January 1898.

<sup>75</sup>McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, *The Birth of Consumer Society*, 1.

<sup>76</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 11 February 1905.

better furniture. Expectations had risen, at least among the upper and middle classes, but while the wealthiest businessmen were earning and spending more, office workers and civil servants were being paid little more than they were ten years before. Yet, the latter's expenses had increased due to "the laudable and natural desire to have comfortable, bright and sanitary homes" for "any self-respecting clerk [wa]s not going to place his family in a home without modern sanitary appliances." A tradesman, on the other hand, despite the problem of periodic unemployment, was much better paid than before and his expectations had not risen so that "His food and clothing are not costing him any more than before, and pretty well the same house and furniture that suited him ten years ago suit him now."<sup>77</sup>

In response, one correspondent argued that the cost of living had risen more than was suggested for the price of goods of comparative quality was higher as were duties, rents and servants' wages. But he charged that the most important factor contributing to a higher cost of living was "conspicuous consumption" and increased expenditure on luxuries, stating that this was "an age of extravagance" and pointing to the high class of goods displayed in the big stores on Water Street as evidence. He, too, saw 1892 as a

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<sup>77</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 3 February 1906.

Most scholars agree that the middle class were the first to benefit from mass production and rising rates of consumption in the nineteenth century but that the increase in working-class disposable incomes in the twentieth century allowed members of this class to adopt the values and attitudes of the spreading consumer culture. Whether retailers, witnessing working-class prosperity, made them a target of their merchandising efforts thereby contributing to this shift or the working class chose to emulate middle-class consumption habits in a bid to raise their social status, is open to debate. Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society*, 76; Colin Campbell, "Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming," *Consumer Society in American History*, 19-30.

turning point but for a very different reason:

Our stores can now stand comparison with those of many cities of double the population, and the craze for stylish articles of dress and home adornment is greatly on the increase.... The desire for show and extravagance has been on a steady increase ever since the fire of '92, and may be mainly attributed to the influx of strangers from the American continent, who coming here to take up their residence amongst us, brought with them their ideas of modern living: ideas that have taken deep root here, with benefit perhaps to shopkeepers and revenue, but the very reverse to the man of moderate salary.<sup>78</sup>

A few years later, another contributor to the *Trade Review* commented upon the nature of conspicuous consumption in Newfoundland, comparing the situation with that in New York: "In this country we judge a man's income by the way he dresses his wife and family, the house he occupies, etc. In New York the gauge of well-to-do respectability is the possession of a servant girl."<sup>79</sup> Clearly, there was at least an impression among locals that appearances mattered and that 'conspicuous consumption' was on the rise in St. John's, boosting city trade. This trend reflects Schudson's argument that within a consumer culture, material goods are used to define and identify one's position in an increasingly impersonal and anonymous modern society. Consequently, even though St. John's was still a relatively small city with little social or geographic mobility and a well-established hierarchy, elements generally associated with traditional society, there was

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<sup>78</sup>Letter to the editor, *Trade Review*, 10 February 1906.

The journal received a letter from another reader who disagreed with the previous correspondent regarding the extravagance of most shoppers but agreed that clerks did not earn enough to support a family. Letter to the editor, *Trade Review*, 17 February 1906.

<sup>79</sup>"A Trip to New York," *Trade Review Commercial Annual*, 26 March 1910.

evidence of a rising consumer culture in the attitudes and practices of many of its citizens.<sup>80</sup>

Given the situation, it should not be surprising that many city merchants saw fit to take advantage of higher rates of consumption by reorganizing their establishments to favor retailing and to further encourage consumer spending. In fact, some long-time fish merchants were reconsidering the wisdom of participating in the fish trade at all due to the uncertainty of catch, price and markets in any given year. In a 1907 letter from W.B. Bowring in England to his brother Edgar in St. John's, he advised limiting Bowring Brothers' interest in the fishery, suggesting they concentrate on selling in the local market.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>Evolving tastes were not just a characteristic of city dwellers either for outport consumers were proving to be nearly as particular in their purchasing, forcing outport merchants to go to St. John's earlier each season in order to get the most fashionable goods recently imported from Europe. As the *Trade Review* editor noted with some condescension in 1910: "Time was when the village belle and the rural Adonis were perfectly happy with clothing that might have been cut out with a hatchet, if the colors were sufficiently vociferous; but that day is gone, and Reuben, jr., now togs himself out, on holiday occasions, just as fashionably as the gayest 'Willie Boy' in the city." Editorial, *Trade Review*, 10 September 1910.

<sup>81</sup>According to W.B. Bowring, the fishery had been the cause of every failure in Newfoundland and was responsible for all of Bowring Brothers' past losses. His advice to Edgar Bowring, therefore, was to "limit ... business in the exporting line & prefer selling in the local market, to risking exporting, of course this depends on prices ruling in [Newfoundland]. I can quite see in course of your large trading in [Newfoundland] you must take in a certain quantity of cod, but you can limit that when prices are high.... Your sealing & coasting [Bowring Brothers] trade have always been satisfactory. Also our shops & stores ... I have faith, founded on long experience, in these branches of your business." "Letter from W.B. Bowring to Edgar Bowring," 6 February 1907, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

Merchants' conviction that the future lay in retailing strengthened in the decades which followed. This in turn meant the growing importance of modern retailing techniques to attract city custom and to encourage the purchase of an increasingly varied range - in both price and quality - of merchandise. Although self-professed conservatives, many St. John's businessmen recognized the need for change, and for their model store owners looked to the great American department stores. The *Trade Review* was particularly vocal on this point, regularly urging the mercantile community in articles and editorials to adopt more modern methods, with great emphasis on extensive advertising, from which the press, of course, would also benefit. While some of the articles on advertising, window displays, and customer service appear to have local authors, many were reprinted from Canadian and American trade journals such as the *Canadian Baker and Confectioner*, the *Minneapolis Commercial Bulletin*, and the *Maritime Merchant*, providing further evidence of the growing influence of North American ideas.<sup>82</sup>

Although department stores in North America and Europe had long utilized newspaper advertising to attract customers, early ads were relatively small, not to mention "infrequent and repetitious and uninteresting in phraseology and form."<sup>83</sup> Pasdermajian

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<sup>82</sup>"New Methods," *Trade Review*, 7 January 1893; "A Science," *Trade Review*, 6 January 1900; "Let There Be Light," *Trade Review*, 20 January 1900; "Importance of Sociability," *Trade Review*, 5 May 1900; "A Pointer on Advertising," *Trade Review*, 1 December 1900; "Don't Lag," *Trade Review*, 8 December 1900; "Snappy Retailing," *Trade Review*, 27 July 1901.

<sup>83</sup>Pasdermajian, *The Department Store*, 32; Twyman, *History of Marshall Field*, 136.

suggests department stores had increased their use of ads by 1880, however, as one response to the declining skill of sales staff and credits the first extensive and imaginative use of advertising to Wanamaker's in Philadelphia. Through his ads, Wanamaker set out to educate consumers with descriptions of goods and their utility and also "sponsored advice columns about style, etiquette, and fashion trends that subtly prepared readers for the next novelties to appear in his exhibits."<sup>84</sup> Twyman and Lancaster note, however, that it was Harry Selfridge of Marshall Field's in Chicago who, in the 1890s, was responsible for another important development in department store advertising by introducing the "institutional" approach, focusing on promoting the store itself rather than specific goods.<sup>85</sup>

In St. John's, retailers were just learning at that time the importance of using a more sophisticated form of advertising to draw shoppers into their stores. In 1893 the *Trade Review* reported that advertising in St. John's had made significant advances in the previous ten years, both in volume and appearance, suggesting derisively that in days gone by, ads consisted primarily - "as per ancient formula" - of announcements that a store buyer had returned from a purchasing trip in Britain and had brought with him "a full stock, &c., &c." Now, however, the journal warned "advertisements must be sharp, crisp

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<sup>84</sup>Barth, *City People*, 139-40; Pasdermajian, *The Department Store*, 32.

<sup>85</sup>Lancaster describes institutional advertising as ads in which "the store itself is given more prominence than the goods." Twyman, *History of Marshall Field*, 146; Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 74.



and attractive: otherwise the man next door gets the trade."<sup>86</sup> St. John's retailers still had a long way to go in the early 1890s for, although many advertised regularly, most ran the same ads consisting of a few lines of text for weeks on end, some still using the ancient formula of "To arrive per the S.S. San Domingo" or "Just to hand per the S.S. Corean."<sup>87</sup> City newspapers also encouraged more frequent advertising, advising businessmen that if they wanted to keep their share of patronage, they must inform customers of their stock and the best way to do that was "through the NEWSPAPER."<sup>88</sup>

Local advertising received a boost with the arrival in 1901 of the St. John's Ad-Writing Company, which conveniently opened in the *Trade Review* building. The journal declared:

Every live business man now realizes that he must advertise, to keep up with the procession, and he must not only advertise, but advertise in an attractive manner. The days when 'Just received per schooner *Mary Jane*', passed muster are dead and gone as Julius Caesar, for the reading public now want advertisements as crisp and fresh as they want their general news.<sup>89</sup>

There is little evidence to suggest how many St. John's firms turned to the new company for their advertising copy but the urging of local papers and rising competition for city trade encouraged the Water Street stores to become the largest advertisers in the country.

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<sup>86</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 14 January 1893.

<sup>87</sup>Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 6 April 1895; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 8 April 1895.

<sup>88</sup>Daily News ads, *The Daily News*, 12 January 1899 and 3 May 1899.

<sup>89</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 1 February 1901.

Gradually, throughout the 1890s and early 1900s, stores began to rely increasingly on ads to attract the attention and custom of St. John's (and island) shoppers.<sup>40</sup>

While Bowring's still relied largely on the old-style of advertising condemned in the *Trade Review* and Ayre & Sons, although a little more expansive in their ads, were sporadic advertisers. George Knowing advertised frequently, regularly using ads to announce sales of slightly damaged merchandise or stock from bankrupt firms.<sup>41</sup> In 1913, *The Daily News* applauded his efforts:

... the Hon. George Knowing is a practical advocate of printer's ink for business purposes. Whilst to his own energy and skilful guidance are due the proportions to which his business has grown, the columns of the local press, wisely and fully patronized by him, have helped materially in the upbuilding.... When the use of newspaper columns was chiefly confined to auction sales and book lists, Mr. Knowing availed of them for business purposes. He not only published his announcements, but for many years they were written and designed by him.<sup>42</sup>

His tactics appear to have worked for on several occasions, the papers announced that "Cheap sales are all the go on Water Street, and flaming announcements attract large numbers of customers" and that "Half a dozen stores that advertise largely and well are

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<sup>40</sup>The relationship between the rise of the department store and the development of the press and advertising has been noted by a number of historians. Schudson actually argues that the department store was "... crucial to subsidizing the growth of urban newspapers" in the U.S. and quotes one late nineteenth-century journalist as describing the newspaper as "an appendage of the department store." Schudson, "The Historical Roots of Consumer Culture," 46.

<sup>41</sup>"Local Occurrences." *The Evening Telegram*, 23 December 1892; George Knowing ad, *The Daily News*, 3 January 1898.

<sup>42</sup>"Hon. George and Mrs. Knowing." *The Daily News*, 23 July 1913.

picking up all the business that's going."<sup>93</sup>

Competitors responded to such cheap sales by emphasizing quality over price in their own ads. The Royal Stores ads claimed: "The man in the other shop may have cheaper clothing, but we don't keep shoddy in stock" and "Wrecked goods might draw the attention of the unthinking crowd, but people who want value for their money will pass them by and purchase solid worth from us."<sup>94</sup> These barbs were likely aimed at Bowring Brothers or George Knowling, both having advertised damaged goods from wrecked ships and burnt warehouses. In spite of having handled wrecked goods years before, however, Bowring Brothers later joined The Royal Stores in denouncing such sales, declaring in 1913 that they would not be buying any of the goods damaged by a fire in Manchester, then being advertised by other city firms.<sup>95</sup> By the late 1900s and 1910s, then, the stores were becoming increasingly aggressive in their ad campaigns, adopting Selfridge's institutional approach to advertising by regularly trumpeting their virtues while often criticizing competitors. The Royal Stores were perhaps the most extensive advertisers in these years, declaring to customers in one 1909 ad: "We can, and will, convert the

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<sup>93</sup>Of course, these were hardly comments from disinterested observers as linking advertising with business success also benefited the press. "News in Brief," *The Daily News*, 20 July 1895; Editorials, *Trade Review*, 23 February 1901 and 29 November 1902.

<sup>94</sup>The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 3 August 1901 and 31 December 1901.

<sup>95</sup>Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 14 April 1913.

The fire damaged goods were being advertised by James Baird and George Knowling. George Knowling ad, *The Daily News*, 4 April 1913; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 10 April 1913.

majority of the clothing buyers of St. John's to our merchandise and methods. That's the reason we do such heavy persistent advertising."<sup>96</sup>

Ayre & Sons' response to The Royal Stores' large, detailed ads itemizing the goods on offer during their Friday and Saturday bargain sales was to declare that it would not be "worrying customers with stereotyped columns of bargain items: the mere fact of mentioning that our Great Stock-Taking Sale is now on, is sufficient - the offerings advertise themselves."<sup>97</sup> Not to be outdone, The Royal Stores announced its 1912 Spring Opening and their display of the newest styles, promising that the store did not pick its merchandise at random but "siffs [*sic*] the chaff from the wheat, and the 'wheat' is here, and the chaff is elsewhere, so far as we know, or care."<sup>98</sup> While the ads never mentioned competitors by name, their meaning was always implied as in this last example which suggests to readers that the 'chaff' might be found at one or more of the other stores lining Water Street.

Other, smaller stores, too, adopted these methods and introduced new concepts in their ads such as browsing and window-shopping. In 1894, J.H. Martin & Company ran an ad for house-furnishings urging "the Public to adopt the American system, i.e. to visit our Store and see what we offer for sale, not necessarily to purchase. We do not force

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<sup>96</sup>The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 17 May 1909.

<sup>97</sup>Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 16 January 1911.

<sup>98</sup>The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 22 April 1912.

goods that will not suit their requirements upon our customers."<sup>99</sup> A Parnell's ad running at the same time, encouraged patrons to come see their new shop, to view it as an opportunity to socialize, urging shoppers to bring their friends but assuring that a purchase would not be necessary.<sup>100</sup> First introduced in French and American department stores, the concept of free entrance without obligation to buy represented a significant shift in the nature of shopping, turning it into a leisure and social activity. The social component of shopping was an important feature of the rising consumer culture and would gain increasing importance as the years passed, especially as the stores focused their attention on women as the primary consumers, a subject explored in a later chapter.

The window display was another promotional tool gaining popularity among the Water Street stores in these years and was a favorite topic for *Trade Review* articles and editorials which urged shopkeepers to utilize their windows as additional advertising, particularly during holidays, declaring it a "feature of good retailing." They argued a tasteful window display increased trade by attracting the attention of passers-by, inducing them to enter the store and make a purchase "on the strength of what he or she may see in the window, when, otherwise, they would have gone away without casting a second

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<sup>99</sup>J.H. Martin & Co. ad, *The Daily News*, 5 June 1894.

Lancaster notes that, although fairly common-place in the U.S. and France, the "walk-around" store was rejected by British retailers who disliked the idea of allowing customers to browse without purchasing. With regard to customer service, American stores were, therefore, far ahead of their British counterparts by the late nineteenth century. Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 69-70.

<sup>100</sup>Parnell's ad, *The Daily News*, 5 June 1894.

glance on the goods displayed therein."<sup>101</sup> *The Daily News* also advocated the use of window displays, facetiously noting in 1897 the great advancement in window dressing since 1892, suggesting the picture of a girl on a bike in the window of Morison's grocery stores drew a much larger crowd than had "'the man killing the rat' in the good old days before the fire."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup>"The Springtime in Business," *Trade Review*, 30 April 1904.

Keith Walden, in an article examining the use and meaning of grocery window displays in Toronto around the turn of the twentieth century, argues that such displays have a cultural significance: "Window displays constituted a series of texts in a discourse about the character of modern life ... [about] order, abundance, new standards and expectations of industrialist capitalist society and, most importantly, changes in the definition of fundamental categories of culture." He suggests that grocery stores catering to a middle-class clientele emphasized the importance of window displays to their businesses while stores situated in working-class areas used their window space for storage indicating "a different social reality" and "a different social vision": "An undecorated window asserted that success was not simply a matter of human will, that community was founded on relationships of people with people, not people with goods, that trust and mutual aid should prevail over the cash nexus, that traditional ways were more comfortable than innovation." If this is true, the window displays of the Water Street stores said much about their view of themselves and their position within a modern world. Unfortunately, the few descriptions of window displays in local papers limit what can be concluded about their meaning. Keith Walden, "Speaking Modern: Language, Culture, and Hegemony in Grocery Window Displays, 1887-1920," *Canadian Historical Review*, 70(3), (September 1989) 287-8.

<sup>102</sup>"Notes in Brief," *The Daily News*, 3 May 1897.

The introduction of plate glass allowed for store fronts composed almost entirely of windows but, prior to the invention of electrical lighting, many stores left their windows empty in an attempt to get the full benefit of natural light. By the early 1900s, however, window display had evolved into an art form in the U.S. where it was taught in colleges. Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 54-6.

In St. John's, the use of electric lighting to replace gas lights became increasingly popular after 1885. Many Water Street merchants were shareholders in the Anglo-American Telegraph Co. and they installed lights to enhance shop window displays and promote the use of electricity. According to *The Evening Telegram*, "It was felt that there

In a column entitled, "The Man in the Mart," the *Trade Review* regularly called readers' attention to examples of effective window-dressing in the various stores, further promoting the practice and giving the stores extra publicity.<sup>103</sup> In 1905, the writer noted that "Store window dressing in this city has risen from the haphazard disposal of stock in the window to a high artistic plane.... It is a far cry from the two sweetie bottles and the box of T.D. pipes which adorned our shop fronts a few years ago, and our windows now compare favorably with those of our neighbors in Canadian towns." He further added that he had two store windows in mind when writing this but, "rather than excite envy in the dog days," would not mention the stores by name, giving shopkeepers fair warning that in future, however, he would not be so reticent to give praise where it was due.<sup>104</sup>

In these early years, novelty, as opposed to an effective showing of store

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was no going back to the use of gas, and those of the business establishments on Water Street which use gas to the exclusion of the new illuminant appeared at a sad disadvantage beside their rivals whose stores were brilliant with the soft mellow radiance of the new light." Brian Wadden, "St. John's Electric Light Company, 1885-1892," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 56(2), (June 1957) 4-5, 38.

<sup>103</sup>"Grocery Window Decoration," *Trade Review*, 22 December 1900; "Use Your Windows," *Trade Review*, 23 March 1901; "The Man in the Mart," *Trade Review*, 23 September 1905, 23 June 1906, 13 October 1906, and 24 November 1906.

<sup>104</sup>"The Man in the Mart," *Trade Review*, 29 July 1905.

In a 1906 article, the author congratulated F.W. Lake, an English clerk with George Knowling's, on his prize-winning window featured in *The Canadian Grocer*. Lake was also awarded a diploma by the Grocers' National Exhibition in London, more evidence of the outside influence on retailing practices in St. John's, especially as many of the store clerks came from England. "The Man in the Mart," *Trade Review*, 23 September 1905 and 24 November 1906.

merchandise, seems to have been the key to most displays. As noted in the introduction, novelty is an important aspect of consumer culture which may be linked to the concept of "modernity" and the emphasis on change in "modern" societies as opposed to stasis in "traditional" societies. Keith Walden, in a study of grocery store windows in Toronto during this period, points out that trade journals promoted originality and novelty as very important tenets of good window dressing and that "oddities and startling effects were [considered] necessary to capture attention and sustain ongoing interest in a store," noting some suggestions for displays "had at best a tenuous link to store goods."<sup>105</sup> Davis and Barth have also argued that retailers frequently changed ads and window displays to maintain consumer interest and to promote changing styles thereby contributing to the general acceptance of "obsolescence" in fashion, in turn encouraging faster rates of stock turnover in the stores.<sup>106</sup>

One of the most effective window displays to combine both novelty and product promotion featured chicks being hatched in an incubator at The Royal Stores. "The Man in the Mart" reporting that it was "particularly strong advertising for the business, for the whole city was talking of the exhibition.... I hear that there has been a large sale of

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<sup>105</sup>Walden, "Speaking Modern," 293-4; Reeves, "Our Yankee Cousins," 7-9; McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, *The Birth of Consumer Society*, 11; Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 4.

<sup>106</sup>Davis, *Fairs, Shops, and Supermarkets*, 292; Barth, *City People*, 140.



incubators since."<sup>107</sup> So popular was the exhibit that the firm announced it would hold it over for another week for those who hadn't a chance to see it yet.<sup>108</sup> Other early displays receiving comment in the newspaper included a sentimental painting of an "old-time mummer" at Ayre & Sons, a model brigantine at Goodfellow's, a "brilliant hexagonal electro-kaleidoscope" at MacGregor's, and a model warship at Bowring's.<sup>109</sup> In 1912, Ayre & Sons introduced another novel use for their windows with a "Lucky 13 Sale" which consisted of numbered items being displayed in the store's window, each costing 13 cents. Customers could buy items from the window by requesting the appropriate numbers and new stock would be featured every hour, ensuring that some customers would return or linger.<sup>110</sup>

As with modern advertising and window dressing, St. John's retailers were also a decade or two behind their American counterparts in putting the holidays to commercial use in order to sell goods. Leigh Eric Schmidt has argued that in the United States, holidays were "long thought [by capitalists] to be impediments to industrial production"

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<sup>107</sup>"The Man in the Mart." *Trade Review*, 23 June 1906.

<sup>108</sup>The Royal Stores ad. *The Daily News*, 18 June 1906.

<sup>109</sup>"Notes in Brief." *The Daily News*, 21, 23, and 30 December 1896 and 11 November 1898.

The use of window displays had also become a common practice in the smaller shops on the second streets after the fire, leading *The Daily News* editor to comment that the large Water Street stores could no longer "boast of having all the beauty." "Notes in Brief." *The Daily News*, 29 April 1897.

<sup>110</sup>Ayre & Sons ad. *The Daily News*, 19 July 1912.

but, in the postbellum period, were found "to have all kinds of possibilities when it came to consumption."<sup>111</sup> Although this realization was late in coming to Newfoundland, once the commercialization of holidays was introduced by one or two of the Water Street stores, it was quickly adopted by their competitors. The newspapers went from one or two ads for holiday groceries appearing shortly before Christmas Day in the early 1890s, for example, to much larger ads for gifts, toys and cards by the turn of the century, forever altering the nature of the Christmas trade. Gradually, as the years passed, these ads began appearing ever earlier in December, urging the purchase of an expanding array of holiday goods. While past holiday purchases had been limited largely to groceries and provisions, by the early 1900s they had expanded to include dry goods, toys and jewellery.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup>Schmidt argues that a rising culture of consumption contributed to the commercialization of a variety of folk, religious and civic holidays, and festivals over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States. Central to the process were the trade journals and retail associations which urged stores to capitalize on the holidays through special advertisements and window displays. Similarly, Michelle Comeau credits Montreal department stores with shaping not only their urban environment but also the rural calendar through their annual sales which determined shopping days and visits to the city. Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Commercialization of the Calendar: American Holidays and the Culture of Consumption, 1870-1930," *The Journal of American History*, 78(3), (December 1991) 889; Comeau, "Les grands magasins," 64.

<sup>112</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 24 December 1904.

The *Trade Review* noted in 1900 that the holiday trade was quite brisk with many merchants reporting their largest sales in years. Although most of the purchases were for children, "the trade for domestic luxuries was the largest for a long time," suggesting that not only was the Christmas trade increasing in volume but it was also expanding beyond the cards, toys and groceries that were the staples of holiday trade only a few years before. "Notes in Brief," *The Daily News*, 16 December 1895; Editorial, *Trade Review*, 29 December 1900.

Whether store ads and promotions had created the demand or simply responded to it is difficult to determine but it is clear that the stores were not above capitalizing on religious and other holidays in order to increase trade. Yet, the fact that a growing Christmas trade was noted in the press several years before most of the stores began running holiday ads would seem to indicate that they were responding to consumer demand rather than creating it.<sup>113</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that store efforts to encourage holiday buying did not contribute greatly to their commercialization. In the late 1890s, owners began decorating their premises with bunting, holly and mistletoe, and created window displays depicting holiday scenes like the figure of Old Father Christmas surrounded by children's presents, "each [store] v[ying] with the other in trying to be the neatest and most attractive."<sup>114</sup> Newspapers, such as *The Daily News*, further encouraged

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<sup>113</sup>Both *The Daily News* and the *Trade Review* noted the increase in Christmas shopping by the mid-1890s: "This Christmas trade is becoming more and more a distinctive feature of local business, as the years go on, and tho' it very rarely covers more than two weeks, the volume of trade is very large. Formerly it was confined exclusively to residents of St. John's, but since the introduction of the railway, Conception and Placentia Bays pour in their buyers by the hundreds [sic] during the latter half of December. Beside these, quite a sprinkling of purchasers, even more remote, find their way into St. John's during the same period." In 1896, *The Daily News* also noted that there were quite a few shoppers from surrounding settlements such as Topsail, Kelligrews and Petty Harbour adding to the Christmas trade. Editorial, *Trade Review*, 18 November 1893: "Notes in Brief." *The Daily News*, 23 December 1896.

<sup>114</sup>If the paper's descriptions of the stores are any indication, it would seem that The Royal Stores and George Knowling's presented the most festive appearances of all the stores, perhaps another indication of their willingness to adopt new retailing methods. "Xmas Display." *The Daily News*, 22 December 1898; "Notes in Brief." *The Daily News*, 15 December 1899.

the Christmas trade by running articles describing the window displays, decorations and merchandise to be seen in all the prominent city stores.<sup>115</sup>

By the 1910s, however, some members of the press were lamenting the "commercialized Christmas," arguing that during the past few decades the holiday had lost much of its religious significance with the emphasis now on the exchange of gifts. Even a business journal like *Colonial Commerce* claimed to regret the shift, suggesting stores had responded to the demand for Christmas merchandise by filling their premises to overflowing in order to compete for trade but it was hoped there would one day be a return to its religious origins:

Competition is keen and the merchant must advertise his wares liberally if he could not be outdone by his rival in the race to secure the Christmas trade. As the blessed day draws nearer and nearer there is a delirium of shopping, in which excited shoppers, clerks, employers, messenger boys and drivers of delivery wagons are goaded to a species of frenzy which, not seldom, terminates in a nervous collapse before the bells which ushered in the birth of the Prince of Peace have ceased to chime. - There is too much rivalry and too little of the gentle spirit of Christmas about the whole business.<sup>116</sup>

From the businessman's perspective, however, December's "delirium of shopping"

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<sup>115</sup>Walden notes that trade journals strongly advised grocers to link their window displays to the calendar and create them early enough to educate customers on what was needed for upcoming holidays, the most important being Christmas: "Theme displays, designed to train and reinforce consuming habits, were never more effective than in the festive season, especially because of their presumed impact on children." Walden, "Speaking Modern," 294-5; "Xmas Display," *The Daily News*, 21, 22 and 23 December 1898; "Our Stores This Santa Claus Season," *The Daily News*, 21 and 22 December 1899.

<sup>116</sup>"A Commercialized Christmas," *Colonial Commerce, Commercial Annual, 1918*, 68.

represented profits not to be sneered at and, with the apparent success of their efforts to encourage the Christmas trade, store owners soon turned their attention to the commercial potential of other special days. As was the case in the rest of North America, the appropriation and commercialization of religious holidays served to encourage consumption and bolster capitalism in Newfoundland, providing further evidence of the shift towards a modern, secular society.

While Christmas was by far the earliest and most commercially successful holiday promoted by the Water Street stores through their advertisements, window displays and decorations, Easter and St. Patrick's were also used to sell goods - primarily groceries, clothes and holiday decorations - by the 1910s.<sup>117</sup> A 1900 *Trade Review* editorial had pointed out that while the American cities enjoyed an Easter trade, this was generally not the case in St. John's due to the later spring. That year, however, "owing to the comparatively early spring, and the early arrival of goods, there is an Easter trade noticeable."<sup>118</sup> This holiday became an important event on store calendars, accompanied by special ads and displays and associated primarily with the buying of spring clothing and the need for a new Easter outfit, although parents were also warned not to disappoint their

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<sup>117</sup>Editorials, *Trade Review*, 14 April 1900, 28 April 1900, and 20 February 1904; Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 16 March 1906 and 15 April 1911.

<sup>118</sup>The weather seemed to have an enormous impact on city trade, discouraging or encouraging seasonal buying depending upon whether it was warm and dry or cool and wet. But its greatest impact was on the provision trade since fishing schooners could only unload their produce on fine days and the fisherman could only buy their supplies once they had sold their catch. Editorials, *Trade Review*, 14 and 28 April 1900.

children by forgetting to buy Easter eggs.<sup>119</sup> But it would never gain the commercial significance of Christmas.<sup>120</sup>

City store owners had proven themselves adept at using modern retailing methods to promote holiday trades already popular in North America and they eagerly applied those methods to local holidays. The weeks leading up to the annual St. John's Regatta, traditionally held the first week of August, was a particularly busy time for shopkeepers who urged patrons to stock up on food and drinks for the occasion and to buy a new outfit to be seen in 'down by the lake.'<sup>121</sup> As with the commercialization of Christmas, store owners were somewhat slow to perceive the commercial promise of the holiday even though the Regatta trade was a well-established fact in St. John's by 1894 when the *Trade Review* noted: "The approach of our natural *fete* day (Regatta Day) makes the clothing trade boom, and tailors and furnishers are reaping a good midsummer harvest."<sup>122</sup> Like Easter, it became a holiday associated with fashion and food, without the gift-giving

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<sup>119</sup>Ayre & Sons ads. *The Daily News*, 15 April 1911, 1 and 4 April 1912, and 22 March 1913.

<sup>120</sup>Schmidt writes that in the U.S., "the status of Easter as 'pre-eminently the festival of the dry goods trade,' and as a fashion parade, was a postbellum development." The failure of Easter to gain the commercial prominence of certain other holidays, particularly Christmas, was attributed by some American businessmen to its not having a fixed date, causing problems for certain trades, especially clothing and tourism, leading them to advocate unsuccessfully that it be celebrated on the same day every year in mid-April. Schmidt, "The Commercialization of the Calendar," 891, 915.

<sup>121</sup>Ayre & Sons ad. *The Daily News*, 28 July 1906; The Royal Stores ad. *The Daily News*, 21 July 1909; James Baird ad. *The Daily News*, 5 August 1912.

<sup>122</sup>Editorial. *Trade Review*, 4 August 1894.

potential of Christmas. Retailers also found a use for Empire Day by playing upon Newfoundlanders' imperialist sentiments with ads for flags and bunting. One Ayre & Sons ad, for example, urged customers to "Show your patriotism on Empire Day by decorating your house and premises. Others are going to do it - why not YOU?"<sup>123</sup>

As the stores expanded and competition for the patronage of city consumers became fiercer, the need to offer an ever-increasing variety of perks and attractions to gain customer loyalty grew. Among the promotional devices, services and entertainment offered by the stores to attract clientele were concerts by employee choral groups, orchestral concerts at Christmas time, sports matches pitting store teams, libraries from which customers could borrow books, and tea and rest rooms for the comfort of lady shoppers.<sup>124</sup> Some also held contests to get customers to visit, usually requiring a purchase be made in order to enter. One such contest at Ayre & Sons involved a name

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<sup>123</sup>Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 22 May 1914.

<sup>124</sup>"Notes in Brief," *The Daily News*, 6 October 1896; "The Man in the Mart," *Trade Review*, 28 April 1906 and 17 November 1906; "Life as a Hardware Assistant in Newfoundland," *Trade Review*, 25 August 1906; "Royal Stores Choral Society," *The Daily News*, 10 January 1907; Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 24 December 1901, 4 December 1909, and 28 December 1909.

Pasdermadjian argues that, in the beginning, the lower prices, novelty and convenience of the department store gave it an edge on the competition but as smaller retailers began to adopt similar methods and as the number of department stores rose, other measures such as new forms of customer service were necessary to maintain an advantage. Ironically, the expense of providing extensive customer service became a drawback for department stores by the 1920s and '30s, especially as other goods and activities such as cars and travel began competing for limited consumer dollars. Pasdermadjian, *The Department Store*, 18-9, 33, 52, 56.

guessing game in which young girls could win a doll but only after spending 20 cents on Christmas merchandise.<sup>125</sup> The contest fulfilled two purposes in getting the children's mothers into the store and, at the same time, teaching young girls how to shop, contributing to their early socialization as budding consumers.

The stores also expanded and improved customer service to gain consumer loyalty. In 1905, a number of stores purchased delivery wagons which were considered a "sign of the go-aheadness of all city retail firms." Six years later, George Knowling created some excitement when he began using a Ford truck to deliver parcels to the nearby towns of Topsail and Kelligrews. *The Daily News* declared, "Though new here, such a system of delivery has been in vogue in the larger cities on both sides of the Atlantic for some time, and with great success.... No doubt other Water Street firms will, in the near future, adopt the Knowling system."<sup>126</sup> Combining their delivery and telephone services, The Royal Stores advised customers in 1909, if "it's too wet to come, or if you are too tired and haven't time just phone."<sup>127</sup> For both city and outport customers, some stores also had special catalogues providing information and guidance in their selection of merchandise.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup>Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 26 December 1913.

<sup>126</sup>"The Man in the Mart," *Trade Review*, 4 March 1905; "Knowling's New Delivery System," *The Daily News*, 22 December 1911; George Knowling ad, *The Daily News*, 26 July 1912.

<sup>127</sup>The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 9 July 1909.

<sup>128</sup>The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 12 September 1906; Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 17 December 1907.



With the stores' adoption of new merchandising methods, competition for consumer loyalty grew, necessitating constant vigilance of one's competitors and an awareness of new trends.<sup>129</sup> A survey of store ads run in *The Daily News* over the period suggests that regular sales were the most popular way of attracting customers. The Royal Stores being the first to advertise an annual cheap sale, the inaugural sale taking place within two years of their opening. A few years later, Ayre & Sons began running ads for their annual white sale around the same time of year and, in a 1913 ad, declared that "This house was the first to introduce the 'White Sale' in this country, and, judging from the number of imitators that have followed our lead, it clearly shows the success that has attended our efforts in this direction."<sup>130</sup> That same year, James Baird began advertising his White Sale, declaring "'Tis a fact that to finish right you must start right. This applies to us, being our First White Sale it behooves us to beat all records in White Sales."<sup>131</sup> For

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<sup>129</sup>Even in areas unrelated to business, the stores, and their employees, were quite competitive. In 1899, *The Daily News* announced that employees of The Royal Stores had met to take up a collection for the Patriotic Fund. The following day the paper noted that other firms planned to take up collections, predicting that "much rivalry will exist as each will try to subscribe more than the other." "Notes in Brief," *The Daily News*, 13 and 14 December 1899.

<sup>130</sup>Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 19 January 1901; Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 3 February 1906 and 3 January 1913.

<sup>131</sup>That same month, The Royal Stores were also advertising a white sale. James Baird, *The Daily News*, 20 January 1913; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 18 January 1913.

Christopher Hosgood suggests that in England, the introduction of semi-annual sales in department stores originated in the practices of drapers who sold off remnants at the end of the season, in attempts to boost receipts especially if the Christmas trade was

new sale ideas, the stores turned to North American retailers for inspiration as with Ayre's "One Hour Bargain Sale" which they described as "extremely popular in the States and Canada, and ought to be appreciated here too."<sup>132</sup> In 1908 The Royal Stores began offering weekly specials in addition to the annual sales and a year later boasted that, while other stores were complaining of bad business, they were getting busier every day, largely due to their Friday and Saturday bargains.<sup>133</sup>

While most, if not all, the stores had bargain counters where customers could find discounted goods, George Knowling, ever the "enterprising merchant," introduced the idea of a "bargain tree" to St. John's, a novelty *The Daily News* found worthy of mention:

Mr. Knowling ... has just set up in his dry goods store a new attraction in the shape of a 'bargain tree.' It is made of metal and consists of 40 pans made to hold a supply of articles. There are six rows of pans which become smaller as it ascends. The tree stands eight feet high, and each row of pans is made to revolve at will. The idea is a splendid one and will doubtless become popular among other store keepers.<sup>134</sup>

Another important yearly event on store calendars, and an additional source of competition, was the spring departure of buyers for the European markets. It was a matter of store pride whose buyer got away first, presumably because that store would

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slow, and in the "pushing shops" where cheap goods were sold for a fast turnover. Christopher P. Hosgood, "Mrs. Pooter's Purchase: Lower-Middle-Class Consumption and the Sales, 1870-1914," *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism*, 150-1.

<sup>132</sup>Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 25 January 1908.

<sup>133</sup>The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 2 April 1908 and 28 August 1909.

<sup>134</sup>"Notes in Brief," *The Daily News*, 5 May 1897; Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 27 July 1895; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 17 August 1905.

likely get the best bargains from leftover and damaged stock as well as be the first to receive shipments of the latest fashion styles and merchandise. As one Ayre & Sons ad crowed in 1905: "Modern Business Methods Place US in the Lead for Popularity. Of course, there are Reasons for this result. One of them is that Our Buyer was First in the Market this Season, and has already shipped some good lines he secured." A few years later, The Royal Stores boasted that "Tremendous resources and the advantage of having a resident buyer in London, enables us to offer better values than are to be obtained in any other store in Newfoundland."<sup>135</sup>

As early as 1893, the *Trade Review* expressed concern that the competition between St. John's firms would contribute to radical price-cutting, leading to the failure of stores unable to withstand the loss in profits:

... there are two good objects derivable from the close-cutting of prices, viz.: the credit system is being slowly killed, and the consumer is becoming more prosperous; the workingman can get even more for his dollar, and his children are better fed and clothed. But ... retailers should be careful not to go beyond the point where low prices end and a non-paying business begins.<sup>136</sup>

In the years that followed, the journal continued to warn store owners of the dangers of cutting prices too far, suggesting it was better to fix prices to ensure a

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<sup>135</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 13 January 1900; Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 10 July 1905 and 21 February 1906; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 30 April 1910.

<sup>136</sup>There can be little doubt that foreign trade journals influenced the editorial content of the *Trade Review* for this editorial on price-cutting appeared only two months after the journal reprinted a similar article from *The Grocer's Review*. Editorial, *Trade Review*, 3 June 1893; "Price-Cutting," *Trade Review*, 27 March 1893.

reasonable profit (although loss-leaders might be considered a legitimate form of advertising) for "That class of trade is more satisfactory than that of the bargain element and is more stable."<sup>137</sup> In 1907, "The Man in the Mart" incredulously reported that he had recently gone into a store and bought a few items which were put in a small pipe or cracker box for which he was charged twenty cents. Upon questioning the proprietor, he was told that "every man in the trade would have to do the same, for competition was now so keen, nothing could be given away for nothing."<sup>138</sup> For their part, The Royal Stores claimed to be against the practice of advertising loss-leaders:

We do not quote a few flash rates in order to lure people into our store, with the intention of 'Making it up' on other articles at high prices which we may sell them. No, we have built our business on the principle of 'Small profits and quick returns.' That is why we give the best values for the least Money. Bargains. Not merely in the paper - but in the store.<sup>139</sup>

Perhaps better than any of the other Water Street stores, The Royal Stores adopted Selfridge's institutional approach to advertising, emphasizing its policy of low prices and a quick turnover, with the store's motto, "Small Profits, Quick Returns," appearing in most of its ads.<sup>140</sup>

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Clearly, rising competition was also a by-product of the increase in city trade.

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<sup>137</sup>"About Price-Cutting," *Trade Review*, 8 September 1900.

<sup>138</sup>"The Man in the Mart," *Trade Review*, 28 September 1907.

<sup>139</sup>The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 20 November 1908.

<sup>140</sup>The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 20 November 1909.

necessitating that the stores expand their operations and services to meet the demands of customers in order to gain a larger share of business. Before long the premises built after the 1892 fire were felt to be too small to accommodate the trade being done by most of the Water Street firms, necessitating the erection of store additions:

There is a great difference between the establishments that were regarded as colossal a few years ago and those of to-day. Not only is our method of business changing, but, since the fire of 1892, the change in Water Street buildings has been very marked. Small shops no longer meet the requirements of the people, nor are small stocks attractive. The buying public demand variety as well as quantity, and these, in their turn, demand spacious premises.<sup>141</sup>

As early as 1899, only four years after opening his new east end store, George Knowing bought the adjacent lot to enlarge his premises, giving him the largest frontage (138 feet) on Water Street.<sup>142</sup> In 1901, Ayre & Sons, having underestimated "the immense growth of business," built an extension over its wharf premises providing the deepest store, front to rear, in the city and floor space equal to any other. The extra room was to be used as a ladies' showroom with a skylight and an expanse of windows at the rear for a view of the harbour. Two years later, it was described as "practically a department store, in the modern sense of the word, for there is scarcely any article that comes under the category of domestic requirements but can be obtained there." The store had telephone connections on every floor, a floorwalker to direct customers, and a wagon to deliver

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<sup>141</sup>"A Palace of Commerce!" *The Daily News*, 23 September 1907.

<sup>142</sup>Editorials, *Trade Review*, 30 December 1899 and 17 February 1900.

parcels anywhere in the city.<sup>143</sup> Then, in 1907, Ayre & Sons moved into the Pitts Building, owned by local businessman, James Pitts, at 249-253 Water Street, the local press declaring:

The evolutionary process in the perfection of the size, architectural style and equipment of Water Street business houses, that has been going on in this city since the great fire of 1892, has had its timid and cautious gradations broken through in a startling manner by the erection of the new building for Messrs. Ayre & Sons ...<sup>144</sup>

The new store, considered comparable "to most modern stores in the United States and Canada," had, as far as *The Daily News* was concerned, "set the pace for future structures along our principal street." Described as "A Palace of Commerce," the building had five stories and featured electric lights, a cash railway (installed by a Mr. Flinn from Boston), two elevators (one for customers, the other for freight), a kitchen, a tea room, sitting rooms, washrooms, and enclosed window displays fitted with "prismatic" lights.<sup>145</sup> A range of merchandise, including hardware, earthen/crockeryware, pianos, stationery, furniture, and groceries, could be purchased from the store's various departments. Local commentators declared that "When completed it will be the acme of comfort.... It supplies a long felt want, and one that outport customers, especially ladies, will appreciate, for all

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<sup>143</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 22 October 1901; "Ayre & Sons," *Trade Review*, 19 December 1903.

<sup>144</sup>"Ayre & Sons New Building," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 7(2), (October 1907) 18.

<sup>145</sup>"The Man in the Mart," *Trade Review*, 13 October 1906; Editorial, *Trade Review*, 28 September 1907; "A Palace of Commerce!" *The Daily News*, 23 September 1907.

the conveniences and comforts of home can be had there from the opening to the closing hour. A lady could spend the whole morning selecting goods ..."<sup>146</sup> (See Figure 1.4)

The Royal Stores also enlarged their premises during these years while Bowring Brothers and James Baird built completely new stores. In 1902, The Royal Stores filled the gap between their dry goods and grocery stores with a hardware department, giving them the largest store in the city, and in 1905, Bowring's tore down its 1895 store and built a new one of concrete with three storeys and an elevator, all within three months.<sup>147</sup> When they had taken up all the extra space adjacent to their stores, a number of firms, including The Royal Stores and George Knowling's, added storeys to their existing premises, the *Trade Review* reporting that "many merchants regret[ed] that they did not build higher when their new buildings went up after the fire." The editor concluded in 1906: "There can be no doubt about it the value of land is being considered seriously in building on the principal streets, and 'room at the top' will be more in evidence in years to come."<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup>"Ayre & Sons New Building," 18-9.

<sup>147</sup>Editorials, *Trade Review*, 12 July 1902 and 17 July 1909; "The Man in the Mart," *Trade Review*, 13 October 1906; "Bowring's New Retail Store," *The Daily News*, 8 June 1905.

<sup>148</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 17 February 1906; "The Man in the Mart," *Trade Review*, 13 October 1906 and 17 November 1906.

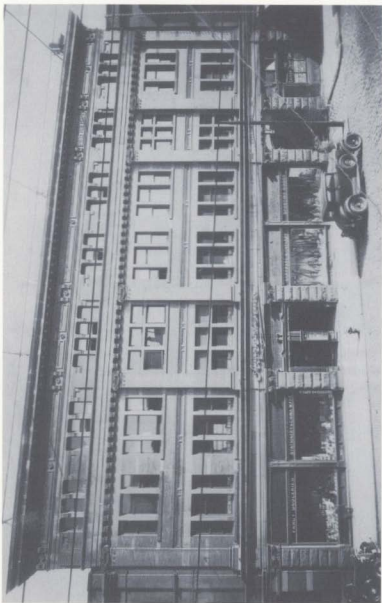


Figure 1.4: Ayre & Sons, Pitts Building  
Source: PANL, B1-15



The stores expanded their businesses in other ways as well, some building branch stores in other areas of the island. In 1898, George Knowing decided to open a store in Channel, sending James Daley, an employee in the dry goods department of his Water Street store, as manager.<sup>149</sup> Job Brothers, partners in The Royal Stores, had a branch store in Placentia and in 1906 The Royal Stores built a new premises there to meet the increase in trade. Like many of the Water Street stores, it had plate glass windows and other "up-to-date" features, dealing mainly in dry goods, groceries, hardware and furniture.<sup>150</sup> This was in addition to The Royal Stores Clothing Factory started in 1899, a furniture store and clothing factory on Duckworth Street in 1905, and the Riverside Woollen Mills, Ltd., in 1906. Then, in 1911, in an agreement with the Anglo-Newfoundland Development Company, they established The Exploits Valley Royal Stores, Ltd., at Grand Falls and Millertown.<sup>151</sup>

The owners of the large Water Street stores had come a long way in a relatively short period of time, modernizing their establishments and adopting new retailing techniques to great effect. In 1906, the *Trade Review* described the evolution of the

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<sup>149</sup>"A Branch Business," *The Daily News*, 18 January 1898; "Notes in Brief," *The Daily News*, 21 January 1898.

<sup>150</sup>"Notes in Brief," *The Daily News*, 3 February 1898; "New Store at Placentia," *The Daily News*, 18 January 1906.

<sup>151</sup>In a 1909 ad, The Royal Stores boasted that it had the "biggest and fastest growing business of any store in Newfoundland" because it was "The Store of Satisfaction." "The Royal Stores, Ltd.," *The Book of Newfoundland*, Vol. 2, 476; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 24 July 1909.

Newfoundland merchant:

Progress has been slow in almost every line in this country, but in no department has the conservativeness, begotten of our isolation, been more marked than in our business methods. Up until a quarter of a century ago our business men were as tenacious of ancient commercial tradition as were their grandfathers, and any concessions to new conditions were as grudgingly made as the force of newer ideas would permit. But the wave of reform in business methods could not always be kept out, and what the railway and increased steam facilities began, the bank crash completed.... [Today, the merchant's] education is liberal; his tastes Cosmopolitan, and he never talks shop outside his business. He does not believe in carrying all his eggs in one basket, and, instead of confining his attention entirely to the fisheries, he is willing to put his dollars in manufacturing enterprises and similar speculations.<sup>152</sup>

This shift in attitude among members of the mercantile community was the result of a number of factors coinciding in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Changes in transportation: disasters like the 1892 fire and 1894 bank crash: a crisis in the fishery: urbanization: industrialization: competition from foreign drummers, pedlars and catalogues: the influence of North American retailing methods: and the introduction and adaptation of these methods by businessmen not tied to local traditions forced the pace of business in St. John's and contributed to the establishment of Water Street's "Palaces of Commerce."

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<sup>152</sup>"The Evolution of the Newfoundland Merchant." *Trade Review*, 27 January 1906.

**Chapter Two - War, Depression and the Birth of the  
St. John's Department Store, 1914-1939**

World War I contributed to rising inflation and resulted in a post-war recession, creating new sources of pressure and introducing new forces for change into the St. John's business community. Distracted by the international conflict and the organization of the country's war effort (many of the city's most prominent businessmen - among them the owners of the large Water Street stores - were members of the Newfoundland Patriotic Association charged with the difficult task of raising funds, recruits and a regiment), the war years witnessed little change in the city's retail trade but were characterized by a higher cost of living, shortages, controversies over prices and enlistments, and unswerving loyalty to the mother country. Rising prices, stagnating wages, the threat of a consumer league, and the organization of their employees following the war, necessitated some damage control by the merchant community to defend their businesses. But the opening of new stores not restricted by old customs such as credit and using aggressive tactics to gain a share of the trade, forced the pace of change and brought modern, North American-style retailing to the fore. The arrival of the Depression, forestalling the country's economic recovery from post-war recession, raised the stakes for the Water Street stores, narrowing the gap between expansion and overextension. Despite the upheavals of the period, however, by the 1930s, after decades of gestation, the St. John's department store was born.

In her thesis, "The Newfoundland Patriotic Association: The Administration of the

War Effort, 1914-1918." Patricia O'Brien estimates that over half of the original 55 members were "businessmen and the majority of these were leading representatives of major Water Street firms." attributing their interest in the Association to imperialism, "distrust of local politicians," and "commercial advantages." Created to remove the war effort from the political sphere in an attempt to unify the country, it was largely successful in the early years of the war but scandals over evidence of merchant profiteering soon led to other divisions (social, religious and geographic). As a result, a coalition government was formed in 1917 which took over administration of the colony's war effort from the discredited NPA.<sup>1</sup>

Far from keeping their business interests separate from their war-time activities, the Water Street merchants made their firms central to their conduct of the war, at times attracting much criticism. There were charges that ship-owning companies had sold off much of their tonnage in spite of the island's heavy reliance on steamers for trade and a government commission investigating charges of profiteering also found proof of price gouging.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, however, the conflict in Europe seems to have temporarily

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<sup>1</sup>A list of Newfoundland Patriotic Association (NPA) members indicates an overwhelming representation of the city's merchant houses, among them C.P. Ayre, Eric Ayre and F.W. Ayre of Ayre & Sons; E.A. Bowring, Edgar R. Bowring and J.S. Munn of Bowring Brothers; Archibald, Harold and Cluny Macpherson of The Royal Stores; R.B. Job and W.C. Job of Job Brothers; David Baird of James Baird & Co.; and George Knowling of George Knowling, Ltd. Patricia O'Brien, "The Newfoundland Patriotic Association: The Administration of the War Effort, 1914-1918," (M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1981) 54, 354-62.

<sup>2</sup>O'Brien, "Newfoundland Patriotic Association," 236, 251, 302.

distracted store owners from the push to expand and modernize which had characterized their operations in the two preceding decades.<sup>3</sup>

The direct participation of store owners in the Newfoundland war effort also had a significant impact upon their employees. As members of the NPA, they were largely responsible for the recruitment of volunteers to fight overseas and, since 20 percent of the St. John's workforce was employed in offices and shops, a fair portion of the city's eligible servicemen was under their employ. When trade began to drop off at the start of the war, businesses began closing at night and to avoid layoffs, store owners urged many of their male employees to enlist. They were so successful that four of the firms contributed fifty volunteers in two months. (See Figure 2.1) As Christmas approached, however, trade rose and the loss of clerks meant a shortage of staff. To address the concerns of the Water Street firms, the NPA allowed enlisted clerks to delay their training until after the holiday while all remaining volunteers commenced training immediately. Later in the war, as the number of volunteers fell, the firms encouraged their employees to enlist by

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<sup>3</sup>Although the stores continued their sales and frequently advertised, there was no mention of plans for remodelling or reorganizing their businesses in city papers. In fact, the Annual Reports of the Newfoundland Board of Trade for the years 1914 and 1915 fail to mention the wholesale or retail trades at all while the 1917 report suggests only that, in spite of the increasingly high cost of goods, there had been few business failures, likely due to the high price of fish. Since the Board's main focus was usually the fishery and, to a lesser extent, other primary and secondary industries such as manufacturing, mining and forestry, this is not unusual. Yet, most annual reports did include some mention of how prices and employment in other sectors of the economy were impacting wholesaling and retailing but not in these years, seeming to indicate a singular lack of concern. *Annual Reports of the Newfoundland Board of Trade, 1914 and 1915*: "Eight [sic] Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade." *Colonial Commerce*, 31 January 1917.



Figure 2.1: Ayre & Sons Employees in the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, 1914-18  
Source: *Newfoundland Quarterly*, December 1914, p. 42.

promising to hold their positions open until their return from overseas service. As a further inducement, some agreed to make up the difference in wages paid to clerks and to soldiers.<sup>4</sup>

In essence, the Water Street merchants were able to manipulate their workforces in order to avoid layoffs and labour shortages while utilizing their relationships with employees to raise enlistments and lend legitimacy to their handling of the war effort. Ayres, Bowrings and Macphersons also volunteered but signed up as officers rather than as ordinary soldiers so that barriers present in the stores, distinguishing owner from worker, were recreated then in the country's military between officer and soldier.<sup>5</sup> In the last year of the war when falling enlistments became a problem, leading to a conflict between St. John's and the outports over the failure of many outport men to enlist, several stores ran recruitment ads in place of their regular ads. One Ayre & Sons ad urged men to "Hit the Trail of the Caribou, And Make Your People Proud of You!" on behalf of the Newfoundland Regiment, while Bowring Brothers ran a similar ad on behalf of "The

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<sup>4</sup>Similarly, the families of enlisted or laid-off employees of the Paris department store, the Bon Marché, were given grants to see them through the war. While the stores' paternalistic relationships with their employees guided such policies, in the case of the St. John's merchants, the self-interest of NPA members was also a motivation. O'Brien, "Newfoundland Patriotic Association," 76, 87, 106-7; Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 233.

<sup>5</sup>In *Tapestry of War: a private view of Canadians in the Great War*, Sandra Gwyn describes the Newfoundland Regiment as "a motley assortment of fishermen and loggers and trappers, with a sprinkling of St. John's merchant princelings on top ..." Sandra Gwyn, *Tapestry of War: a private view of Canadians in the Great War* (Toronto: Harper Collins Publishers, Ltd., 1992) 298.

Soldiers and Rejected Men" which encouraged the "young men of the outports of Newfoundland" to enlist.<sup>6</sup>

The loss of employees through enlistment as the war continued, necessitated a few changes in the way the stores operated. Early on, many businesses had limited their orders fearing a disruption of trade but the removal of a British embargo on trade with the Mediterranean in 1915 brought an end to the economic slump of 1913-14, leading to a revival in the fish trade and resulting in an improved economy and higher employment. This meant a greater demand for labour and more women, who had already begun to benefit from the expansion of the Water Street stores by taking new low level positions at lower wages, were hired to replace the men heading overseas.<sup>7</sup> New labour-saving

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<sup>6</sup>In January 1915, *The Daily News* reported that Bowring Brothers employees "have responded to the Call of Empire most liberally, no less than eight having passed the medical examinations, and enlisted in the Second Newfoundland Contingent." As in business, there was no doubt an element of competition among city firms to see who could contribute the most volunteers. "Bowring Bros. Employees Join the Volunteers." *The Daily News*, 5 January 1915; Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 17 April 1918; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 19 April 1918; Ayre & Sons, *The Daily News*, 22 April 1918; George Knowling ad, *The Daily News*, 23 April 1918; Martin-Royal Stores Hardware Co. ad, *The Daily News*, 24 April 1918.

<sup>7</sup>Women were not, however, taking jobs from men as a result of their employment in the Water Street firms. Rather, they were entering newly created positions opening up as a result of store expansion. In addition to their usefulness in serving female clientele, salesladies also worked for less pay thereby lowering the stores' expenses. The increased bureaucratization of store operations was in part responsible for it allowed the creation of a hierarchy of employees so that less experienced workers could be hired and supervised by floorwalkers, department heads and store managers. More women may have been hired to replace enlisted clerks during the war but, according to Nancy Forestell, it is unlikely that women workers in St. John's made many permanent advances in entering the workforce since most employers promised to hold jobs for men going overseas. Benson,



devices like the cash register were also introduced to ease the impact of fewer experienced male staff. As one cash register ad in *The Daily News* argued, this new technology would limit the number of mistakes being made by salesladies and inexperienced boys doing the work of absent clerks.<sup>8</sup>

The war's impact on retailing operations is most evident in store advertisements, replete with references to the conflict in Europe, loyalty to the mother country, the rising cost of living, and the threat of shortages. Early on in the war, when it was still possible to obtain imports from Britain, ads frequently urged consumers to buy British-made goods, sometimes using the war as a metaphor for trade competition, one Ayre & Sons ad stating in 1914: "English Manufacturers have now an opportunity of showing they can produce Blouses that are equal in every respect to those of German and Austrian Manufacture."<sup>9</sup> Retailers also expressed their nationalist sentiments by elaborately decorating their premises with bunting (See Figure 2.2) while encouraging consumers to express their own loyalty through purchases of flags, tea tins and women's neckwear with

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*Counter Cultures*, 2-3, 283-8; Nancy Forestell, "Women's Paid Labour in St. John's Between the Two World Wars." (M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1987) 5, 18, 20, 31, 34.

<sup>8</sup>One ad featured a saleslady operating a cash register stating, "This clerk makes no mistake in adding the items of a sale.... No mental additions, and no mistakes." "The Retail Store And Its Equipment." *The Daily News*, 11 August 1917; "A New Invention for Storekeepers." *The Daily News*, 4 September 1920; National Cash Register Co. of Canada, Ltd., ad, *The Daily News*, 18 September 1920.

<sup>9</sup>Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 14 September 1914, 27 October 1914, and 3 May 1915; James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 30 October 1914 and 1 December 1916.



Figure 2.2: Ayre & Sons, 1914  
Source: PANL, A17-184

patriotic designs. And on the day of its departure from St. John's in the fall of 1914, the stores closed their doors for several hours "to enable clerks and citizens to witness and give a good send off to the First Newfoundland Regiment ...."<sup>10</sup>

If patriotism failed to sell, there was always the threat of shortages to encourage buying as one Ayre & Sons ad warned. "Owing to the war, later shipments of such goods [Fall and Winter Coats] are problematical, and it would be wise for our patrons to secure what they want in these garments NOW."<sup>11</sup> In 1917, *Colonial Commerce* noted that orders placed in 1915 and 1916 had still not been filled due to problems in delivering goods yet the lack of supplies and the high cost of goods were more likely caused by disruption to production in Britain and local customs duties.<sup>12</sup> By 1918, shortages had become a severe problem, *Colonial Commerce* reporting that "The shortage of British

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<sup>10</sup>"Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Importers' Association," 8 October 1914, Importers' Association of St. John's Collection, MG 634, Box 1 (PANL); Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 29 April 1915; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 4 April 1916; Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 1 June 1917.

<sup>11</sup>Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 27 August 1914.

<sup>12</sup>Attacks on the merchant fleet were in part responsible but some attributed shipping problems to the opportunism of ship-owning NPA members who, it was charged, had made a tidy profit by selling off many of their steamers to be used in the war effort. Then, it was argued, those who had held on to some of their ships had raised freight rates, further contributing to high prices and shortages. There is little evidence to support these charges, although Job Brothers, for example, did reluctantly sell its share in the S.S. *Nascopie* in 1915 to their partners, the Hudson's Bay Company, for use in war transport. O'Brien, "Newfoundland Patriotic Association," 236, 251; Job, *John Job's Family*, 61; *Ships and Seafarers of Atlantic Canada: Data on the vessels, captains and crews of Atlantic Canada, an Interactive CD* (St. John's: Maritime History Archives, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1998).

goods is just now a disturbing factor, and for want of those goods a few firms here have decided to go out of business."<sup>13</sup>

The rising cost of living also hindered consumption, a concern addressed in store ads, again using military metaphors. James Baird advertised his weekend sales with such statements as "War Still Wages on High Prices. Our camp now actively engaged cutting prices ...." "Invade this incomparable Bargain Budget & Conquer to-day's problem - The High Cost of Living," and "ENLIST! With the Legion of Satisfied Shoppers that Storm our Bargain Trenches ... In the Face of Such Formidable (Bargain) Array You Can't Remain Neutral. Bargains like these mean SHOPPING ACTIVITY."<sup>14</sup> In 1917 the Newfoundland Board of Trade reported that the cost of almost every kind of good had reached "unprecedented figures." On dry goods, for example, prices had risen about seventy percent since the start of the war, while the price of some woolen and cotton items had increased over one hundred percent. So far, however, the Board noted, "there had been almost complete immunity from serious business failures" due largely to the high prices being paid for Newfoundland fish in the international markets. Consequently, only

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<sup>13</sup>The disruption caused by the war to production in Britain exacerbated shortages but so did the loss of other traditional suppliers. According to the journal, Newfoundland had, indirectly, done much trade in German and Austrian manufactured goods but, as those loyal to the mother country avowed, it "is to be hoped that day is gone." "Current Notes," *Colonial Commerce*, 30 April 1918; "Dry Goods," *Colonial Commerce*, 31 May 1917. (*Colonial Commerce* was a business journal started in 1915 by P.K. Devine, editor of the *Trade Review*.)

<sup>14</sup>James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 21 August 1914, 17 and 24 November 1916.

those earning fixed wages were suffering from inflation but *Colonial Commerce* warned that more people would have to exercise economy in order to combat rising prices.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of such warnings, the journal anticipated a brisk fall trade in 1917 and a year later, *Colonial Commerce* still marvelled at the boost given to the Newfoundland economy by the war in Europe:

I [*sic*] spite of the high prices ruling for all the commodities of life the people of the country, as a whole, were never so well off, and there is now no talk of want or poverty such as we used to know in past times amongst the people ... The outports have undergone a quiet but complete trade revolution in recent years owing to the fact that the business people there are brought into touch with the wholesale sources of trade and deal direct with the first market. The general volume of trade has so increased in the meantime, that St. John's has not suffered in proportion to the big divergence of business to the outports. The loss if any has not been felt by the retail man and the wholesale trade has increased tenfold.... Business men from wholesalers and manufacturers are now travelling the whole Dominion and we are all coming out of our isolation of centuries and have made the biggest lap [*sic*] in the journey the past four years. The war has helped Newfoundland in more ways than one.<sup>16</sup>

Few in the business community complained of the rising prices as long as the country continued to receive high prices for its products, particularly for its fish. And, while many believed the price of fish would drop after the war, the cost of food, clothing and other necessities was expected to fall as well, even though it might take a few years for trade to readjust. In early 1919, however, all were reluctant to predict how the post-

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<sup>15</sup>"Eight [*sic*] Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade"; Editorial, *Colonial Commerce*, 31 March 1917: "Dry Goods," *Colonial Commerce*, 31 May 1917.

<sup>16</sup>Editorial, *Colonial Commerce*, 31 July 1917: "Prosperity in Newfoundland," *Colonial Commerce*, 31 October 1918.

war economy would shape up.<sup>17</sup>

The problem of high prices in Newfoundland continued long after the war, but their effect was no longer ameliorated by a high price for the country's fish. In 1920, the price of fish fell, exacerbating the problem of inflation, but the conflict in Europe could no longer be used as an explanation for the high cost of goods. The financial drain of the war debt and the railway on the colonial government, in addition to a falling demand for the country's fish due to post-war economic upheaval in Brazil, Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal, led Newfoundland into a recession. In 1920 the revenue from salt cod exports had been \$23 million but in 1921, that figure dropped to \$13 million. There was a pervasive sense of "doubt and insecurity" in the St. John's business community such as had not been felt for decades and the Board of Trade reported that although the cost of living had fallen in 1921, so had employment and wages, so that little improvement could be seen. Since seasonal employment in the island's industrial centres like Grand Falls and Bell Island had also dropped off, city trade was suffering. Retailers who survived the downturn were forced to get rid of staff and cut wages.<sup>18</sup>

By March of 1920, consumer antagonism over rising prices, particularly on

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<sup>17</sup>Editorial, *Colonial Commerce Commercial Annual 1918*; "Trade Outlook," *Colonial Commerce*, 28 February 1919.

<sup>18</sup>Forestell, "Women's Paid Labour," 23-8; S.J.R. Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971) 155.

necessities, was reflected in a movement advocating the creation of a Consumers' League similar to one created in Britain. Evidence of profiteering during the war, the start of a recession, and continued high prices led to renewed charges of price gouging and a number of prominent citizens met to form the Consumers' League and appoint a committee to consult with government regarding legislation to punish profiteers. While steep shipping rates and duties provided a partial explanation for high prices, the excessive profits made by wholesalers, retailers and jobbers were considered the main culprit.<sup>19</sup>

The merchants' response to the Consumers' League's charge of unnecessarily high prices was to blame freight rates, government duties and the extravagance of consumers, the annual report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade for 1920 suggesting that the unusually high prices received during the war for the nation's fish, mineral and forestry products were the problem:

Unfortunately our people through the abnormal prices we have obtained for our products and the consequently greatly increased circulation of money, have in common with people the world over lost their sense of relative values and by extravagance in both public and private life are assisting to increase the already high cost of living. There are only two sure remedies for this evil *Work and Save*.<sup>20</sup>

Defenders of the merchants' position also responded to League charges that they had not reduced prices on necessities as much as they could by arguing that "Competition is too

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<sup>19</sup>Editorial, *The Daily News*, 31 March 1920; "The Consumers' League," *The Daily News*, 28 April 1920; "Consumers' League," *The Daily News*, 19 May 1920.

<sup>20</sup>*Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade, 1920*, 3-4.

keen in St. John's to allow of any 'extortionate profits being made at the expense of the public.'<sup>21</sup>

The Newfoundland Board of Trade also attributed the problem of high prices and troubles within the fishery to government duties, noting that "Nearly all our taxes, no matter upon whom they are intended to fall, are ultimately passed on to the consumer and have to be paid by him."<sup>22</sup> Not surprisingly, the *Trade Review* concurred, repeating one local merchant's claim that "were it not for Newfoundland's outrageously high tariff his firm would be able to sell half a dozen of the principle lines of dry good [*sic*] within five per cent of the cheapest pre-war prices" due to the bargains to be had in the United States as a result of business failures.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the charges of profiteering, city merchants had to contend with the activism of their own employees who complained of the rising cost of living and low pay, making demands for a 'living wage.' Although fishermen had benefited from the high price of fish during the war (explaining their reluctance to enlist and masking inflationary trends), shop clerks had, reportedly, received no increase in pay and some argued it was

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<sup>21</sup>The letter, by J.E. Dempster, was written in response to a recent editorial in *The Evening Telegram*. Dempster, holding a management position in George Knowling's grocery department, was hardly an impartial observer. Letter to the editor, *The Daily News*, 15 October 1921; *McAlpine's St. John's Directory, 1908-09*, 195.

<sup>22</sup>*Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade, 1923*, 5.

<sup>23</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 11 March 1922.



time to appoint delegates to meet with employers.<sup>24</sup> An attempt was made in 1919 to create a clerks' association but the movement apparently failed, either in its objective to organize workers or in getting employers to the bargaining table. Within weeks of its formation, the association had disappeared from city newspapers as had the Consumers' League. Less than two years later it was announced that some employees of the Water Street firms had been given layoff notices due to a depression in business. The Importers' Association, which included all the major firms, planned to meet to adopt a regular schedule of wages to be submitted to employees, "most of the employers being desirous of retaining their entire staffs if at all possible."<sup>25</sup> Instead of raises, many store employees were forced to choose between wage cuts or layoffs.

Still the recession in Newfoundland continued, growing worse throughout the early 1920s. *The Newfoundland Magazine*, a journal devoted largely to news and business, advised "cheerful and persistent" advertising as a cure for the island's economic troubles:

If one were to trace the present trade depression in this city and throughout the country to its source it would be found that the main cause of it is psychological rather than founded upon anything real or concrete. The

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<sup>24</sup>This is contrary to a report in *Colonial Commerce* which suggested that "Wages and salaries have been in many cases raised in the mercantile establishments to enable the employees to meet the present abnormal conditions." "Eight [sic] Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade."

<sup>25</sup>Letter to the editor, *The Daily News*, 11 and 12 December 1917; "Notice to Clerks," *The Daily News*, 21 June 1919; "Clerks Will Form Organization," *The Daily News*, 27 June 1919; "Laying Off Employees," *The Daily News*, 15 December 1920.

advertising that has been done during the past few months has been of a nature calculated to ensure the depression from which we now suffer instead of dispelling it, and the specious arguments of the gloom agents have succeeded but too well....

The object of advertising should be to increase existing trade and to create new business, and hence it is that when business shows a tendency to slump, advertising should be increased.<sup>26</sup>

As part of their advertising campaign to encourage consumer buying, some merchants met charges of profiteering and price-gouging with claims that they had the consumer's best interest at heart. Instead of downplaying rising prices, aggressive advertisers like James Baird confronted the problem in their ads, arguing "We buy our Merchandise with extreme care ... and instead of trying to see how much we can get for these goods, we mark them at lowest possible prices, being satisfied with modest profits ..."<sup>27</sup> By far the most frequent and creative users of institutional advertising in the 1920s, Baird's used its ads to gain customer loyalty, urging consumers to "TRADE at YOUR HOME-TOWN STORE. TRADE AT BAIRD'S. The Store that has kept incessantly at it. CUTTING PRICES to help along the Overtasked pocket books of the Masses ..."<sup>28</sup> In focusing on the store itself rather than on specific goods, Baird was also attempting to confront a long history of mistrust between the merchants and fishermen in Newfoundland arising out of the "evils" of the credit system, a mistrust handed down to the city's growing

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<sup>26</sup>"The Gloom Chaser." *The Newfoundland Magazine*, November 1920.

<sup>27</sup>James Baird ad. *The Daily News*, 15 September 1922.

<sup>28</sup>James Baird ad. *The Daily News*, 8 April 1921.

working class. The rising prices and stagnating wages of the post-war period had awakened old prejudices, necessitating a response from merchants to quell the antagonism of consumers. Part of his campaign to win their trust was to proclaim his commitment to truth in advertising:

This Store has always adopted the principle of Honesty in its advertising, and faithfully carrying it out today [*sic*]. Our announcements carry no exaggerated statements, you are sure to find everything as represented. We can never betray your confidence in us or in our advertising.<sup>29</sup>

The arrival of a new competitor in 1919, bent on profiting from the historical mistrust of local merchants, added to the troubles of the Water Street stores. Begun by two brothers, Joseph and Harris Goldstone, using profits made from a huge one-time sale of women's ready-mades from the U.S. in 1917, The London, New York and Paris Association of Fashion, situated next door to Bowring's at 283 Water Street, deliberately set itself apart from the city's other retail establishments. With Joseph acting as a very effective manager, introducing such concepts as the money-back guarantee to the city's retail trade, Harris travelled to New York and London as the store's buyer.<sup>30</sup> The

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<sup>29</sup>Similarly, historian Roland Marchand suggests that in the United States, a "rising distrust of advertising emerged in the form of a fledgling consumer movement" by the 1920s and '30s. James Baird ad. *The Daily News*, 19 August 1921; Roland Marchand, "The Golden Age of Advertising," *American Heritage*, 36(3), (April/May 1985) 88-9.

<sup>30</sup>The Goldstones were born and raised in the St. John's area and their father, Israel Goldstone, was a local businessman. Joseph Goldstone, prior to opening The London, New York and Paris and with his father's aid, had started a dry goods store in Burin but, shortly after, lost the business in a fire. One former employee described Goldstone as a former peddler on the Burin Peninsula and Southern Shore, selling from "a pack on his back." Although the informant later went to work for Bowring's, he claimed to have

Goldstones emphasized their foreign ties with store ads stating that their stock came from "one of New York's 19th Street Department Stores" and suggesting that St. John's was "advancing some when a New York departmental store interests itself."<sup>31</sup>

Due, no doubt, to an awareness of the general antagonism felt towards local merchants, The London, New York and Paris ads frequently reminded consumers that the store had "no connection with any other concern in St. John's," that their merchandise was available only in their establishment, and that their retailing techniques were the same as those used by American department stores.<sup>32</sup> Indicative of the success of their efforts, less than a year after opening, The London, New York and Paris announced it was enlarging its business in St. John's:

The Youngest Large Concern on the street, full of life and vim, have [*sic*] now decided to set out in reality to still more please and transfer its business materials to the pleasing and encouraging town of St. John's... We have inaugurated a public institute backed and supported by the public, without whom we could not exist, we are existing, we will become the City's Real Department Store.<sup>33</sup>

A few years later, the new store was still attempting to distinguish itself from other

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learnt everything he knew about the retail trade from Joe Goldstone. Peter Gard, "Joseph Goldstone," *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, Vol. 2 (St. John's, NF.: Newfoundland Book Publishers (1967), Ltd., 1984) 548; Interview with R.C.; *St. John's City Directory, 1924* (St. John's, NF: The St. John's (Nfld.) Directory Co., 1924).

<sup>31</sup>London, New York and Paris ads. *The Daily News*, 14 March 1919 and 4 June 1919.

<sup>32</sup>London, New York and Paris ads. *The Daily News*, 29 November 1919 and 26 April 1920.

<sup>33</sup>London, New York and Paris ad. *The Daily News*, 20 November 1919.

Water Street stores with such warnings to customers as "Danger! Imitation is a genuine form of flattery - while appreciating the compliments being paid us by certain competitors, we wish to warn the public that we have NO OTHER CONNECTIONS in Newfoundland." Ads also promised greater savings to consumers than other stores because they bought and sold for cash only and at low margins of profit for a faster turnover. Furthermore, the store had no 'fancy fixtures' to raise its operating costs.<sup>34</sup>

By 1922, yet another store, the Bon Marché, situated opposite Ayre & Sons at 266-268 Water Street, had begun advertising in city newspapers. Owned and operator by Robert Innes from Aberdeen, Scotland, a former employee of both George Knowling and Bowring's, the new store emphasized its low prices and cash-only policy.<sup>35</sup> Then, in 1925, The Broadway House of Fashion opened its doors at 331 Water Street, warning outport

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<sup>34</sup>Well aware of the importance of outport trade, the Goldstones instituted a mail order service in 1924. Not only would established firms have to compete for city customers but for outport custom as well. London, New York and Paris ads. *The Daily News*, 27 September 1923, 19 November 1923, and 23 February 1924.

Pasdermajian, in tracing the declining fortunes of the department store in the 1920s and '30s, attributed it in part to competition from smaller retailers who had adopted certain practices such as cash-only policies and fixed prices first popularized by the department store. Smaller stores, however, benefited from lower operating costs as they spent less on fixtures and customer service. Newell has also argued that, in the case of Toronto retailers, older stores with established clienteles were actually at a disadvantage as both clerks and customers sometimes resisted the introduction of new techniques. Pasdermajian, *The Department Store*, 27; Newell, "From Cloth to Clothing," 25-6, 32.

<sup>35</sup>This store had no connection to the Bon Marché in Paris but was one of its many namesakes worldwide. *St. John's City Directory, 1924*; Linda Russell, "Robert Innes," *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, Vol. 3 (St. John's, NF: Harry Cuff Publications, Ltd., 1991) 46.

customers that when they inquired at other businesses as to the store's location, some storekeepers claimed to be them and so shoppers should check the sign over the door. With its promise of lower prices and a bargain basement, it, too, posed a serious threat to the larger retail establishments tied to cumbersome and expensive practices such as credit and extensive customer service. (See Figure 2.3) Like The London, New York and Paris, The Broadway House of Fashion emphasized that it had "no connection with any store in the island."<sup>16</sup> Although the Bon Marché and The Broadway House of Fashion dealt largely in fashions and accessories, the new businesses posed significant threats to the large Water Street stores for clothing sales - whether ready-made or tailored - were becoming increasingly important to city retailers, especially to the department stores.<sup>17</sup>

Michael Miller has argued that ready-to-wear clothing had many advantages over the tailored variety (primarily lower price and ease of purchase) which made it increasingly popular over the course of the nineteenth century. The features that made it attractive to consumers also made ready-to-wear just the kind of merchandise department stores wanted: low priced and in demand meaning a faster turnover. Although Miller was

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<sup>16</sup>*St. John's City Directory, 1924*: The Broadway House of Fashion ad, *The Daily News*, 13 July 1925.

<sup>17</sup>Bon Marché ad, *The Daily News*, 14 August 1922.



Figure 2.3: The Broadway House of Fashion, 1925  
Source: CNSA, 137.2.01.037

describing the situation in France, the same was true of the relationship between ready-to-wear fashions and department stores everywhere, including those in St. John's.<sup>38</sup> This was reflected in the stores' large, well-appointed ladies' showrooms and gent's departments as well as in the rising numbers of ads devoted to ready-made clothing.

John Joy's thesis, "The Growth and Development of Trades and Manufacturing in St. John's, 1870-1914," explores the changing nature of the city's clothing trade, arguing that there was a shift from small tailoring and dressmaking operations selling custom-made clothing to large factories producing cheaper ready-made clothes. By the 1890s, firms like The Royal Clothing Company, associated with The Royal Stores, controlled the market for ready-mades and the smaller shops had turned largely to retailing, altering and pressing clothing. Since most of the Water Street merchants were investors or partners in the large clothing factories, they had a vested interest in pushing ready-made fashions in their retail stores. Joy argues that "... by 1913 the large incorporated clothing and woolen factories wholesaled their products to major merchant firms, especially those represented on the

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<sup>38</sup>Newell has, in fact, argued that Toronto department stores developed out of dry goods stores because of Toronto's expanding clothing industry in the late nineteenth century and the stores' relationship with women shoppers who were the primary purchasers of ready-to-wear fashions. St. John's businesses were also profiting from the growing popularity of ready-made clothing. In 1916, Samuel Frelich opened the Semi-Ready Clothing Factory and a year later was reported to be doing quite well: "The Semi-Ready-made system is one that is of great advantage to the customer. It eliminates long waits and the suits only need the finishing touches to make them fit each customer.... one gets the benefit of a low-price suit of first-class quality ... [Frelich] has a large clientele and a great deal of his trade is done by the mail order system." Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 34; Newell, "From Cloth to Clothing," 24, 115-7; "Semi-Ready Clothing Factory," *Colonial Commerce Commercial Annual 1917*.



company sharelist and directorate, and ready-made clothing was included in the merchants' Island-wide distribution system."<sup>39</sup> Under the protection of a steep tariff, local factories produced most of the men's and boys' clothing sold on the island but they were unable to compete with foreign imports of women's clothing and millinery goods due to consumer demand for fashionable and varied styles which local manufacturers could not economically produce in such a small market.<sup>40</sup> Clearly, the sale of ready-mades was of extreme importance to the Water Street merchants in their capacity as retailers, wholesalers and as investors in local clothing factories.

In addition to The London, New York and Paris, the Bon Marché, and The Broadway House of Fashion, the large Water Street stores also had to contend with mainland catalogues. Although the editor of the *Trade Review* in 1904 had dismissed Canadian catalogues as a novelty with which Newfoundlanders would soon become disenchanted,<sup>41</sup> the journal's editor, D.R. Thistle, was forced to admit in 1922 that, while

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<sup>39</sup>In addition to the Jobs and Macphersons who owned The Royal Clothing Company, The Royal Fur Company and The Royal Stores Limited, the Ayres, Bowrings and James Baird were all investors or partners in local clothing factories. Joy remarked that "Frequently, the people asked to become shareholders in a company were those whom the promoters expected would be major wholesale customers for its products. Accordingly, most of the major factories were financed and controlled by St. John's merchants." Their investments were relatively small, however, and were spread out over a number of industries and factories thereby limiting risk "and through limited liability [they] protected their export-import business[es] from failures in high-risk manufacturing ventures." Joy, "Trades and Manufacturing in St. John's," 42-7, 61-6, 176.

<sup>40</sup>Joy, "Trades and Manufacturing in St. John's," 67-8.

<sup>41</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 27 August 1904.

the city's wholesale trade with the west and south coasts was much improved over recent years, a significant portion of the business was going to the mainland:

The most regrettable feature of the West Coast business is that the most of the money in circulation goes to Halifax. They have practically cut off buying provisions, clothing, etc., from St. John's and find that it is not only more convenient, but more profitable to buy in Halifax.

There is a big stream of money going out of the country to Halifax and Moncton all the time to the mail order departments of the Robert Simpson Co. and the T. Eaton Co.

Messrs. Farquhar & Co., with their steamship service have provided such tempting facilities for reciprocal trade between Halifax and the West Coast that the people are taking advantage of it to the great loss of the St. John's merchants.<sup>42</sup>

A few weeks later, the journal reported that no government department was growing in size or revenue like parcel post: "There has grown up a steady business by parcel post with firms in the United States, Toronto and Montreal and there are people who get most of their wearing apparel through this system and the number of such people is increasing every year."<sup>43</sup> Postal Department statistics support the conclusion that catalogue sales were on the rise as the value of parcels received in Newfoundland rose from \$39,044 in 1901, three years before the Eaton's catalogue first made its appearance on the island, to \$75,005 in 1911 and \$302,133 in 1921, nearly an eight-fold increase in just twenty years.<sup>44</sup> (See Chart 4 in the Appendix.)

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<sup>42</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 25 November 1922.

<sup>43</sup>"Parcel Post Department is Greatly Improved," *The Daily News*, 16 December 1922.

<sup>44</sup>Newfoundland, *Journal of the House of Assembly, Customs Returns*, 1901, 1911 and 1921.

To combat the rising popularity of foreign mail order in Newfoundland, local business journals like the *Trade Review* and *Colonial Commerce* urged consumers to "buy at home," printing articles enumerating all the many contributions made by local merchants to the betterment of society. Ironically, while the campaign emphasized mercantile philanthropy, its main argument was the protection provided by the credit system during difficult times, a system that most members of the business community thought should be abandoned in favour of cash:

Few people appreciate what they owe to the home merchant. If they did, the hundreds of dollars which go out of this community to the big mail order houses would remain here and help build up the town.

Let us consider a few facts. When you are up against it, it is the home merchant who carries your account until you are ready to pay; when you need money for the churches, hospitals or charity it is the home merchant who helps you out. The home merchant pays heavy taxes to support the schools and keep up the streets and roads and other public institutions. He is your friend in time of need and the money you spend with him stays right here in town and helps to make it prosper.

The next time you are tempted by the fine pictures in the mail order catalogs, remember that you can buy better right here at home.

You need not ask yourself whether the mail order houses would give you credit when you have sickness in the house or are out of work. You know that every dollar they take out of town is preventing it from going ahead just that much.

Every time you send money out of town for goods you are directly injuring yourself. Buy from your home merchants - your neighbours and your friends - the men who are helping to make this a live wide-awake community.<sup>45</sup>

In 1925, Thistle urged the government and Board of Trade to "come alive to the seriousness of the situation and endeavour to hold what little we yet have of the trade of

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<sup>45</sup>"Buy at Home," *Colonial Commerce*, 31 October 1917.

the west and south coasts."<sup>46</sup> In 1927, the journal repeated the *Colonial Commerce's* 1917 appeal, urging consumers to buy from their merchant instead of ordering merchandise from an outside concern, thereby keeping the money in local circulation. Although fewer outport customers were travelling to St. John's on semi-annual buying trips, city merchants could at least benefit as a result of their buying from the store's mail order departments or from outport merchants who, in turn, bought from their wholesale departments. Those who really felt the loss of outport trade, however, were St. John's retailers, for fewer outport customers were making their way to St. John's in these years, partly because the size of the fishing fleet had reportedly fallen to less than one-third of its size in the 1890s, and also because many were choosing instead to buy at home or from foreign catalogues. Those who continued to travel to St. John's were reportedly spending less, no doubt saving some of their earnings due to the enduring post-war slump. In consequence, the contribution of city trade to store sales was increasing in importance relative to that of the outports, once considered vital to the success of the city's largest wholesale and retail firms.<sup>47</sup>

So, not only were St. John's retailers facing competition within the city from new stores but those with wholesale, mail order and branch operations were also losing trade in the outports to Canadian catalogues. In consequence, the large Water Street stores were

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<sup>46</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 14 February 1925.

<sup>47</sup>"Think This Over," *Trade Review*, 13 August 1927; Editorials, *Trade Review*, 30 May 1925 and 21 November 1925; "City Trade," *Trade Review*, 18 July 1925.

forced to face their challengers head-on and store owners' response to the threat of declining business was to renew their efforts towards the expansion and modernization of their operations. As one James Baird ad pointed out in 1924, "In a town, the size of St. John's, we have only a limited clientele to draw from. A dissatisfied customer, therefore means a loss we can ill afford to stand."<sup>48</sup>

While many businessmen had defended themselves against charges of price-gouging by in turn charging consumers with extravagant buying during an illusory war-time boom, they spent much of the 1920s trying to encourage consumption, promoting it as a cure for the post-war recession. The Industrial Fair of 1924 was one attempt by the St. John's merchant community to boost their sales and profile among city and outport customers. All of the large Water Street stores had booths at the Fair, several promoting the event in their ads by offering special sales. The railway also did its part to encourage visits by outport customers with reduced fares to St. John's.

Like their window displays, store booths appear to have been as much about entertainment and spectacle as about store merchandise. At the Ayre & Sons booth, a woman played piano (the piano and organ showroom being an important feature of the store) while James Baird's booth, one of the "prettiest" at the fair, used special lighting effects to attract attention. Meanwhile, Bowring Brothers' booth featured a model of one

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<sup>48</sup>James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 22 May 1924.

of the island's concrete bridges and a selection of the store's bakery goods. *The Daily News* proclaimed the Fair's success, declaring "The exhibition besides being an eye opener to the visitors, many of whom were surprised that so many things were to be had in the city, has also been a great boon to the business people, who have exhibited and many big sales have been recorded as a result."<sup>49</sup> The success of the Fair led to another the following year and likely provided the inspiration for a shopping festival organized by city retailers in 1928. As with the Fairs, it was expected that many stores would offer special sales and the railway and steamship lines special rates for outport parties. Combining spectacle and consumption, the festival was to last a week and was intended for "the mutual benefit of shopper and vendor alike," going "a long way towards keeping our own money in circulation at home."<sup>50</sup>

According to *The Daily News*, thousands crowded Water Street for the opening event of Shopping Week which included artistically dressed windows, fireworks and a band concert for "the entertainment of and attraction of shoppers of the country." At a second concert a few days later, the stores once more illuminated their windows, again setting off fireworks while the Church Lads Brigade Band entertained the audience with

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<sup>49</sup>Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 3 October 1924 and 1 November 1924; James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 1 November 1924; "The Mercantile and Industrial Fair," *The Daily News*, 6 November 1924; "The Mercantile Fair," *The Daily News*, 10 November 1924.

<sup>50</sup>"Visit the Industrial Fair Free," *The Daily News*, 17 October 1925; "Exhibitors at the Fair," *The Daily News*, 29 October 1925; "City Stores Plan Shopping Festival," *The Daily News*, 10 September 1928; "Fall Shopping Week," *The Daily News*, 4 October 1928.

music. Even though the stores had planned the festival together, it is clear that there was also a great deal of competition among them to present the better appearance and to attract the most attention. As one James Baird ad announced: "The friendly fray is on - the fray for your favour - exultingly we enter it, gaily comparisoned [*sic*] and conditioned."<sup>51</sup> Such events strengthened the equation of shopping with leisure, entertainment and novelty, creating a carnivalesque atmosphere which further encouraged unrestrained consumption.

In addition to the fairs and festivals, the Water Street stores continued to hold their own special events to attract customers. Perhaps attempting to compete with Ayre & Sons' tea room while also promoting various products, Bowring Brothers began advertising free samples of drinks and cakes in their grocery department. Contests were another popular tool for getting shoppers into the stores. Bowrings, for example, allowing customers who had spent two dollars or more in their store a chance to win tea, sugar or chocolate by guessing how many seals their firm would catch in 1925. In connection with the 1925 Industrial Fair, Ayre & Sons also held a contest in which children could win a watch or doll for the best essay describing their firm's booth. Not to be outdone, Bowring Brothers held a contest the following month in which children could win a pony by getting their relatives to save entry coupons obtained on purchases made in the grocery and

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<sup>51</sup>"Shopping Display Attracts Big Crowd." *The Daily News*, 13 October 1928; "Many Visitors Here For Shopping Week." *The Daily News*, 15 October 1928; "2nd Band Concert For Shopping Week." *The Daily News*, 18 October 1928; James Baird ad. *The Daily News*, 13 October 1928.

hardware departments. The larger the purchase, of course, the more contest entries one received improving the chances of winning.<sup>52</sup>

The evolution of store window displays continued throughout these years as well, relying increasingly on spectacle and novelty to attract the attention of passers-by. In 1925, *The Daily News* reported that a crowd of onlookers had held up traffic on Water Street in order to see a Crisco display in the window of Ayre & Sons' grocery department. The display featured a mechanical man, looking and moving like a real man, resulting in unprecedented sales of the product.<sup>53</sup> The stores also created window displays to correspond with public events like 'Baby Week,' during which businesses, in response to a request from health workers, decorated their windows with items deemed necessary for the proper care of infants, thereby combining public service and merchandising in order to promote sales.<sup>54</sup>

Meanwhile, the commercialization of certain holidays continued apace although shortages and continuing high prices after the war hindered Christmas trade. As most retailers advocated only the purchase of necessities during the war, many stores promoted

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<sup>52</sup>Bowring Brothers ads, *The Daily News*, 14 October 1924, 11 March 1925, 9, 16 and 23 November 1925, and 1 March 1926; Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 24 October 1925.

<sup>53</sup>It seems city residents were fascinated by mechanical figures for another one, this time selling Ivory soap, also attracted a crowd at Bearn's on Duckworth Street two months later. "Crowds Hold Up Traffic On Water Street," *The Daily News*, 20 April 1925; "Store Window Attracting Crowds," *The Daily News*, 13 June 1925.

<sup>54</sup>"An Attractive Window Display," *The Daily News*, 17 June 1925.



the idea of the "practical" Christmas present, especially for adults. In 1924, however, the *Trade Review* reported one of the busiest Christmases in years, describing a Water Street bustling with visitors from the surrounding outports bringing a brisk cash trade.<sup>55</sup> A new holiday was also introduced to the commercial calendar in these years with the first Mother's Day ad appearing in *The Daily News* in 1927. Reminding customers of the special day, Ayre & Sons described it "as an opportunity to show your gratitude for all that your mother has done for you," implying that expressing appreciation meant gift-giving.<sup>56</sup> Their role in introducing American holidays to the Newfoundland calendar illustrates yet another way in which the stores influenced the habits and values of the local society, shaping the city's developing consumer culture.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Methods of transport were very important in determining when outport people went to St. John's and how much business they brought. This particular year, the snow roads were good and people were able to travel by horse and sleigh. "Christmas Trade is Booming," *Trade Review*, 13 December 1924.

<sup>56</sup>Father's Day, however, did not join the roster of holidays promoted in store ads until the late 1930s. Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 3 May 1927 and 13 June 1938.

<sup>57</sup>When Anna Jarvis first envisioned Mother's Day and began promoting it in the early 1900s as a day devoted to sentiment and religion, little did she anticipate the commercial potential such a day would offer members of the American business community. Picked up first by American florists in the 1910s, they were joined in the 1920s by "confectioners, department stores, stationers and jewellers," all wanting to capitalize upon the new holiday. Not surprisingly, Jarvis protested its commercialization for her conception of a special day to celebrate "home, motherhood and Christianity" was very much at odds with the reality of a day dominated by "the marketplace, advertising, and profit making." Yet, in many ways, the popularization of Mother's Day as a commercial holiday reflected the changing role of women in a consumer culture. As historian Leigh Eric Schmidt writes, "Women's roles in particular were being crucially redefined in terms of consumption: for

The large Water Street stores were also becoming increasingly adept at advertising not just the merchandise they carried, but the stores themselves. The Royal Stores, another aggressive self-promoter in the 1920s and '30s, printed posters depicting their various business interests, directors and employees as well as the Macpherson home, Westerland, with the family's Newfoundland dogs out front.<sup>58</sup> The firm had also begun publishing its own monthly magazine, *The Royalist*, with a varied content aimed at the whole family. Along with news items, stories, women's and children's pages, there were poems and jokes submitted by readers and, of course, ads for Royal Stores merchandise interspersed throughout. First appearing in 1922 and running into the '40s, subscriptions cost about twenty-five cents a year but advertising was fifteen dollars a page per issue.<sup>59</sup> Not surprisingly, there were few ads other than those for The Royal Stores or its sister firms like The Royal Clothing Company. Yet, the editorial staff resisted including articles about the stores or overtly about shopping, no doubt wishing to appeal to a general audience and hoping the advertising content would do its work in publicizing the store and

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women especially, the new rituals of the consumer culture increasingly competed with church involvement and domestic piety." Schmidt, "The Commercialization of the Calendar," 909, 907, 911-2.

<sup>58</sup>The Macphersons were well-known breeders of Newfoundland dogs. "Royal Stores Issue Newfoundland Map." *The Daily News*, 16 November 1928; Poster of The Royal Stores Directors and Employees, C3-2 (PANL); Poster of The Royal Stores Directors, Employees and Businesses, C3-4 (PANL).

<sup>59</sup>This was the subscription rate in the 1930s as there are no issues available for the 1920s. By comparison, a publication like the *Newfoundland Quarterly* cost 80 cents per year for just four issues.

its merchandise.<sup>60</sup> In the 1930s, the firm also issued postcards featuring images of their store, one set of cards showing the store and its windows decorated to celebrate the King and Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1935, a number of stores using the event to express their imperialist sentiments and attract shoppers with elaborate displays.<sup>61</sup> (See Figures 2.4 and 2.5)

The Royal Stores was not the only firm to get involved in publishing to garner publicity. By the 1930s, Gerald S. Doyle, a wholesaler and retailer primarily of medicinal products, was distributing the *Family Fireside* for free which, not surprisingly, had the largest circulation of any publication in Newfoundland. Steers, Ltd., a long-established local firm quickly rising to join the ranks of the large Water Street stores, also published *The Mailman*, another monthly house organ created to carry company advertising.<sup>62</sup>

For their part, Ayre & Sons entertained customers with in-store musical programmes on gramophone and combined self-promotion with the promotion of Newfoundland as a tourist destination by issuing playing cards decorated with pictures of

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<sup>60</sup>The only known issues of *The Royalist* still remaining are held at the Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland. *The Royalist*, June 1937, April 1939, July 1942, and February 1945.

<sup>61</sup>The Royal Stores postcards, A35-25, A35-26 and A35-27 (PANL).

Many of the stores took advantage of the celebration by holding special sales and urging customers to buy "holiday attire" for the occasion. James Baird ad, The Royal Stores ad and Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 3 May 1935.

<sup>62</sup>T.D. Carew, "Journalism in Newfoundland," *The Book of Newfoundland*, Vol. 1, 161.



Figure 2.4: The Royal Stores, 1935  
Source: PANL, A35-26



Figure 2.5: Bowring Brothers, 1935  
Source: CNSA, 137.2.01.06

the island.<sup>43</sup> Combining advertising and customer service, James Baird, Ltd., in 1929, introduced a new motorized delivery system which *The Daily News* described as "the type of delivery expresses in use in the American cities" and indicative of the "progressiveness and strict attention to the needs of its patrons by this popular firm." Panels on each side of the delivery vehicle were also used to advertise "the store's 'star' values." Before the year was out, Baird's had added yet another attraction, a "Cash Discount Bond System," announcing in an ad that there were \$20,000 in bearer bonds to be given away.<sup>44</sup>

In spite of the troubles plaguing the Newfoundland economy, then, the large Water Street stores continued to expand and modernize throughout the 1920s in order to meet consumer expectations, the new stores offering extra incentive to keep up with retailing innovations in North America. In 1919, within months of The London, New York and Paris opening its doors, James Baird announced the opening of a new annex housing an

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<sup>43</sup>There was much talk in these years of Newfoundland's potential as a tourist haven, especially for those interested in outdoor activities such as hunting and fishing. Ayre & Sons, in particular, had been promoting tourism for some time, issuing booklets aimed at tourists as early as 1913. "Water Street Stores Were Busy Last Night" and "Playing Cards as Publicity Stunt for Newfoundland." *The Daily News*, 18 December 1928; Gerald Pocius, "Tourists, Health Seekers and Sportsmen: Luring Americans to Newfoundland in the Early Twentieth Century," *Twentieth Century Newfoundland: Explorations*, James Hiller and Peter Neary, eds. (St. John's, NF: Breakwater Books, 1994); Ayre & Sons, Ltd., *Souvenir of Newfoundland, 1913* (PANL).

<sup>44</sup>Initially, customers could only redeem bonds on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday for the store generally held sales on Friday, Saturday and Monday but it was later decided, apparently in response to customer complaints, that patrons could redeem bonds on any day that was convenient. "Messrs. Jas. Baird, Ltd., Inaugurate New Motor Delivery Service." *The Daily News*, 5 July 1929; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 9 November 1929.

"up-to-date and well equipped" gent's outfitting store. "patterned after the leading American stores" and stocked with everything a man needs. Less than two years later, Baird also bought out the business of William Frew at 179 Water Street with the intention of offering the same goods as his original store to relieve congestion during the store's busiest hours. The new branch store was to be managed by John Taylor, previously Frew's foreman.<sup>95</sup>

In 1925, Ayre & Sons also installed a new showroom, one outfitted with display cases like those found in American stores. Special woodwork and new lighting fixtures were added features that would "put the store on par with the best of continental stores."<sup>96</sup> A year and a half later, Ayre & Sons opened an east end branch in the Newfoundland Hotel which was described as the "most modern" store, "equal to any of its size in Canadian cities."<sup>97</sup> In 1929, Bowring Brothers began remodelling their premises as well, subsequently announcing plans for even more changes. Their intention was to open up the front of the store by tearing down walls to create one continuous corridor so that "the store connected in one homogeneous whole, interconnecting between all departments." (See Figure 2.6) They also planned to exchange partitions for glass show cases like those in their ladies' department, doing the work during the slack period (January to March) to

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<sup>95</sup>James Baird ads. *The Daily News*, 7 July 1919 and 29 January 1921.

<sup>96</sup>"Ayre & Sons Install Splendid Showroom." *The Daily News*, 10 October 1925.

<sup>97</sup>"New Ayre's Store Is Most Modern." *The Daily News*, 1 March 1927.



Figure 2.6: Interior, Bowring Brothers, ca. 1920s  
Source: CNSA, 137.2.01.019



limit disruptions to business. The end result of their efforts would be "an entirely model and up-to-the-minute departmental store."<sup>68</sup> Four months after the announcement, *The Daily News* described the transformation of Bowring's into a "Store Deluxe":

The most recent alterations have been to the dry goods department at the eastern end of the building. Under reconstruction very ample shopping space is now provided. Modern 'silent salesmen' show cases [line] the whole front of the store which extends back the full width of the building. Goods marked in plain figures are easily examined and the shopper not only saves the clerk's time but can make his or her selection with deliberation.<sup>69</sup>

Meanwhile new competitors continued to enter the scene ensuring that Baird's, Ayre's and Bowring's never rested upon their laurels but continued to keep pace. In December 1928, Steers, Ltd., a firm formerly dealing in the wholesale and provision trades, announced that they had remodelled their premises at 379-383 Water Street and could now claim the title of the city's west end departmental store. Although Steers was now the largest department and dry goods store in that area of St. John's, it denied attempting to compete with the variety and elegance of the older east end stores, claiming to cater to a different class of clientele by offering more moderately priced merchandise.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>"Will Remodel Front Bowring Bros. Store." *The Daily News*, 8 January 1929.

<sup>69</sup>"Reconstruction Makes Bowrings' A Store Deluxe." *The Daily News*, 2 May 1929.

<sup>70</sup>Starting out as John Steer, Ltd., a firm involved in the retail, wholesale and fish trades which failed in the 1894 bank crash, it was reformed as John Steer and Sons, later becoming Steer Brothers in 1917. The firm was then renamed Steers, Ltd., after being purchased by a number of businessmen headed by Calvert C. Pratt, former director and secretary treasurer of another local firm, A.E. Hickman Co., in the early 1920s. "Steers Limited Claim West End Title as Departmental Store." *The Daily News*, 18 December

Clearly, Steers' goal was to target the working-class population of the west end. Yet, with the introduction of the streetcar to Water Street several decades before, consumers were not restricted to shopping in the area in which they lived. Consequently, the east end stores stood to lose the patronage of area residents travelling by streetcar to shop in the city's west end as well as west end residents who might otherwise have used public transport to visit their stores. Several east end stores, among them Ayre's, Knowling's and Baird's, also had branches in the west end of the city which would lose customers to Steer's new retail store. Given the growing importance of working-class trade to department stores here and elsewhere in this period, Steers was a competitor not to be taken lightly by established retailers.

Such evidence of retail development and expansion does not mean, however, that the large Water Street stores faced few financial difficulties as a result of the recession and growing competition in the 1920s or that financing new services and the remodelling of premises was easy. In fact, George Knowling, Ltd., the store once lauded as "second to none in this country," closed the dry goods department in its west end store in 1927 to concentrate on selling in its east end store. In 1929, the firm went out of business with George Knowling announcing that he would be buying out the central grocery and hardware store, intending to trade under his own name "with fresh stocks of various goods

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1928: David Pitt. "Charles Steer." *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, Vol. 5 (St. John's, NF: Joseph R. Smallwood Heritage Foundation, Inc., 1994) 300; R. Cuff, M. Baker and R. Pitts, eds., *Dictionary of Newfoundland and Labrador Biography* (St. John's, NF: Harry Cuff Publications, Ltd., 1990) 277.

of quality and price for which the old firm was noted."<sup>71</sup> Meanwhile, Ayre & Sons bought out the firm's dry goods, shoe and crockery store adjoining their premises in order to expand their own operations.

Following Bowring's lead, in 1930 Ayre's opened their new shopping emporium which reflected many of the innovative retailing features adopted by their competitor. In conjunction with extensive ads to introduce their remodelled store, *The Daily News* ran an article praising Ayre's for its progressiveness, remarking upon the changes taking place in the city's large retail establishments:

During the past ten years the development of modern departmental stores along Water Street has been most marked. The crowded counters and laborious pulling down of dry goods from shelves is passing. Present day competition demands service, and service is best given by free display and ease of inspection by customers, for display is the store half-brother of advertising....

Gone are the counters and unhandy shelves. Glass fronted mahogany show cases, equipped for free inspection of goods through adjustable and moving steel stands, line the walls. There is freedom of movement for an army of shoppers, and a display that will be an attraction and delight to even the most casual visitor.<sup>72</sup>

The article emphasized the number of departments, the variety of merchandise and the

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<sup>71</sup>In the absence of company records, it is impossible to suggest the primary cause of Knowling's failure. It may have been the result of poor management by George Knowling, Sr.'s successors, the general recession of the 1920s or the consequence of expanding too quickly and becoming overextended as Newell has suggested was the case for some failed department stores in Toronto. "Knowling's to Stage Sacrifice Sale," *The Daily News*, 30 May 1927; George Knowling ad, *The Daily News*, 10 October 1929; Newell, "From Cloth to Clothing," 33.

<sup>72</sup>"Modern Equipment In Ayre's New Store," *The Daily News*, 20 March 1930.

effectiveness of store displays, describing the store's layout and additional features such as a skylight and numerous mirrors in the millinery section. The firm also published diagrams showing the arrangement of the store's various departments which included women's, children's, men's, millinery and shoes on the ground floor and house furnishings, floorings, gramophones, radios, musical instruments and travelling cases on the top floor.<sup>73</sup>

The largest of the Water Street retailers had, therefore, achieved department store status by 1930 for most had revamped their premises to create more open spaces, easing the flow of traffic and eliminating divisions separating their various departments. Instead of what once had amounted to a series of stores housed in one building, they now occupied stores housing a variety of departments, all interconnected. Methods of displaying and promoting the ever-expanding array of merchandise on offer also continued to evolve as owners and managers grew increasingly aggressive in their efforts to attract custom. The introduction of self-service with open display cases represented a significant step for city stores, permitting the free inspection of goods and easing the pressure on staff.

Changes in customer service, therefore, were keeping pace with those made to store layout and appearance. Prior to the introduction of self-service in the stores, serving customers had been a time-consuming and inefficient business as clerks and salesladies had to remove items from enclosed cases to show customers, demonstrating the uses and

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<sup>73</sup>"Modern Equipment In Ayre's New Store" and "Ayre & Sons Ltd. New Eastern Premises," *The Daily News*, 20 March 1930.

benefits of various goods. This traditional method of displaying goods in department stores prior to World War I was, as Benson has noted in the U.S., dictated by custom according to which "merchandise [was] more or less concealed from the public, and shown only at a shopper's request.... The result was that the typical department was more effective at keeping the goods from the customer than at presenting them to her." By 1910, she argues, retailers had begun taking notice of the costs of traditional selling practices as sales staff spent a significant portion of their time removing and replacing items stored in boxes and on shelves. This decreased significantly the amount of time actually spent concluding sales and limited the number of customers who could be served by a clerk or saleslady. Gradually, fixtures were introduced in American department stores to openly display goods for customer inspection, making service more efficient and labour less costly.<sup>74</sup>

Part of the modernized operations of the new Water Street department stores also included a trend towards self-service, giving customers the opportunity to peruse, at their leisure, the clearly priced goods on show in open display cases. In this way, the shift represented a major step in turning shopping into a leisure activity for women as it removed the pressure to make a purchase and allowed them to spend longer periods browsing in the stores. In turn, stores benefited from lower costs, helping them meet competition from smaller shops which did not offer expensive customer services. As the

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<sup>74</sup>Benson, "'Palace of Consumption and Machine for Selling.'" 213-14.

pictures which appear on the following pages illustrate. offering old-fashioned customer service entailed a significant investment in labour. one no longer paid pay off in sales. In Figures 2.7 and 2.8. six to eight sales attendants line the counters of Bowring Brothers' grocery and shoe departments with merchandise stored on shelves behind them. Compare these to Figures 2.9 and 2.10 taken in what appears to be Ayre & Sons' housewares department. In these pictures it is difficult to distinguish sales staff from customers but several appear to be shoppers examining items openly displayed on tables and counters. It is clear that this arrangement of goods has significantly decreased the number of employees required to serve customers thereby lowering the store's labour costs.

While taking slow steps in the direction of self-service, however, neither American department store owners nor their St. John's counterparts wholeheartedly adopted the policy until after World War II. In attempting to sell consumption and guide consumer behaviour, it was essential that retailers maintain control over customer access to goods. According to Benson, they were "not yet ready culturally or economically to open up the space of the store to the customer, but insisted on retaining many of the traditional barriers between customer and merchandise." This attitude, she argues, made sense in this period as retailers saw themselves as "selling not just goods but also a way of life that involved amenity and service."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup>Benson, "A Palace of Consumption and Machine for Selling," 216.



Figure 2.7: Shoe Department, Bowring Brothers, ca. 1920s  
Source: CNSA, 137.2.01.020



Figure 2.8: Grocery Department, Bowring Brothers, ca. 1920s  
Source: CNSA, 137.2.01.021





Figure 2.9: Interior, Ayre & Sons, ca. 1920s  
Source: PANL, B16-152



Figure 2.10: Interior, Ayre & Sons, ca. 1920s  
Source: PANL, B1-39

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In spite of apparent evidence of expansion and growth in the retail trade, the post-war recession persisted in Newfoundland. While economic conditions appeared to be improving by the mid-1920s due to employment in construction and factory work, the retail and wholesale trades were still considered "somewhat disappointing." By late 1927, the Board of Trade believed things were looking up although the credit system was being blamed for creating risk and raising prices. The tone of the Board of Trade's 1929 report was positive despite an economic downturn in the latter months of the year but the 1930s and the impact of a worldwide depression brought a halt to the Newfoundland economy's all-too-brief move towards recovery from the recession of the 1920s.<sup>76</sup>

As in the previous decade, the prescribed cure for the economic troubles of the 1930s was to buy, placing the responsibility for recovery on the shoulders of consumers. Repeating its 1920 message, *The Newfoundland Magazine and Commercial Advertiser* (then *The Newfoundland Magazine*) advocated extensive advertising by retailers and purchasing by consumers. In an article titled, "Good Times are Just Over the Hill," the

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<sup>76</sup>There were also shortages of American goods but due to Newfoundland's proximity to market, dealers could place orders every week whereas they generally bought only twice yearly on the British market. The convenience of dealing with American suppliers provides one explanation for rising U.S. imports while importations from Britain were declining. "The Dry Goods Trade Brisk all the Fall," *Trade Review*, 29 November 1924; *Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade, 1926*, 3; *Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade, 1927*, 3; *Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade, 1928*, 4; *Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade, 1929*, 15; *Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade, 1930*, 16; *Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade, 1932*, 5.

journal rebuked men and women who needed things but resisted buying them for they were holding back prosperity, arguing that "... the sooner everybody who can afford it returns to the basis of normal buying for normal needs, the sooner the unemployment problem will be solved, the sooner business will become steady, the sooner good times will return for everybody."<sup>77</sup> Interestingly, it seems many now saw the economy as being driven by the consumption of goods rather than their production. It was not a case of factories raising production to raise employment thereby increasing the disposable incomes of workers, but of consumers using their money to put people back to work by spending and increasing demand. Hence, the economy was now considered to be demand-driven instead of supply-driven.<sup>78</sup>

Despite the troubled economy, the large Water Street stores continued to advertise extensively while developing new promotional schemes and altering their businesses to improve and consolidate operations. On the heels of Ayre's major renovations, The London, New York and Paris announced in 1930 that it was taking over the lease on

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<sup>77</sup>"Good Times Are Just Over The Hill." *The Newfoundland Magazine and Commercial Advertiser*, January 1931.

<sup>78</sup>Unfortunately, a large number of consumers in St. John's were members of the working class who were under- or unemployed, many living on very low levels of government relief, meaning extremely limited buying power. Receiving about six cents a day per person in dole, 975 St. John's families collected able-bodied relief in 1934, rising to 1856 in 1935. The depression lingered longer in Newfoundland than in most western nations and it has been argued that St. John's residents felt its impact more severely than in the outports where subsistence farming and fishing had long been the practice of most families. Wayne Stockwood, "Great Depression," *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, Vol. 1, 612.

premises previously held by Henry Blair at 243 Water Street, intending to use the space to house men's and boys' clothing, the original store then carrying only women's and girls' fashions. A year had passed, however, before papers announced the opening of the firm's new store where everything was in sight and well lit, having "the last word in modern store effectiveness and goods display." Less than two years later, however, The London, New York and Paris closed the haberdashery department in their men's store, subsequently moving men's and boys' wear back to the main store in order to cut overhead costs. In "an open letter of policy" to their customers in 1933, they stated that while all stores were being forced to lower prices due to lower earning power, some were sacrificing quality to meet price competition. At The London, New York and Paris, however, they had maintained "lowest-in-the-city" prices by cutting expenses, enabling them to lower prices without compromising quality.<sup>79</sup>

Part of the continuing policy of newer stores like The London, New York and Paris and the Bon Marché, then, was to distinguish themselves from their local competitors. Both ran ads in October 1932 attacking the established Water Street stores for being old-fashioned and mired in backward traditions harmful to customers. The Bon Marché charged, "Low Prices Are a MATTER of TRAINING. This is something likely to be overlooked in this Period of Economic Readjustments. We have been trained to it by

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<sup>79</sup>"Assoc. of Fashion To Open New Store," *The Daily News*, 25 April 1930; "Everything in Sight And All Well Lit at New Men's Store," *The Daily News*, 4 April 1931; London, New York and Paris ads, *The Daily News*, 31 March 1931, 17 November 1932, and 27 March 1933.

experience, and not stampeded into it over night."<sup>80</sup> implying that low prices were a Bon Marché policy in good times and bad while other stores habitually charged high prices but had been forced to lower them due to the depression. Furthermore, the store, unlike its competitors, could sell its merchandise "for at least 10 per cent less than it could if it did not buy and sell exclusively for cash."<sup>81</sup> A later ad went a step further by implicitly attacking competitors for gouging customers:

Why are the Bon Marché cash prices so low? For two reasons: First, because we sell for cash only. Second, because we know that the lower the retail price, the more the public can afford to buy. Volume sales at lower cash prices built this Store and we refuse to rig or maintain higher prices that cut down your buying power, your happiness, and your security.<sup>82</sup>

Again relying on the historical mistrust of Newfoundland merchants and resentment of the truck system, the Bon Marché in yet another ad claimed that "One Price To All Is Our Motto." Presumably referring to the higher prices paid by credit customers elsewhere, the ad stated: "Judged by the response to our price list, the public of Newfoundland have decided there is no better store in which to trust their orders. We will endeavour in the future, as in the past, to continue to merit this confidence. Nobody is in debt to the Bon Marché."<sup>83</sup> Similarly, The London, New York and Paris persisted in their attack on firms of long-standing, arguing that only they were committed to giving

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<sup>80</sup>Bon Marché ad, *The Daily News*, 15 October 1932.

<sup>81</sup>Bon Marché ad, *The Daily News*, 12 April 1933.

<sup>82</sup>Bon Marché ad, *The Daily News*, 21 September 1935.

<sup>83</sup>Bon Marché ad, *The Daily News*, 19 September 1936.

customers what they wanted for "We are not hide-bound to obsolete traditions, and are quick to recognize to-day's conditions and demands." As a result, in response to consumer demand, they would now offer clothing in a variety of qualities at new low prices.<sup>54</sup>

Whether it was their smear campaign which won them adherents or genuinely lower prices, The London, New York and Paris and the Bon Marché survived the depression and successfully expanded their operations in spite of the former's abortive attempt to open a separate men's store in 1931. In 1935, the Bon Marché announced it was hiring staff for the store previously owned by Phil Murphy and in 1937 advertised a "Pre-Alteration Sale" to reduce their stock so that workmen could get started on incorporating the neighboring premises into the present store. According to the ad, there had been such a rapid increase in business that this would be their third expansion in five years.<sup>55</sup> Illustrating their success island-wide and the continued importance of outport trade to city retailers, The London, New York and Paris claimed to have thirteen mail order agents located around the island by 1938.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>London, New York and Paris ad. *The Daily News*, 15 October 1932.

<sup>55</sup>Bon Marché ads. *The Daily News*, 31 October 1935, 25 September 1937, and 3 July 1938.

<sup>56</sup>London, New York & Paris ad. *The Daily News*, 31 December 1938.

Outport trade, as evidenced by their mail order operations, continued to be of great importance to the Water Street stores. The stores often ran ads directed at this market like the one from Bowring's in 1938, appealing specifically to "Fishermen and Outport Customers": "Our trade with you and your brethren is increasing and this fall's

Clearly, depression conditions had served to heighten competition on Water Street, a situation aggravated by foreign interest in the Newfoundland market. In 1934, the Chicago firm of Montgomery Ward began advertising its catalogue in St. John's newspapers, inviting those interested to send for a free copy. Then, in 1938, the company announced that the local firm of Crosbie & Co., Ltd., would be the sole distributors in Newfoundland of Montgomery Ward stock (primarily furniture, tools, and household appliances).<sup>57</sup> In 1935, another new store opened in the building formerly occupied by George Knowing, Ltd.<sup>58</sup> The arrival of The Model Shop, carrying men's and women's ready-made clothing, appears to confirm the concern expressed in a letter to the editor of *The Daily News* from 'Activity' in 1933 regarding the loss of local businesses and their replacement by newcomers. Referring to the recent request from one store employee for a movable weekly holiday to be granted when the weather was fine, the author argued that this kind of work ethic was responsible for a loss of control over local trade:

It means reduced wages to the clerks when trade falls off, and instead of looking for holidays they should be agitating for longer working hours. Look along Water Street and see the old firms being replaced by newcomers. Very soon if things are allowed to go on in the come day go day style as they are to-day we will have none of the old time names over

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business is the best for many years. The reason is obvious: - our food, our prices, our treatment are right. Get our prices on the things you need. Make Bowring's 'the place where you buy.'" Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 2 November 1938.

<sup>57</sup>Montgomery Ward ads, *The Daily News*, 7 February 1934 and 6 June 1938.

<sup>58</sup>"Model Shop Opens To-Day In New And Extensive Premises." *The Daily News*, 24 September 1935.



the stores. It is certainly time to take things seriously if we want to hold our place in business in this city.<sup>89</sup>

The 1936 visit of a representative from T. Eaton Co. (Maritimes) Ltd. to "check out" the situation in St. John's likely raised even more concern among members of the business community who feared having to compete not just with the Eaton's catalogue, but with a branch store right in their midst.<sup>90</sup>

Meanwhile, local firms persevered in their own efforts to win a share of the dollars circulating in the Newfoundland market. Responding to fears of a bank failure, The Royal Stores created a club in 1930, existing under a variety of names over the following years - the Blanket, Merchandise and Thrift Club - which allowed customers to open savings accounts with the firm. The club was, according to store ads, "not a bank but a safe place to save, with bigger interest on your money than any bank will give you." By 1936, the firm offered as much as five and ten per cent interest on savings.<sup>91</sup> No doubt customers

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<sup>89</sup>Letter to editor, *The Daily News*, 26 September 1933.

<sup>90</sup>T. Eaton Co., Still Interested in St. John's," *The Daily News*, 15 December 1936.

<sup>91</sup>Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 4 July 1930, 28 August 1931, and 28 August 1936.

In a 1933 report prepared by a representative of the Hudson's Bay Company at the request of Job Brothers (the two firms were then partners in a number of investments), the practice of allowing customers to make deposits was criticized and the company warned that it had insufficient funds to cover a call for the money. The author of the report declared that "The fact of a general store entering into private banking business is, at best a dangerous procedure." "Report of Royal Stores Ltd., Exploits Valley Royal Stores Ltd. and Martin Royal Stores Hardware Co. Ltd., 28 August 1933." Job Family Papers, Collection 4, Box 3, File 3.54 (MHA).

could also make purchases on their accounts, negating the need for ready cash and making it more convenient to shop where one's money was deposited.

Perhaps wishing to forestall charges that the island's merchants were somehow responsible for Newfoundland's economic troubles, The Royal Stores announced in 1931 that it was making a voluntary contribution of one per cent of their cash sales for all of December to the Emergency Unemployment Relief Fund of Newfoundland and the Official Charity Bureau of St. John's. The announcement emphasized the close relationship between The Royal Stores and its customers stating, "There is no separating this Friendship. It is a thing of generations and there is no departing from it. The Store has shared with the people in good times and bad and with their confidence in it, and its confidence in them, it has prospered.... This is not a Tax. It is not a Charity. It is a voluntary contribution to deserving Humanity, facing perhaps, an unexpected peril."<sup>42</sup> Then, in a 1933 ad, The Royal Stores reaffirmed their commitment to helping

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<sup>42</sup>The Royal Stores notice, *The Daily News*, 27 November 1931.

This was a very different sentiment from the one expressed privately by several Newfoundland businessmen. In a 1935 letter to his parents, Derrick Bowring complained that "Most working class Newfoundlanders & others are pretty lazy I think!" "Letter from Derrick Bowring to his parents," 8 December 1935, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

Hugh LeMessurier, a St. John's businessmen appointed to work with the Heart's Content Co-operative Association, also expressed his doubts regarding the work ethic and honesty of the people whom he was to help, calling the community Heart's Disease and preaching the need for constant vigilance against false claims to his fellow association member, Eric Bowring. "Letter from Hugh LeMessurier to Eric Bowring," [n.d] and "A Game of Wits" by Hugh LeMessurier, Heart's Content Co-operative Association Papers, Bowring Bros., Ltd. Collection, MG 39, Box 15 (PANL).

Newfoundlanders survive the depression through their specially priced "Depression Dispersers" and their weekend sales, declaring: "Now, as never before the public deserves whole-hearted support in making their limited dollars give them the maximum in value. This we try to do to the best of our ability, by offering quality merchandise at the very lowest prices, every week-end."<sup>43</sup>

In addition to declaring their desire to help customers combat the depression through lower prices, the stores continued to hold major sales to attract shoppers. Bowring Brothers, for example, celebrated their anniversary at least three times during the 1930s, holding sales in honour of their 120th, 121st and 125th birthdays, receiving extra publicity from newspaper editorials and articles commemorating each event.<sup>44</sup> Established stores, therefore, responded to charges of backwardness and price-gouging from new retailers by focusing on their long-time relationship with the community and with customers.

The competition for business became so stiff that at least one Water Street store went to the customers rather than wait for customers to come to them. James Baird, Ltd., in 1930, sent two representatives to nearby Bell Island to hold a ten day sale in the store of local businessman, J.C. Stewart, achieving its sales objective in only three days with the

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<sup>43</sup>The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 13 February 1932 and 7 April 1933.

<sup>44</sup>Bowring Brothers ads, *The Daily News*, 9 July 1931, 7 July 1932, and 2 July 1936; "Bowring Directors Presented Address," *The Daily News*, 15 July 1931; "125th Birthday of Bowring Brothers, Ltd.," *The Daily News*, 2 July 1936; Editorials, *The Daily News*, 9 July 1931 and 3 July 1936.

store still crowded with customers.<sup>45</sup> In so doing, the firm forestalled the visit of Bell Island shoppers to St. John's, discouraging them from patronizing competitors while gaining the custom of families with breadwinners gainfully employed in the mines. So important was the Bell Island market that The London, New York and Paris ran an ad in 1937 explaining the absence of a branch, agent or representative on the island. The firm argued it could give better service in their St. John's store and invited the people of Bell Island to send a mail order request or to visit in person.<sup>46</sup>

Although few stores attempted to expand in the 1930s, many continued to remodel and improve existing operations. In 1931, no doubt responding to the demand for cheaper goods even if outdated or of lower quality, James Baird, Ltd., opened a bargain basement department, with *The Daily News* declaring, "The bargain basement is a modern idea with all large firms and Messers. Baird are leaving nothing undone to ensure that their department will be kept up to the minute." Only a few weeks before, a new store had opened, a five, ten and fifty cent store, the first of its kind in St. John's suggesting a local demand for bargain shops. Then, in 1932, Baird's announced a basement sale for the benefit of consumers suffering from current economic conditions, stating, "This Store acquiesces to the existing depression conditions, with a show off of values that will stiffen

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<sup>45</sup>"Baird's Sale," *The Daily News*, 18 October 1930.

<sup>46</sup>London, New York and Paris ad, *The Daily News*, 25 August 1937.

your Dollar's productiveness." <sup>97</sup>

Despite much evidence in the way of falling profits, failures, wage cuts and layoffs suggesting St. John's retailers were feeling the financial strain of the depression,<sup>98</sup> some of the large Water Street stores continued to make major investments in their businesses. In 1931, Ayre & Sons established an in-store radio station, the first in Newfoundland owned and run by a firm solely for the purpose of advertising. Called the Voice of Ayre & Sons (V.O.A.S.), the station broadcast musical selections from Victor records (also sold in the store) interspersed with news of store sales or recent arrivals from the markets from 11am to 12:30pm, 3:30pm to 5:30pm, and 7:45pm to 9:30pm.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup>"New Department at James Baird, Ltd.," *The Daily News*, 25 September 1931; "New Store to be Opened To-day on Water Street," *The Daily News*, 1 September 1931; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 12 May 1932.

<sup>98</sup>In 1932, Bowring Brothers laid off a fifth of their employees and cut wages while the total spent in salaries at The Royal Stores in 1933 was little more than half that spent in 1929. Meanwhile, the failure of George Knowling, Ltd., in 1933 had thrown the firm's entire staff out of work. "Here, There and Everywhere," *The Evening Telegram*, 26 January 1933; "26th Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade," *Journal of Commerce*, (January 1935) 19; "27th Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade," *Journal of Commerce*, (January 1936) 19; "28th Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade," *Journal of Commerce*, (January 1937) 15; "List of Directors and Permanent Employees," Bowring Brothers Ltd. Collection, MG 39, Box 8 (PANL); "Letter from Edgar R. Bowring to the directors of C.T. Bowring Co.," October 1934, Bowring Brothers Ltd. Collection, MG 39, Box 7 (PANL); "Balance Sheets for 1929, 1933 and 1939," Job Family Papers, Box 3 (MHA).

<sup>99</sup>The station's morning broadcast was directed specifically at women, no doubt hoping to catch the primary household shopper before she headed out to the shops. Ernest Ash, "The Story of Radio in Newfoundland," *The Book of Newfoundland*, Vol. 1, 347-8; Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 20 July 1931.

The original impetus for establishing V.O.A.S. had been to build a station that could be received anywhere in the city as the poor reception of foreign programmes led many to think their radios did not work thus hindering sales. Initially intended to sell radios, V.O.A.S. was used to promote a variety of Ayre's merchandise and eventually, the store's signal could be received throughout Conception, Trinity and Bonavista Bays, and even as far as St. Anthony on the northern peninsula, boosting Ayre's mail order business.<sup>100</sup> The station, therefore, helped Ayre's promote the store island-wide while also informing city consumers of new merchandise and up-coming sales.

Ayre & Sons was not alone in its exploration of the merits of advertising via the increasingly popular medium of radio. In 1932, the Imperial Manufacturing Co., Ltd., began its own commercial broadcasting station to advertise its products and later began sharing air-time with The Royal Stores although the venture appears to have been short-lived. Other firms sponsored shows on privately-owned radio, sometimes combining the shows with in-store promotions. In 1934, for example, James Baird, Ltd., sponsored the "Little Marjorie" story on VONF which aired Friday evening and the following Monday

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<sup>100</sup>Oscar Hierlihy was an amateur radio buff working in Ayre's radio repair department in 1930 when he first proposed the idea of a store radio station to demonstrate to customers the quality of their radios. Once an antenna had been erected and the station was up and running, Mr. Herder, manager of the advertising department, began running advertisements, interspersed throughout musical selections played on a gramophone situated in the store's showroom for the entertainment of their customers. Oscar Hierlihy, *Memoirs of a Newfoundland Pioneer in Radio and Television* (St. John's, NF: Breakwater Books, 1995) 22-4.

began advertising "Little Marjorie Wash Dresses" for girls.<sup>101</sup>

In "Constructing the Community and Consumers: J.R. Smallwood's *Barrelman* Radio Programme." Jeff Webb analyzed the content of the F.M. O'Leary-sponsored show. Webb argues of the *Barrelman* that

As a commercial programme, it had another discourse embedded in it - that of incorporating people into a North American consumer lifestyle.... The *Barrelman* programme created an audience for commercial programming and both effectively and unobtrusively advertised products. As such, the programme worked to incorporate Newfoundland into North American consumer culture ...<sup>102</sup>

He goes on to suggest that, in the troublesome economic times of the depression, the show helped listeners internalize the role of consumer thereby bolstering capitalism. At the same time, while the local content of radio programming fostered Newfoundland nationalism, foreign programming from the U.S. and Canada also helped to undermine it. As Webb has argued, "There is no doubt that a great deal of American programming became part of the cultural corpus of Newfoundland."<sup>103</sup> Much the same may be said of

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<sup>101</sup>In 1938 James Baird, Ltd., sponsored "Trial of Mutiny on the Bounty" on VONF-VOGY and, although there is no mention of it sponsoring "The Lone Ranger." The Royal Stores advertised "Lone Ranger sweaters" for boys in 1939. Ash, "The Story of Radio in Newfoundland," 348; James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 12 June 1934, 15 June 1934, and 1 October 1938; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 19 May 1939.

<sup>102</sup>O'Leary was a competitor of the aforementioned Gerald S. Doyle, both selling primarily imported medicinal products through stores in St. John's and via mail order to the outports. Jeff Webb, "Constructing the Community and Consumers: J.R. Smallwood's *Barrelman* Radio Programme," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 8 (1997) 167.

<sup>103</sup>Webb, "Constructing the Community and Consumers," 171, 184.

the Ayre & Sons' radio station and other store-sponsored shows. Most of the goods advertised would have been foreign imports as were the music and programmes aired to attract listeners and to sell the radios stocked by all the large stores.<sup>104</sup> Consequently, the sponsorship of radio programmes by local business firms was instrumental to the process of educating Newfoundlanders about life in neighbouring countries. By matching foreign radio shows with imported store merchandise, as Baird's did with the "Little Marjorie" dresses, the stores went one step further in linking consumption and entertainment and brought Newfoundlanders one step closer to adopting a North American consumer culture dominated by brand-name labels.

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While several stores responded to the depression by consolidating their operations and closing out their least profitable departments, Ayre & Sons going so far as to close their branch store in the Newfoundland Hotel in 1935, starting in the mid-1930s, a number of retailers began announcing plans for remodelling and even plans for expansion. A 1935 Bowring Brothers ad invited men to visit the "improved facilities" in their men's department and to check out their "complete, up-to-date stock" while, in 1936, Steer's and Baird's announced improvements to their women's and men's departments.

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<sup>104</sup>Several stores ran competitions through which entrants could win their own radios and offered easy payment plans as well as free trials to those who purchased radios. Most radio ads emphasized good reception of foreign broadcasts like "the concerts of London," "the operas of Paris" and "your favorite American programme!" The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 2 January 1932 and 5 December 1935; Steers ads, *The Daily News*, 18 November 1937 and 23 November 1937.



respectively, suggesting that, despite the depression, fashions were still among the more popular and profitable merchandise that stores carried.<sup>105</sup> And when some smaller city retail shops were forced to close out, larger concerns quickly filled the void as did James Baird, Ltd., in 1935 when the firm announced that it was taking over the building and stock of S.E. Garland, at 177-179 Water Street, as a going concern. In 1937, Baird's denied rumors of a shut-down, declaring that, to the contrary, their intention was to close temporarily for the purposes of expansion, having hired a "merchandizing expert to suggest ways and means of improving the service rendered by the store and of increasing the comfort of employees."<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup>The newspaper also announced in 1931 that twelve staff members of a large concern were being laid off as the firm was closing out one of its departments. The Royal Stores ads. *The Daily News*, 13 April 1932 and 1 April 1933; "Firm Lays Off Twelve Employees." *The Daily News*, 8 July 1931; Ayre & Sons notice, *The Daily News*, 1 June 1935; Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 17 April 1935; Steers ad, *The Daily News*, 1 May 1936; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 2 May 1936.

The reduction in the tariff on imported clothing in 1935 no doubt gave a boost to store sales and several were quick to announce that they were dropping their prices as a result, likely forcing others to follow suit. Although ready-made fashions remained popular as demonstrated by Steer's 1935 fashion show exhibiting "the latest in New York, London and Paris Fashions" and the opening of The Model Shop in 1936, the rising number of ads for patterns and materials suggest stores were also responding to the consumer's need to economize in these years. Bon Marché ad and "Changes In Tariff Into Effect To-Day," *The Daily News*, 2 July 1935; "Many Shoppers Visit Steers, Ltd.," *The Daily News*, 8 May 1935; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 6 June 1935; "Model Shop Opens To-Day in New and Extensive Premises," *The Daily News*, 24 September 1935.

<sup>106</sup>Baird's was not alone in attempting to rationalize their operations by hiring experts to advise them on more efficient and scientific business methods. In the 1933 report by an expert from the Hudson's Bay Company, The Royal Stores executive were advised that more expert managers with marketing training were necessary to keep up with changing

As had Bowring's and Ayre's in the late 1920s, Baird's now undertook renovations to transform its store into "a completely modern department store" with thick carpeting, well-lit mirrors and tables for customer comfort, and variety of merchandise from men's, ladies' and children's clothing, to books, giftware, yard goods, boots and shoes, toys, radios, and floor coverings.<sup>107</sup> In 1938 *The Daily News* described the alterations to Baird's store:

Completely transformed in Departmental lay-out: elaborate modern fittings replacing the old, carpeted Show-room, show-cases which show at a glance what is contained inside; new, noiseless operating electric cash carrier system; new four-door main entrance; these are but a few of the improvements that have been effected. Nothing has been done in a desultory or perfunctory manner, but everything is right at the highest pedestal of perfection. It demonstrates that Messrs. James Baird Ltd. is a firm with the courage to expand and the earnest desire to do everything possible to create a smooth running service and to make it a pleasure as

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trade conditions. Although Campbell Macpherson was then heading to Winnipeg for training at the Hudson's Bay Company's head office, it was recommended that the firm look for an experienced general manager to whom he could serve as an assistant. The delegation of authority to department heads and more hierarchical control were also suggested as was a study of local consumption habits to permit a more rational approach to purchasing which continued to be influenced by old practices, resulting in heavy stocks. Buying stock through the Hudson's Bay Company which had a greater ability to buy in bulk thereby obtaining better prices from wholesalers and manufacturers was another suggestion for lowering costs. What impact these suggestions had on the firm's operations is unknown due to the lack of store records but the report certainly proves their awareness of trends towards more rational, scientific management and merchandising methods in North America. James Baird notice, *The Daily News*, 10 October 1935; "Deny Report of Shut-Down Water St. Firm." *The Daily News*, 6 December 1937; "Report of Royal Stores Ltd., Exploits Valley Royal Stores Ltd., and Martin Royal Stores Hardware Co. Ltd.," 28 August 1933, Job Family Papers, Collection 4, Box 3, File 3.54 (MHA).

<sup>107</sup>"Work at Premises James Baird, Ltd. Progressing," *The Daily News*, 26 April 1938; "Improved Layout Aids Customer Service at Baird's," *The Daily News*, 10 August 1938.

well as a convenience to do your shopping there.<sup>108</sup>

Regardless of all the improvements the Water Street firms had made to their stores in the 1920s and 1930s and contrary to the glowing evaluations of city papers, the stores had their critics. Among those who failed to appreciate their efforts to expand and modernize operations were the workers who had taken pay cuts or been laid off as a result of the depression.<sup>109</sup> Another critic, but for very different reasons, was Derrick Bowring who arrived from England in 1935 to join the family firm. Assigned to work in the store only days after arriving, he promptly wrote to his parents back in England of plans to

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<sup>108</sup>"Improved Layout Aids Customer Service at Baird's." *The Daily News*, 10 August 1938

While the Newfoundland Board of Trade's annual reports in the early 1930s had lamented the poor performance of the retail and wholesale industries, their report for 1934 noted that, although trade was still below normal levels, there were signs of improvement in the two most affected areas - dry goods and hardware - and cash appeared to be more plentiful as there was less demand for credit. In several 1935 letters to his parents back in England, Derrick Bowring commented upon the great advance in sales leading up to Christmas: "The Shops are open every night now until 9.30 and money is rolling in fast. For although everyone is saying that this is the worst year they have ever known, there seems to be lots of money and our cash increase over last year in the shops is somewhere around \$14,000." This perhaps explains the resumption of store renovations and expansions mid-decade. In spite of these signs of economic recovery, however, reports in the late 1930s were mixed with improvements in some sectors of the economy balanced by downturns in others. In 1939, the Board described the retail and wholesale trade as fair but was reluctant to make any predictions for its future performance given the abnormal conditions created by the start of the war. Editorial, *The Daily News*, 7 September 1934; "26th Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade." *Journal of Commerce*, January 1935; "Letter from Derrick Bowring to parents." 8 December 1935. Bowring Family Papers . COLL-157 (CNSA); "30th Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade." *Journal of Commerce*, January 1939; "31st Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade." *Journal of Commerce*, January 1940.

<sup>109</sup>Letter to the editor, *The Daily News*, 8 April 1938.

make improvements to "the layout of the shop in every way." A few months later, he complained of the lack of suitable Christmas presents in the store, having come to the conclusion "that there is nothing here worth buying especially for people in England" and asking his parents to use his allowance to buy gifts for him at home. Four years later, the selection of goods available in St. John's stores appears to have been little better as Bowring asked his brother back in England to purchase a gift for their sister since he had "scoured this place & [found] nothing worth buying."<sup>110</sup>

John Hope Simpson, one of the British commissioners appointed to the newly formed Commission of Government in Newfoundland in the 1930s, and his wife, Lady Simpson, were also quite critical of the Water Street stores for reasons of their own. Distressed by the conditions they witnessed on the island during the Depression, the Simpsons, like many others, viewed the local merchants as the main culprits in the colony's troubles, a position perhaps predisposing them to be highly critical of the merchants' commercial endeavours.<sup>111</sup> In Lady Simpson's opinion, St. John's was "a dirty, foul-smelling slum" and Water Street, "the main shopping street," was "about the level of the

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<sup>110</sup>"Letters from Derrick Bowring to his parents," 26 September 1935 and 18 October 1935, and "Letter from Derrick Bowring to Norman Bowring," 3 July 1939. Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

<sup>111</sup>On the verge of financial ruin, Newfoundland had voluntarily abandoned responsible government in favour of a Commission of Government and British economic aid in 1933. Peter Neary, ed., *White Tie and Decorations: Sir John and Lady Hope Simpson in Newfoundland, 1934-1936* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 83, 146, 220-1, 247, 287.

streets behind Euston Station (the fried fish shop level but less lively) ... Even the best stores, very 4th rate, look shabby & unpainted ..."<sup>112</sup>

Closer acquaintance did little to sway her judgment of the merchants or their establishments for a year and a half later, her descriptions of both were no less scathing:

All these leading men have their merchant businesses, but they have also their shops on Water Street in St. John's - Bowrings, Jobs, Bairds, Knowling, etc. - innumerable general stores - the best far below the standard of any shop you would ever deal with in England - the standard of the stores you find in the sort of street in England where you get fried fish shops - squalid.... You don't meet Mr. Bowring or Mr. Job & company in these shops; in fact, I think they are ashamed of acknowledging any connection with them.<sup>113</sup>

Although the dislike and mistrust of the British commissioners for Newfoundland merchants were, for the most part, mutually felt, people like Derrick Bowring and the Simpsons had something in common which likely influenced their impressions of the large Water Street stores. They came from England where there were department stores several times larger than those of St. John's, serving a sizable and more prosperous market meaning they could offer a much greater variety of better quality goods in grander surroundings. But to locals who had never visited Harrod's or Whiteley's in London, the St. John's department stores were impressive structures indeed.

In contrast to Lady Hope Simpson's scathing dismissal of St. John's and the Water Street stores, J.R. Smallwood's *The Book of Newfoundland*, published in 1937, presented

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<sup>112</sup>Neary, *White Tie and Decorations*, 78.

<sup>113</sup>Neary, *White Tie and Decorations*, 242.

a very different view of the island's capital city and its main thoroughfare. In an article entitled, "Life To-day in Newfoundland." Smallwood suggested that, although certainly "the oldest street in the New World ... Water Street is as modern as some of the fine new departmental stores ... can make it." This he partly attributed to the North American influence on Newfoundland:

Visits of many St. John's-men to Canada and the United States; the dominance of American films and of American newspapers and magazines; the coming of a constant stream of visitors and tourists and travellers from Canada and the United States - these and numerous other contributing factors have grafted on to the people of St. John's a variety of Americanisms.<sup>114</sup>

While allowing for the nationalist rhetoric typical of Smallwood's *Barrelman* radio programme and writing, it is clear that many local commentators believed themselves witnesses of significant change in St. John's over the preceding decades, at the centre of which, whether as simply a reflection or, more complexly, initiators of that change, stood the large Water Street stores. The inevitable mention of the stores in descriptions of the city supports Barth's observation that the department store contributed to the downtown focus of the nineteenth-century American city and altered the appearance and use of the commercial district, encouraging more attractive building facades, cleaner streets and a mixing of peoples. As it did in New York, Chicago or Toronto, the department store in St. John's captured the imaginations of local inhabitants. Foreign films, radio and

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<sup>114</sup>J.R. Smallwood, "Life To-day in Newfoundland," *The Book of Newfoundland*, Vol. 1, 26.

magazines may have raised local awareness of lifestyles on the continent but could not, by themselves, enable Newfoundlanders to participate in and adopt the values of a North American consumer culture. By introducing modern retailing methods (advertising, window displays, sales, and self-service) into their ever-expanding operations, the owners of the Water Street stores helped sell consumption and gave the people of St. John's the tools and opportunity to embrace it.

### **Chapter Three - The Impact of World War II and the Prospect of Confederation, 1939-1949**

Many Newfoundland historians, both popular and scholarly, see the 1940s as a watershed period in Newfoundland's history due to the arrival of thousands of American, Canadian and other foreign troops to the island, contributing to unprecedented economic prosperity brought about by the construction and servicing of military bases. The great increase in waged employment fuelled consumer demand as Newfoundlanders began making up for years of deprivation and economic uncertainty. The Water Street stores benefited greatly from increased consumption and responded by further renovating and expanding their premises. The colony's consideration of the Confederation question in the latter half of the decade precipitated even greater economic, social and political change, creating apprehension among some retailers regarding possible competition from mainland firms for island trade and providing another incentive to further modernize their operations. Despite this, World War II and Confederation did not, as some believe, bring Newfoundland into the North American fold and into the twentieth century but rather encouraged and strengthened pre-existing trends.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The consensus of those having written on this subject is that "the presence of Canadian and American military forces in Newfoundland helped to change the island's traditional trans-Atlantic orientation to a continental orientation." This has been refuted, however, by a number of studies, among them works by Stewart, Reeves and MacLeod, which point to evidence of the island's exposure to North American ideas and goods decades before the 1940s. Neary, *Political Economy*, 67; Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949*, 236; Neary, "A Garrison Country: Newfoundland and Labrador during the Second World War," 4; MacLeod, *Peace of the Continent*, 42-3; O'Flaherty, *The Rock Observed*, 146-7; Blake, *Canadians at Last*, 3; Noel, *Politics in*



As the previous chapters have shown, Newfoundlanders, particularly those living in the capital city, were well aware of social, economic and cultural developments in the United States and Canada long before 1939, even if unable (or unwilling) to adopt a spreading North American consumer culture wholeheartedly prior to World War II. This is not to deny the importance of the war and Confederation, for both had a significant impact on Newfoundland society and the economy, but suggests a need for reconsideration of the belief that "accepted values and modes of behavior were profoundly challenged"<sup>2</sup> by these events.

Although the war did not introduce a new, previously unknown North American influence to Newfoundland, it did bring many of the colony's residents face-to-face with its representatives and greatly strengthened its presence on the island. At one point during the war there was actually one Canadian or American serviceman in St. John's for every five locals, representing a large occupying force which could not help but have an impact on the local way of life.<sup>3</sup> Under such conditions, there could be little local control over the importation or dissemination of North American goods, ideas, or values. Prior to 1939, the colony's experience of the North American lifestyle had been largely indirect, limited primarily to foreign media in the form of magazines, movies and radio, imported

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*Newfoundland*, 263-4; Stewart, "The 'Revolution of 1940,'" 5; Reeves, "Our Yankee Cousins," 2-3; MacLeod, *Crossroads Country*, ix, xxiv-xxvi.

<sup>2</sup>Neary, *Political Economy*, 67.

<sup>3</sup>MacLeod, *Peace of the Continent*, 44.

brand name goods, and the accounts of those who had gone to the eastern States and the Maritimes to work. The adoption of North American retailing techniques by St. John's retailers and the arrival of foreign catalogues also had an impact, by exposing Newfoundlanders to new products and guiding local consuming habits, but prior to World War II, North American culture was, for the most part, filtered by those locally responsible for importing it.

This shift in the manner in which Newfoundlanders experienced and participated in North American culture no doubt had an impact on the way it was accepted and interpreted. Similarly, Liz Cohen has argued, contrary to the long-held assumption that a spreading mass culture in the form of chain stores, brand name products, radio, and movies contributed to the 'embourgeoisement' of ethnic and working-class American communities in the 1920s, that ethnic and working-class cultures were strengthened by elements of mass culture because they experienced it within their own communities and as a group, enabling them to adapt it to suit their own needs and values. Not until the 1930s when workers and ethnic groups began buying brand name products at chain stores, viewing movies in theatres outside their communities, and listening to commercial radio programming, did they become increasingly immersed in an American mass culture over which they had little control because it was no longer filtered through their working-class and ethnic cultures. Much the same might be said of Newfoundland during World War II as the influx of foreign servicemen and the establishment of theatres, a radio station and stores on military bases meant Newfoundlanders could now experience American mass

culture directly, side-by-side with its representatives.<sup>4</sup>

A comparison of St. John's newspapers before and during the war provides ample evidence of a growing fascination with outside ideas, attitudes and products as foreign - largely American - content rose dramatically, consisting primarily of entertainment and sports news as well as cartoons and general interest articles.<sup>5</sup> Before this, city wholesalers and retailers had been largely responsible for introducing American products and practices to local shoppers but they now began responding to the consumer demand aroused by an influx of American mass culture in the form of the movies, music, books, radio and magazines accompanying foreign servicemen stationed in St. John's. These had long been

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<sup>4</sup>Liz Cohen, "Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s," *American Quarterly*, 41(1) (March 1989) 6-21; Liz Cohen, "The Class Experience of Mass Consumption: Workers as Consumers in Interwar America," *The Power of Culture: Critical Essays in American History*, Richard Wrightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, eds. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993) 135-60; Patricia O'Brien, "World War II," *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, Vol. 5, 633.

<sup>5</sup>Rising interest in American mass culture became increasingly evident in store ads promoting radios able to receive the great New York dance bands, recordings of the latest songs from the American Hit Parade, bestselling American books like *Gone With the Wind*, sweaters worn by Vivian Leigh, coats worn by Deanna Durbin, Constance Bennett cosmetics, and 'Hollywood' curlers, bathing suits and hosiery. City newspapers helped the public keep up with American trends, noting the popularity of various American books, songs and movies in St. John's, complaining when local listings of American hits were not up to date. Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 2 November 1939, 12 April 1940, 18 May 1940, 16 July 1940, and 8 July 1942; London, New York and Paris ad, *The Daily News*, 25 November 1941; Model Shop ad, *The Daily News*, 31 August 1942; "What St. John's Is Doing," *The Daily News*, 22 January 1945; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 28 September 1945; "St. John's Reading Tastes Today Same As America's," *The Daily News*, 3 April 1946.

present in Newfoundland but never in such volume, making their influence inescapable and effectively removing local control.

Although Newfoundland's experience of the Second World War was very different from that of the First, in large part due to the presence of foreign troops, there were a number of similarities. Once more many of the leading Water Street merchants chose to serve their country by joining the Newfoundland Patriotic Association, their influence muted, however, by the scandals which had plagued the NPA in the last war and the existence of the Commission of Government which, distrustful of the merchant class, maintained its authority over the colony's war effort. Still, the Association played a prominent role in raising enlistments and selling war bonds, responsibilities for which its members were well-situated.<sup>6</sup>

As they had in World War I, Water Street merchants encouraged their male employees to volunteer for overseas service. They did so by offering incentives such as an extra month's salary to enlisted men and the promise of employment upon their return. James Baird, Ltd., also established a fund to collect money for the men to be distributed when they finished their overseas service while Steers, Ltd., agreed to maintain group insurance policies in the men's absence. Those who enlisted were then feted by employers with special dinners, dances and card parties in their honour.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>"Men's Patriotic Association," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 39(4), (March 1940) 5-11.

<sup>7</sup>"Bonus Paid to Employees of Ayre & Sons," *The Daily News*, 27 February 1940;  
"Staff Steers Ltd. Say Farewell to Two Members," *The Daily News*, 2 April 1940:

In addition to recruiting volunteers from their staffs, store-owning NPA members used their businesses to raise funds for the war effort by selling war stamps and certificates in their stores while also promoting them in their daily newspaper advertisements. Store ads, decorated with "V" for victory, told readers to show their loyalty by buying stamps to "Help Beat the Hun." Ads selling handbags, powder puffs, and flowered hats sent mixed messages to customers by also urging them to "forfeit a little luxury," to forego "some little titbit, some little enjoyment and spend its procurement cost in War Savings Stamps."<sup>4</sup> As the war progressed, such ads became increasingly insistent, targeting specific groups with urgent demands to support the war effort. Men who remained at home were told that they could do their part towards winning the war "through the medium of buying" by

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"Bowring Bros. Ltd. Honor Employees Going Overseas," *The Daily News*, 3 April 1940; "Say Goodbye to Fellow Employees," *The Daily News*, 11 April 1940; "Jas. Baird Ltd. Entertains Staff Who Volunteered," *The Daily News*, 13 April 1940.

The NPA was not quite as successful in its recruiting efforts during World War II but enough men volunteered that conscription was unnecessary. While 49.97% of the male population aged 15 to 29 enlisted in World War I, this was down to 44.22% in World War II. There are a number of possible explanations for the drop. In the First World War Newfoundland had its own regiment, whereas during the Second World War Newfoundlanders were enlisted into the British military, perhaps decreasing national pride in the colony's war effort and hindering recruitment. The economic growth experienced in Newfoundland during World War II may, however, provide a more likely explanation as base construction led to full employment, the opportunity for earning wages no doubt discouraging many men from volunteering. Canada, "Newfoundland Enlistment and Casualty Statistics, World War I and World War II," (Ottawa: Directorate of History, National Defence Headquarters, 1987); O'Brien, "World War II," 629.

<sup>4</sup>Ayre & Sons and James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 4 April 1941; Bon Marché and Model Shop ads, *The Daily News*, 18 August 1941; James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 18 August 1941 and 10 April 1942.

purchasing war stamps.<sup>9</sup> Women, as the recognized household purchasers, were also asked to do their share in buying war savings certificates. As one ad stated, "Women can fight with dollars.... Economise at home!"<sup>10</sup> The Bon Marché, claiming to offer the best values in the city, argued that women, in order to buy as many certificates as possible, must shop with them: "You are DUTY bound to buy your needs at the store of the Greatest Value in Dry Goods so that you can do your utmost towards the war effort."<sup>11</sup> Not even children were exempt from these appeals but were instructed to save their pennies so they, too, could make a contribution. The stores, in addition to promoting and selling stamps and certificates, further demonstrated their patriotic spirit by paying

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<sup>9</sup>James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 28 August 1945; Model Shop ad, *The Daily News*, 29 May 1943.

<sup>10</sup>Another newspaper ad without an identified sponsor, charged that women who spent money on non-necessities were not only raising prices but were also sabotaging the war effort. Model Shop ad, *The Daily News*, 28 August 1942; War Savings Certificates ad, *The Daily News*, 19 September 1942.

<sup>11</sup>Bon Marché ad, *The Daily News*, 12 April 1943.

Regarding the store's policy of buying and selling solely on a cash basis, *The Daily News* stated in 1941: "This policy of a two-way cash trade has enable [sic] the management of the Bon Marche to bring their savings slogan up to date: 'Beat the Rising Tide of Prices by Buying at the Bon Marche.' Many thousands of satisfied shoppers throughout the country have found this slogan to work to their advantage." In recent years, the store had also been remodelled and now occupied "three buildings opened out into one large store," its counters and showcases arranged for "convenient and easy shopping." Not only were city shoppers reportedly finding the "Bon Marche more and more the answer to their shopping needs" but there had also been a notable increase in the store's mail order business, "a speciality with the management of the Bon Marche." "Cash Trade Cuts Prices," *The Daily News*, 31 December 1941.

employee bonuses with them.<sup>12</sup>

City stores had little to lose in urging customers to save their money to buy war savings certificates for shortages of practically every kind of import meant most were unable to meet consumer demand anyway. Although the price of goods, especially food, rose dramatically during the war, St. John's shoppers faced few of the deprivations endured in Europe and more than ever before had disposable incomes to spend. As the high price of fish had helped protect many Newfoundlanders from inflation during World War I, rising employment opportunities in base construction made World War II a time of prosperity rather than hardship. At the end of 1938, there had been 80,000 unemployed men (approximately one-sixth the total population) in Newfoundland. This had fallen to 50,000 in 1939 but within a few years, there was actually full employment on the island and many were leaving the fishery for waged work on the bases.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike the previous war, however, there were fewer accusations of merchant profiteering mentioned in the press, possibly because the island's economic growth made it less of a concern or because the presence of the Commission of Government and the loss of NPA authority over the war effort lent the appearance of greater protection for

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<sup>12</sup>The Royal Stores ad. *The Daily News*, 5 September 1942; "Bonus War Savings Certificates Paid to Employees." *The Daily News*, 10 March 1942; "Ayre & Sons, Ltd., Directors and Employees Meet." *The Daily News*, 3 March 1943.

<sup>13</sup>R.A. Mackay, *Newfoundland Economic, Diplomatic and Strategic Studies* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1946) 220; Great Britain, *Report on the Financial and Economic Position of Newfoundland, 1946* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1946) 6.

consumers. When prices began going up as early as September 1939 due to the start of the war and speculative buying, rather than charging the merchants with price-gouging, the editor of *The Daily News* argued that this was a natural consequence of events and that the rising cost of living did not necessarily indicate "extortionate profits."<sup>14</sup>

Retailers' immediate response to the rising cost of goods was to urge customers to buy from current stocks still at pre-war prices. As the Bon Marché declared at the start of the war,

We are determined that our public will not have to suffer through advancing prices created by the sudden change of events. Our stocks appear ample to take care of our large business and prices are guaranteed against advance, but only so long as the present large stocks hold. We advise our customers to avail of this opportunity as soon as possible and save disappointment.<sup>15</sup>

Other stores followed suit, even suggesting shoppers begin their Christmas buying in early November to take advantage of the lower prices and to ensure a good selection of merchandise.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Editorials. *The Daily News*, 7 September 1939 and 15 September 1939.

This is not to suggest there were no complaints about prices or the government's actions in this regard. The Board of Customs decision to make one dollar American equal to \$1.10 Newfoundland, led to the criticism that this would raise the price of American imports, goods "used chiefly by the lowest-income groups in Newfoundland," for importers and retailers would simply pass increased costs on to the consumer. Editorial, *The Daily News*, 18 September 1939.

<sup>15</sup>Bon Marché ad. *The Daily News*, 28 September 1939.

<sup>16</sup>James Baird ad. *The Daily News*, 3 November 1939; Bowring Brothers ad. *The Daily News*, 9 November 1939.



Although there was some talk of "buying British" early in the war. for "... every dollar spent on the purchase of British-made goods is a contribution to the Empire's war chest and to victory," store ads rarely pushed British merchandise, another difference from World War I.<sup>17</sup> As Derrick Bowring, of Bowring Brothers, Ltd., explained in a 1941 letter to his parents in England,

English goods are getting terribly high in price and even with every imaginable kind of preferential duty we cannot buy them against Canadian or American.... Naturally we try to buy from England where possible but cannot do so if we are to keep in business and meet competition.<sup>18</sup>

When able to stock British products, stores like Ayre & Sons expressed their patriotic spirit with special window displays. "remind[ing] customers that now, and always, 'Britain Delivers the Goods.'"<sup>19</sup> Yet, there was no overt message equating consumption or buying

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<sup>17</sup>Editorial, *The Daily News*, 12 September 1939.

Steer's was one of the few firms to run such ads and they did so rarely, in 1940 calling on customers to "Help Churchill Paint Out Hitler's Crimes! Use BURRELL'S English Paint for lasting coverage" and to buy 'PEERLESS' English Flannel Shirts. "Representative of the solid character of the English." Steer's ads, *The Daily News*, 14 May 1940.

<sup>18</sup>Letter from Derrick Bowring to parents," 24 April 1941, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

Shortages of English goods were still a problem in 1944 causing Bowring to lament the price and quality of American and Canadian men's clothing while anticipating the day when they could once more get "decent underwear, shirts and suits from England." When it came to children's ready-made clothing, his wife concurred, stating, "... you wouldn't put the trash on them ..." "Letter from Gordon to in-laws," 20 March 1943, and "Letter from Derrick Bowring to parents," 24 September 1944, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

<sup>19</sup>Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 30 April 1941; "New Shipment British Goods at Ayre & Sons," *The Daily News*, 10 September 1943.

British with patriotism, likely because the stores were unable to back it up with British goods except when a merchant ship made it to port.

Due to the difficulty in obtaining stock from Britain and North America, all the stores suffered shortages negating the need to aggressively advertise their wares. By 1941, the arrival of foreign troops in St. John's and the great increase in employment resulting from the construction of bases had raised consumer demand to unusual levels, exacerbating the problem of shortages.<sup>20</sup> Some store ads even encouraged customers to put off purchases in favour of war savings certificates with the promise of better goods to buy when the war was over.<sup>21</sup> So great was consumer activity that it caused concern among those who feared what the island's economic future might hold when the war ended, possibly bringing an end to wartime prosperity. According to the editor of *The Daily News*,

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<sup>20</sup>"Newsy Briefs." *The Daily News*, 17 February 1941.

The increase in waged employment less affected by seasonal change was responsible for significantly altering trade on Water Street. Most stores found that with declining dependence on the fishery, business was less tied to the changing seasons and weather patterns. As had been noted in the trade journals and newspapers decades earlier, trade had become increasingly spread out over the year and stores depended less on the traditional busy periods in the spring and fall when sealers and fishing schooners descended upon the city. Many stores, however, persisted in observing the extension of store hours during traditionally busy seasons despite charges that it was "but a wasteful heritage from the uncivilized days when it was considered necessary to keep open night and day from September to January and from March to June." Yet, when the shortage of goods made staying open late pointless, the major Water Street stores soon began restricting their hours of business. Letter to the editor, *The Daily News*, 9 November 1940.

<sup>21</sup>James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 5 August 1943 and 28 June 1944.

Many thousands of people in this Island are now earning enough to give them the essential comforts of life and allow some margin for saving. Perhaps many of them are saving but we have had many instances cited of families that had been on relief only a few months ago and are now equipped with radios and other commodities which may be regarded as luxuries.

There is, of course, always a tendency towards excessive spending in a boom period. When people have been living for years on the bare margin of existence, the sudden acquisition of substantial earnings creates an almost irresistible impulse to go on a spending [spree].<sup>22</sup>

Governor Walwyn of Newfoundland and U.S. Consul General George D. Hopper also noticed the seemingly unrestrained spending of St. John's consumers. The governor attributed it to locals witnessing the comforts enjoyed by visiting Americans, creating a "demand among the poorer sections of the community not only for the basic domestic requirements but also [for] what might be termed luxury articles, such as radio sets, etc., and ... better and more expensive food stuffs."<sup>23</sup> According to Walwyn, they had been "dazzled by American dollars, hygiene and efficiency." Hopper was somewhat more critical, concluding that Newfoundlanders were complacent and indifferent to the war effort, citing a 1942 *Trade Review* editorial noting the throngs of shoppers in the stores as evidence. He also lamented the "tendency of many Newfoundlanders to lag behind

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<sup>22</sup>Editorials, *The Daily News*, 4 and 16 September 1941.

Derrick Bowring expressed a similar concern, confessing that "We are busy at the office and turnovers are keeping up nicely - but I don't know what is going to happen when the base construction work is over and they have to go back to the fishery." "Letter from Derrick Bowring to his parents," 3 May 1942, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

<sup>23</sup>MacLeod, *Peace of the Continent*, 43.

[Americans] in willingness to undergo personal sacrifices of long enjoyed privileges." Yet, as Peter Neary has suggested, had Hopper witnessed Newfoundland in the 1930s, he might have understood their indulgences because "Collectively, Newfoundlanders had been let out of the poor house ..."<sup>24</sup>

Despite low stocks and rising inflation, city retailers continued to profit from the economic prosperity accompanying base construction and high rates of waged employment.<sup>25</sup> By mid-1941, Derrick Bowring could report to his parents that trade was "very good" and that Bowring Brothers "have been making lots of money."<sup>26</sup> This appears to have been the general experience of most in the retail trade as *The Daily News'* economic review of that year attests: "All records were broken by Newfoundland business in 1941. Beginning in the late spring, the volume continued to increase as more and more men were employed and all the pent-up wants developed in years of destitution were

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<sup>24</sup>Peter Neary, "'A Mortgaged Property': The Impact of the United States on Newfoundland, 1940-49," *Twentieth-Century Newfoundland*, 182.

<sup>25</sup>Canada spent a total of \$65,000,000 on its bases from 1940 to 1945 while the U.S. spent almost twice that amount, \$112,000,000, in the same period. Meanwhile, government revenue more than doubled from 1935 to 1942, going from \$10,000,000 to \$24,000,000. The total in bank account savings also rose from \$29,000,000 to \$39,000,000 in 1942, the peak year of construction. It has been estimated that half of the increase was due to the "extra savings of Newfoundland firms and families." The number of Newfoundlanders employed on the military bases peaked in 1942 at 20,000, approximately one-fifth of male workers aged 16 to 65. This does not include those employed in other industries as a result of wartime prosperity. MacLeod, *Peace of the Continent*, 10-11.

<sup>26</sup>"Letters from Derrick Bowring to parents," 27 July 1941, 23 August 1941, and 2 October 1941. Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

translated in to the greatest spending wave in the country's history."<sup>27</sup> It is particularly noteworthy that the author should use the term "pent-up wants" as opposed to attributing consumer demand to a newfound desire for previously unknown goods. Clearly, American goods and values had found fertile, not to mention previously hoed, ground for taking root in war-time Newfoundland.

Trends noted in 1941 continued in 1942 which ended with a record Christmas trade, attributed largely to the servicemen stationed around St. John's, causing Derrick Bowring to joke that "... we are in the midst of the Christmas Stampede in the shops and one is likely to get trampled to death in the rush!"<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, retailers' ability to take advantage of consumer demand was limited by shortages in the supply of goods throughout the war. In January 1943, Bowring predicted that the shops would be "... quieter from now on as it is extremely difficult to get any goods to sell, only the essentials being available in any quantity or regularity."<sup>29</sup>

The problem worsened throughout the following months with buyers travelling to the United States to purchase stocks and returning shorthanded because many manufacturers had limited stocks to sell while others were restricted by American export

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<sup>27</sup>"Record of the Year in Review." *The Daily News*, 31 December 1941.

<sup>28</sup>"City and Elsewhere." *The Daily News*, 7 December 1942; Editorial, *The Daily News*, 24 December 1942; "Letters from Derrick Bowring to his parents," 11 and 22 December 1942, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

<sup>29</sup>"Letter from Derrick Bowring to parents," 5 January 1943, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

regulations. Unlike previously busy fall seasons, Ayre's, Baird's, Bowring's, The Royal Stores and Steer's announced in late 1943 that they would only remain open on Saturday evenings and would not extend their hours for the Christmas trade until December 20th. As *The Daily News* observed, "In former years the stores were always open at night for a fortnight before Christmas. It is not so many years since when the stores were open every night during the months of October, November and December."<sup>30</sup>

In fact, some stores not only shortened their hours but also closed departments for which they had difficulty finding sufficient stock. In late 1943 Steer's announced their intention to discontinue retailing altogether in favour of wholesaling while in September 1944, Ayre & Sons closed their radio department and stopped selling musical instruments.<sup>31</sup> *The Daily News* summed up the record of trade for 1944, stating, "Although many widely-used commodities were in shorter supply in 1944 the general volume of business appeared to have increased and customs returns indicated that the value of consumer goods imported into the country had shown a marked increase."<sup>32</sup> Obtaining sufficient quantities of stock continued to be problematic throughout 1945 yet

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<sup>30</sup>"Difficult to Get Dry Goods." *The Daily News*, 22 September 1943; "Shortage of Stocks Being Felt Throughout Country." *The Daily News*, 13 November 1943; "Around Town." *The Daily News*, 23 November 1943; "City and Elsewhere." *The Daily News*, 14 December 1943.

<sup>31</sup>Steer's notice, *The Daily News*, 29 December 1943; Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 1 September 1944.

<sup>32</sup>"Record of the Year at Home in Review." *The Daily News*, 30 December 1944.

turnover rates in the stores remained high despite the war's end and falling employment on military bases. According to *The Daily News*, trade expectations for 1946 were high "... based on the pent-up demand for scarce goods ..."<sup>33</sup>

The prosperity of the war years and anticipated consumer activity encouraged many of the large Water Street stores to undertake major renovations starting in 1945, the most dramatic transformation occurring at Bowring Brothers. In its retail operations, from advertising to design, from services to promotional activities, the firm had long lagged behind its competitors. Renovations in the late 1920s went some way towards closing the gap but, in the early 1940s, the store was still far from the cutting edge of the retail trade.

The decision to expand and modernize Bowring's department store and to limit the firm's investments in the seal and cod fisheries was the brainchild of then managing director, Derrick Bowring, who had arrived from England in 1935 at the age of eighteen to work for the family business in St. John's. He was to be the first Bowring since the firm's earliest days to work in "the Shops," as the retail premises were known, and would learn the ropes from store manager, Walter Wills, a long-time employee who had started with the firm as a boy, eventually working his way up to director. The two Bowrings on Bowring Brothers' Board of Directors, Derrick's uncles, Eric and Edgar, knew nothing

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<sup>33</sup>"Record of the Year at Home in Review," *The Daily News*, 31 December 1945.

about the firm's retail operations, having chosen to focus their attentions on its seal, salt cod, and cod oil interests. Although the firm had begun as a watchmaker's shop, expanding into dry goods before developing interests in shipping, sealing and the salt fish trade, the latter were considered the firm's traditional activities. Their decision to emphasize these areas of the business, often at the expense of the Shops, was, in Derrick Bowring's opinion, influenced by the attitude in England that "to be in trade was not a gentlemanly thing to do" and the belief that shopkeeping was "a very low form of occupation."<sup>24</sup>

Less tied to local and family traditions than his uncles, Derrick advocated ideas considered "too outrageous" by the firm's directors. While Eric Bowring felt they should continue prosecuting the seal fishery throughout the war despite expectations of a loss - simply because it was tradition and Bowring's hadn't "missed a year" yet - Derrick wondered why the loss of one more tradition, when so many had already "gone by the board in this war," should make a difference. Why "throw money away," he asked in a 1942 letter, when Bowring's was doing so well with its "various sideshows," particularly the Shops?<sup>25</sup>

To his immense frustration, Bowring found that the other directors gave little consideration to the company's retailing operations, an attitude he fought, believing the

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<sup>24</sup>Interview with D.B.

<sup>25</sup>"Letters from Derrick Bowring to his parents," 5 January 1943, 7 February 1943, and 27 August 1945. Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).



Shops were the only aspect of the business with real money-making potential. While Derrick was exasperated by his uncles' conservatism, they, in turn, complained of his tendency to display the "impetuosity of youth."<sup>36</sup> When Eric Bowring, then chairman of the Board, suggested he learn about the general trade of the firm by examining the company's fish accounts, Derrick's belief was confirmed. Going back fifty years in the ledgers, he found that Bowring Brothers had "managed to lose a considerable sum of money" in the salt cod trade. Upon reporting his findings to his uncle, Eric's first response was one of disbelief but, offered the company's own books as proof, he was forced to admit that the firm had indeed suffered substantial losses as a result of its investment in the fishery. Even then, the board was reluctant to abandon what were considered the firm's traditional business interests. But the transfer of Edgar Bowring to head office, C.T. Bowring & Co., Ltd., in Liverpool, in the late 1930s, Eric Bowring's gradual removal from the firm's day-to-day operations due to his involvement in the war effort, and Walter Wills' retirement in 1945, paved the way for change, giving Derrick Bowring almost free rein to reshape the company's operations as he saw fit.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>"Letter from Eric Bowring to Edgar R. Bowring," 11 July 1942, Bowring Bros., Ltd., Collection, MG 39, Box 2 (PANL).

<sup>37</sup>At a 1940 dinner to bid farewell to their enlisted employees, it was announced that over the past two decades, Bowring Brothers "had not shown any dividends" on its local interests and that the Bowring family continued to run the business only out of gratitude to its employees and customers and from a sense of family tradition. It is not clear who made the speech but it was likely Wilson Clarke, manager of the dry goods department and a minor shareholder in the firm. "Speech at a Farewell Dinner to Employees going across to War, April 1940," Bowring Brothers, Ltd., Collection, MG 39, Box 4, File: Contacts

While the older generation of Bowrings, both in Newfoundland and in England, were reluctant to see Bowring Brothers rid itself of what were considered family traditions, a number of factors pushed the firm in this direction. The prosperity of the war years and the expectation that Newfoundland's accumulated surplus would contribute to postwar development, high employment and rising consumer demand, meant expanded opportunities in retailing and provided the impetus for change. Discovery of the true extent of the company's losses incurred in the salt fish trade, the loss of three of Bowring's sealing ships during the war, and Derrick Bowring's appointment as managing director also contributed to a shift in focus. Gradually, Bowring Brothers got out of the seal and cod fisheries, as well as wholesaling, and turned its attentions to the long-neglected "Shops."<sup>38</sup>

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Worth Keeping (PANL); "Souvenir Program, Dinner for Overseas Service, April 2, 1940." Bowring Family Papers, Box 3, File 1 (CNSA); *Newfoundland Directory, 1936* (St. John's, NF: Newfoundland Directories, 1936) 193; "Bowring Bros., Ltd., Honor Employees Going Overseas," *The Daily News*, 3 April 1940; Interview with D.B.; "Mark 53 Years With Firm of Bowring Bros., Ltd.," *The Daily News*, 18 May 1945.

<sup>38</sup>Bowring's maintained its interests in insurance and cod oil in deference to the wishes of head office but these activities were relatively straightforward and minor affairs which did not greatly interfere with Derrick Bowring's expansion of their retailing operations. Interview with D.B.

Historian David Alexander has been quite critical of Bowring Brothers, "the monarchs of Water Street," for not being more supportive of the Newfoundland Associated Fish Exporters Limited (NAFEL), a limited liability company created after World War II to rationalize the marketing and export of Newfoundland's fish. As Alexander puts it, "Bowring's, with its huge English connection, had other fish to catch ..." Although it is true that Bowring Brothers decided to cut its losses by getting out of the fish trade entirely in the 1950s, there were a number of factors contributing to that decision, one important one being fifty years of almost consistently losing money in that

One of Derrick Bowring's first moves was to devise a company pension plan to allow some of the elder staff to retire thereby making way for "new blood" which he hoped to get from England. Of the four managers in Bowring Brothers' retail division, he was by far the youngest, the next eldest being in his sixties and the others in their seventies. Another significant move was to hire Fred Ayre, the son of Harold Ayre, one of the owners of Ayre & Sons, who had worked for Coca Cola in England before accepting a position with the Bank of Commerce in St. John's after the war.<sup>39</sup> In early 1945, Bowring began instituting changes, starting with a new department selling electrical, heating, plumbing and interior building supplies to capitalize on post-war housing construction. It quickly became a "great success" and inspired further changes in 1946. That year the firm introduced the X-ray Shoe Fitter to its shoe department and opened a new floor coverings department. The following year brought major changes to the firm's men's wear section, now under the name, 'Esquire,' with ads declaring, "At last Water Street can boast a really modern, specialist Men's Outfitting Department":

The whole set-up of 'Esquire' is another step forward in the modernization of Bowring Brothers shopping arrangements, and represents a very far cry from the old days of cramped space[,] hidden goods and restricting counters of a generation ago.

Yesterday afternoon the Mayor and City Council visited the new

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industry. Rather than continue supporting a failing investment with its more profitable retail establishment, Bowring's chose, not surprisingly, to put its money into the part of the firm actually making money. Alexander, *The Decay of Trade*, 34, 134, 139-40.

<sup>39</sup>"Letters from Derrick Bowring to parents." 4 May 1945 and 12 August 1946, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA); Interview with D.B.

emporium to welcome another addition to the modernization of city business.<sup>40</sup>

Boasting of its new departments, the firm challenged other stores to follow their lead, inviting "Competitors to view the latest example of Leadership that we are offering to the Retail Trade of St. John's."<sup>41</sup>

Four months after opening 'Esquire,' Bowring's introduced their new dress and mantle department for women, 'Mademoiselle,' so named "because it typifie[d] the utmost in Feminine Chic ... Smartness ... and Charm." "This City's Most Modern and Luxurious Dress Department." 'Mademoiselle,' according to one of the store's ads, was yet another indication of "the leadership which this department has so long enjoyed in the field of Feminine Wear." By mid-1948, Bowring's had made numerous other changes to their operations and were urging customers to

Take a New Look at Bowring Brothers. Take a good long look. Something's going on in Terra Nova's Capital City. In the past two years we've done more business, made more progress, won more friends than ever before. We've added, enlarged, remodelled or rejuvenated many departments. We've added many exciting new lines. We've won public acclaim by constantly featuring value for money, dependable merchandise at sensible prices.

We are confident that 1948 will be another great year at Bowring

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<sup>40</sup>New Department at Bowring Bros." *The Daily News*, 5 May 1945: "Letter from Derrick Bowring to parents." 27 August 1945. Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA); Bowring Brothers ads. *The Daily News*, 7 January 1946 and 7 March 1947: "Bowring Bros. Department Store Adds New Section," *The Daily News*, 28 October 1946: "'Esquire' Opening Presents Newest To Male Shoppers." *The Daily News*, 12 March 1947.

<sup>41</sup>Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 2 July 1947.

Brothers. We plan to go on modernizing and improving, to provide more conveniences, to make your shopping easier - and more interesting - to show our merchandise to best advantage to the thousands of fashion conscious and value loving people of Britain's Oldest Colony.<sup>42</sup>

Replete with romantic and magical metaphors to capture the beauty of the firm's latest remodelling efforts, *The Daily News* described shopping in the new fashion department at Bowring's as "shopping in Wonderland," praising the use of colour, lighting, display cases and counters in creating the overall effect of a fairyland. Such surroundings made

... shopping not only a necessity as it once was, but a warm pleasure. Bowring's is now a store where a customer is not only able to obtain anything he desires, but a store in which the shopper receives the luxury of beautiful, and restful surroundings.... Here you see a scientific approach that is revolutionary, but which thousands of customers are warmly applauding.<sup>43</sup>

In instituting many of these changes, Derrick Bowring was greatly aided by his old public school ties back in England. Realizing that the Shops required major overhauling if they were to compare to the modern department stores in other cities, he had sought advice from his uncle, Edgar, then living in Liverpool, on finding a department store that would be willing to show them how to run a modern retail operation. Through Edgar, Derrick met Duncan Norman, chairman of a Liverpool firm, Owen Owen, owners of a chain of department stores in England. Norman agreed to take on Fred Ayre and another

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<sup>42</sup>Bowring Brothers ads, *The Daily News*, 10 July 1947, 1 November 1947, and 7 May 1948; "New Ladies' Department At Bowring Bros.," *The Daily News*, 19 July 1947.

<sup>43</sup>"Wonderful Store Opens This Morning," *The Daily News*, 7 May 1948.

of Bowring Brothers' employees for several months of training and later sent several of Owen Owen's experts to St. John's, free of charge, to help directly oversee modernization of the store's retail operations. The only expense to Bowring Brothers was the cost of hotel accommodation. According to Derrick Bowring, this was all thanks to old school ties for Owen Owen had nothing to gain financially from Bowring Brothers' ventures in retailing. In addition to influencing the design and layout of the store, Owen Owen's most important lesson was the inventory retail system under which stock was valued at the selling price rather than the cost price, putting Bowring's "streets ahead in administering the business."<sup>44</sup>

Another important lesson was in organized buying for department store groups which led to the creation of Allied Merchandisers, contributing greatly to the confidence of Bowring's directors. The organization of ten independent department stores, nine in major Canadian cities and Bowring Brothers in St. John's, was established to pool information and statistics but, more importantly, for group buying. Bowring felt that the combined purchasing power of the stores would give the firm a significant advantage over

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<sup>44</sup>Interview with D.B.

Pasdermadjian noted that the increased size and variety of merchandise carried by large stores required the adoption and adaptation of ideas from the area of industrial management. One of the most important "concepts of modern department store organization" was "the retail inventory method (or cost and selling system), which makes it possible to obtain at the end of every month and without obligation of taking a physical inventory the two basic figures represented by the gross margin and the value of the stock ...". Although previously used in some American department stores, the retail inventory method was not widely instituted in most stores until after 1920. Pasdermadjian, *The Department Store*, 67, 69.

local competitors but there were other benefits to membership as well: "We shall swap personnel for training and frequent meetings will be held of various executives, buyers, display men and so on to discuss methods and plan group operations. At the very least it is an excellent hedge against Confederation."<sup>45</sup> Not surprisingly, then, Bowring Brothers was practically the only merchant firm on Water Street to come out in favour of Newfoundland's joining Canada. While Derrick Bowring believed the business, thanks to Owen Owen and its contacts in Canada, would "come out of it fairly well in the long run," Lewis Ayre charged they would all be "reduced to paupers in two years." But as Bowring drily noted, "All the Ayre's [*sic*] were rabid Responsibles" and, therefore, were virulently

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<sup>45</sup>"Letters from Derrick Bowring to parents," 4 May 1945, 2 January 1947, 13 April 1947, 28 July 1947, and 24 October 1948, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

At one time, department stores, due to their size and the fact that many were also wholesalers, had an advantage over other retailers when it came to buying. Davis has argued, however, that group buying by department stores became important between the two world wars due to competition from new chain stores selling fashions and accessories and having the advantage of greater buying power but with little expenditure on customer service. Davis, *Fairs, Shops, and Supermarkets*, 294.

Pasdermadjian has also discussed the advantages of being a member of a department store group, although referring to chains of department stores, many of the benefits hold true for the Allied Merchandisers of which Bowring's was a member. He notes that "... besides the decrease in expense brought about by the integration of the functions of retailing and wholesaling realized in the chain of department stores with central buying and central merchandising, there is also an increase of efficiency caused by the more effective co-ordination between the production and distribution activities, and by the possibility of utilizing the abilities of the specialists within the organization to better advantage.

"Thus the chain of department stores represents a more profitable form of operation than the individually operated department store, on account of its superior buying power and lower expenses." Pasdermadjian, *The Department Store*, 108-9.

opposed to Confederation with Canada.<sup>46</sup>

Owen Owen's influence on Bowring's retail operations does not, however, negate the argument that the Water Street stores owed more to North American retailing innovations than Newfoundland's supposed British orientation would suggest. According to Lancaster, Owen Owen visited the U.S. in the early 1900s to learn more about American department stores and returned "impressed with the sophistication of American advertising" and "the American policy on 'sales'.... [which] were held at the beginning of the season, not at the end as in Britain, and together with the 'bargain basement' greatly improved stock velocity." British interest in American retailing practices had been aroused by Gordon Selfridge, the former manager of Marshall Field's in Chicago, whose opening of a store in London led to a debate over the merits of British versus American department stores. British retailers had long lagged behind their American counterparts, especially in the area of customer service, and Selfridge's arrival encouraged many like

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<sup>46</sup>"Letter from Derrick Bowring to his parents," 23 July 1948, and "Letter from Gordon Bowring to in-laws," 24 August 1948, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

In another letter, Derrick Bowring noted that "The commercial group as a whole in [Newfoundland] are dead against Confederation but so far I can see nothing but good coming out of it. Many of the benefits are not immediately obvious but we discover new ones almost everyday. It is time for one thing that our economy should be modernised. One of the Canadian Bank Managers described it to me not long ago as 'medieval' and I feel he is just about right." "Letter from Derrick Bowring to his parents," 25 January 1949, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

Part of the merchants' enmity towards Confederation was no doubt engendered by the confederate argument that, by joining Canada, the price of Canadian goods, especially items ordered from the Eaton's catalogue, would fall with the removal of the tariff and that the merchants' stranglehold on trade would be broken. "That was a wonderful day," *Confederation Celebrations*, 25 January 1999.



Owen Owen to catch up by adopting American methods.<sup>47</sup>

Under the guidance of the British firm, Bowring's department store underwent a major transformation that had all of Water Street watching in fascination and with no small measure of concern. Most of the changes were attributable to Derrick Bowring and Fred Ayre's determination to turn Bowring's into a truly modern operation, a goal made attainable with Owen Owen's guidance. In a 1947 letter to his parents, Derrick boasted, "When we get in our stride we should certainly be able to put it over our competitors. They are already on the hop a bit and are all wondering what we will be up to next. They have always looked upon us as somewhat mad but now I think they have an idea there is a method to our madness!" Bowring's remodelling led John Murphy, owner of another Water Street store, The Arcade, to declare that Bowring and Ayre had "caused the expenditure of more money on re-fixturing shops and rebuilding than anybody else in the place!"<sup>48</sup>

Among other significant changes to Bowring Brothers' operations were the introduction of training classes for staff and promotional meetings where employees were invited to "advance any wild scheme he or she may have," resulting in such ideas as the

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<sup>47</sup>Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 68-71.

<sup>48</sup>Derrick Bowring tells of finding John Grubb, a manager brought in by Ayre & Sons from mainland Canada to help modernize their own operations, in Bowring's store, measuring their fixtures with a ruler so they could be copied for Ayre's. "Letter from Derrick Bowring to his parents," 28 July 1947, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA); Interview with D.B.

dropping of pamphlets from an airplane and a window display of live rabbits, both of which Bowring's used. It is not surprising that their competitors viewed their efforts with much suspicion and doubt for Bowring Brothers had completely rejected the conservative manner of introducing change to the local retail trade. This shift had much to do with Derrick Bowring's "impetuosity of youth," his disinterest in family and local tradition, and his policy of attracting young staff, both men and women, to the firm. In the past, most managers at the Water Street stores had attained their positions by working their way up through the ranks, learning on the job, and proving their worth over the years, as much through loyalty as through talent. Consequently, management had been dominated by the elderly as in the case of Walter Wills, who finally retired from Bowring Brothers after 53 years of service at the age of seventy-six. Now the emphasis was on youth, training and imagination.<sup>49</sup>

In 1948 Bowring's went even further in its quest to modernize their department store, opening a fashion salon, women's accessories department, and a magazine subscription department where customers could order "all the best known Canadian and American publications" at the same prices offered in Canada. Ranking "among the most modern stores in North America" and providing "the last word in convenience for lady

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<sup>49</sup>"Letters from Derrick Bowring to his parents," 2 January 1947, 28 July 1947, and 7 October 1948. Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

shoppers." Bowring's had created a "modernly designed woman's Utopia."<sup>50</sup> Changes were not restricted to the physical layout and design of the store but also included new services for customer convenience such as an easy payment plan offered on goods costing twenty-five dollars or more. Shortly thereafter, the firm also introduced its 'Family Budget Plan,' wherein purchases could be charged with six months to pay and no down payment when the customer agreed to make a regular monthly payment, in turn getting up to six times that amount in credit. Store ads described the plan as "revolutionary ... to match the modern way of living."<sup>51</sup>

Still not satisfied that their efforts were sufficient to meet customer needs and expectations, Bowring's announced a competition in late 1948, offering a \$1000 prize to the letter presenting the best criticism of the department store and the best suggestions for improvement. The firm received numerous entries, each containing plenty of constructive criticism for the directors' consideration, and the contest results were announced during a special radio programme in February 1949. Starting with a history of Bowring Brothers

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<sup>50</sup>Bowring Bros. Open New Fashion Salon." *The Daily News*, 15 July 1948; Bowring Brothers' ad. *The Daily News*, 9 September 1948 and 12 November 1948.

<sup>51</sup>Bowring Brothers ads. *The Daily News*, 8 June 1948 and 27 August 1948.

Calder, in his study of consumer credit in the U.S., suggests that instalment buying arose in the late nineteenth century but was stigmatized as a practice associated with marginalized groups such as immigrants and the poor. Over the early decades of the twentieth century, the use of instalment plans to buy consumer durables, especially cars, became more widespread and was legitimized. Reasons for the introduction and growing popularity of such plans will be explored in Chapter Four. Calder. *Financing the American Dream*, 166. 183-4.

followed by a summary of the suggestions contained in the letters received, it ended with the on-air presentation of a cheque to the winner, garnering many compliments and much publicity for the firm. Illustrating its willingness to take customer opinion seriously, Bowring's subsequently opened a bargain basement in March 1949, as suggested in many of the competition letters.<sup>52</sup> Derrick Bowring's aim, in his own words, was to "put her on the map," a goal he had gone a long way towards achieving by 1949. By 1960 the firm was considered worthy of mention in John Ferry's history of department stores.<sup>53</sup>

Although offering, by far, the most impressive example of retailing innovation in St. John's during the period, Bowring's was not the only firm to undertake renovations and expansion in the 1940s. In 1945 James Baird, Ltd., remodelled their shoe and dry goods departments, removing counters for more floor space, adding new "modern" fixtures for easier selection, and introducing new lines of merchandise to meet consumer demand. Less than six months later, the firm announced the opening of a new cosmetics department, Baird's being the exclusive Newfoundland agent for a number of popular American cosmetic lines. Described in *The Daily News* as the "Arcade of Loveliness," the combination of lighting and special showcases made Baird's cosmetic counter "a modern,

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<sup>52</sup>Bowring Brothers ads, *The Daily News*, 31 December 1948 and 25 March 1949; "Bowring Bros. Announce Winner of \$1,000 Prize," *The Daily News*, 11 February 1949; "Letters from Derrick Bowring to parents," 25 January 1949, 7 February 1949, and 12 February 1949, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

<sup>53</sup>Interview with D.B.: Ferry, *A History of the Department Store*, 334-5.

almost continental corner."<sup>54</sup>

In 1947 Ayre & Sons announced the opening of a new men's and boy's ready-to-wear department and crockeryware department, followed by a new infants' department in 1948.<sup>55</sup> Ayre & Sons, too, felt the pressure to keep up with the retailing innovations being introduced at the other stores, and with the threat of Confederation on the horizon, decided to hire a consulting firm in Canada to advise them on how to reorganize their operations. The consultants suggested they hire an Englishman, then working in Canada, and so Ayre's employed John Grubb as general manager of their retail store. Grubb had a profound impact on the firm and on retailing in St. John's, his most important contribution being the introduction of bargain-oriented, self-service stores to supplement Ayre's department store in the early 1950s.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, The Royal Stores built new offices in 1948 and also opened a new radio department featuring extensive floor length front windows used to display a variety of the most recent household appliances, highlighted by special new spotlights. The firm also made provisions for employee comfort, opening a

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<sup>54</sup>"Important Changes At James Baird, Ltd.," *The Daily News*, 28 February 1945; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 4 August 1945; "James Baird Ltd. Open Modern Cosmetic Counter," *The Daily News*, 8 August 1945.

<sup>55</sup>Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 25 July 1947 and 18 September 1947; "Ayre & Sons New Crockeryware Department," *The Daily News*, 14 August 1947; "Ayre's Opens Another New Department," *The Daily News*, 22 March 1948.

<sup>56</sup>Interviews with E.P. and D.B.

cafeteria and smoking-reading room above the new store.<sup>57</sup>

Local retailers were not the only ones seeking to capitalize upon the unprecedented economic growth taking place in Newfoundland. New competitors opened their doors, providing further impetus for change in the city's retail trade. In December 1945, G.B. Hefferton introduced the notion of "Two Way Stores" to St. John's, a store combining a modern 'Grocery' with a dry goods department located at Golf and St. Clare Avenues. According to *The Daily News*, the business was "Modelled on the modern layout of United States, and Canadian Chain Stores.... and in the 'Two Way Stores,' customers w[ould] find every feature of the Chain Store on America's Main Street." There, customers could buy low-priced goods straight from New York, Hefferton having recently "returned from a trip abroad, where he viewed the 'up to the minute' shopping situation."<sup>58</sup> In 1947 Sears-Roebuck & Co. also began running ads in local newspapers, having distributed 5000 catalogues in St. John's alone, and announced the opening of an outlet on Duckworth Street where customers could place orders in person or by phone and take advantage of their easy payment plan and lower delivery charges. Simpson's opened a similar office on Water Street the following year, making catalogue shopping

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<sup>57</sup>"City and Elsewhere," *The Daily News*, 5 July 1948; "The Royal Stores Newly-opened Radio Department," *The Daily News*, 4 September 1948.

<sup>58</sup>"Modern 'Two Way Stores' Opened By G.B. Hefferton," *The Daily News*, 20 December 1945.

even more convenient for St. John's consumers.<sup>59</sup>

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Newfoundland's economic prosperity continued after the war in spite of the anticipated loss of jobs on the military bases. Newfoundland's retail trade remained prosperous throughout 1947 and 1948 for, although spending power was reportedly less than in 1946, the greater supply of consumer goods and semi-durables helped foster demand despite high prices.<sup>60</sup> Complaints of profiteering due to the persistently high cost of goods led Commission of Government to institute a cost of living inquiry but it concluded that raised prices were the result of freight rates and other causes external to Newfoundland. The report, according to the *Newfoundland Journal of Commerce*, "... was accepted with general equanimity by the trade and quieted any generally held belief that the public was being gouged."<sup>61</sup>

Like their rural counterparts, especially those in the larger industrial centres of Grand Falls and Corner Brook, St. John's consumers were enjoying a rising standard of

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<sup>59</sup>Sears-Roebuck ads, *The Daily News*, 28 March 1947 and 7 April 1947: "Sears, Roebuck Open Mail Order House Here." *The Daily News*, 14 April 1947; Simpson's ad, *The Daily News*, 14 February 1948.

<sup>60</sup>"Industrial Newfoundland," *The Daily News*, 8 January 1941; "1947 Generally Prosperous Year for Newfoundland," *The Daily News*, 31 December 1947; "Letters from Derrick Bowring to parents," 29 November 1948 and 28 December 1948, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

<sup>61</sup>"Cost of Living Inquiry Scotches 'Profiteering,'" *Newfoundland Journal of Commerce*, 14(11), (December 1947) 20-1.

living as evidenced by the significant increase in the purchase of consumer goods. Unlike the situation in the outports, however, city shoppers enjoyed a selection of stores from which to buy, not to mention larger stores with higher turnover rates and greater capacity for carrying a variety of goods.<sup>62</sup> A large number of outport people had migrated to St. John's in search of employment during the early 1940s, swelling the city's population and increasing its consumer base but many feared the consequences of falling employment for the retail trade at war's end, especially since St. John's seemed to be losing its central role in the fish trade with the handling of salt codfish passing to the outports. Still, wholesale trade with the outports remained an important contributor to the city's economy, helping to ease the impact.

As in the capital, the outports experienced the benefits of an improved economy with local shopkeepers and city wholesalers reaping the rewards. In 1946, the *Trade Review* reported a great demand in the outports for a better class of food, clothing and furniture "as people are building up their homes and furnishings, which were allowed to go down during the days of the depression.... There is plenty of money and people are not afraid to spend it ..."<sup>63</sup> By 1948, however, trade appeared to be falling off, the decline being attributed by some to uncertainty over the Confederation question, by others to

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<sup>62</sup>"A 'Bayman' Views the City," *The Daily News*, 4 September 1941.

<sup>63</sup>Editorials, *Trade Review*, 16 February 1946 and 17 August 1946: "Finds Prosperity On Northeast Coast," *Trade Review*, 21 August 1946.



international factors such as European reconstruction.<sup>64</sup> At Bowring's, retail sales, on the whole, remained good although the wholesale trade was dull due to concerns over the outcome of referenda to determine Newfoundland's political future. Due to uncertainty over the country's future status, many held off on buying stock from Canada for, if Confederation occurred, there would no longer be tariffs on Canadian goods making imports cheaper.<sup>65</sup>

Changing consumer attitudes regarding modern society and an acceptable standard of living, no doubt the result of economic prosperity, high employment and a greater awareness of life on the North American continent, contributed to the buoyancy of retail sales. The increased number of store ads for household fixtures and appliances, in particular, demonstrates a growing fascination with "modern living" and the intention of many in St. John's to share in its benefits.<sup>66</sup> The 1945 Housing Commission Survey further illustrates a rising awareness of local living conditions and a growing belief that everyone had a right to a certain standard of living. The commission found that many in St. John's lived in substandard housing, a condition no doubt caused in part by the great influx of people during the war, the city's population having risen 19% from 1935 to 1945.<sup>67</sup> In

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<sup>64</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 24 April 1948.

<sup>65</sup>"Letters from Derrick Bowring to parents," 23 July 1948 and 10 August 1948. Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA); Editorial, *Trade Review*, 11 September 1948.

<sup>66</sup>"In the News," *The Daily News*, 22 June 1945.

<sup>67</sup>MacLeod, *Peace of the Continent*, 31.

fact, many homes were without certain amenities like bath tubs and some remained unconnected to the city's sewerage system. The findings were a source of surprise and outrage to many like the editor of *The Daily News* who declared:

Well, something has to be done because it is a shameful blot on our sense of what is fair and right that half the citizens of St. John's should live in overcrowded and poor to very bad houses. The low-income groups are entitled to better living and something must be done to make it possible for them to enjoy it. Every family should have modern accommodation ...<sup>88</sup>

Two years later, the newspaper's editor again expressed concern over the issue of adequate housing for St. John's citizens. It would appear that many were making comparisons between local living conditions and those existing on the mainland for he felt the need to refute the idea of a North American standard of living, suggesting that poverty existed everywhere, even in Canada and the U.S. Still, he charged that locals were too complacent when it came to living conditions, arguing "sub-standard housing" must be replaced by "modern workingmen's apartments in which the amenities of modern life may be enjoyed."<sup>89</sup>

His concern was part of a growing fascination in Newfoundland with "modern" life. Items once considered luxuries had become essential for establishing a minimum standard of living to which every citizen had a right. The large Water Street stores capitalized upon this belief and the findings of the Housing Commission by advertising

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<sup>88</sup>Editorial, *The Daily News*, 7 November 1945.

<sup>89</sup>Editorial, *The Daily News*, 4 June 1947.

goods for household improvements and complete sets of furnishings for every room in the home. Of particular importance were electrical appliances "to lighten kitchen drudgery and household duties for the Housewife" and to "Make Modern Living a Pleasure."<sup>70</sup> As far back as 1941, The Royal Stores had been promoting washing machines, not just as conveniences but household necessities like irons and sewing machines, and offering easy payment plans for Philco refrigerators, advertised as the "winner of the American design award."<sup>71</sup> Over the course of the decade, numerous other items - such as tapestries, venetian blinds, new furniture, and floor coverings - were added to the list of essentials in "the Modern Home."<sup>72</sup>

In 1947 Bowring Brothers announced that it would be holding a Modern Homes Fair within their store, featuring exhibits of model kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms and sitting rooms. Ads for the Fair advised housewives to attend to see how to make life "a great deal easier." No doubt inspired by the Housing Commission's finding that there were many city homes without proper plumbing or bathroom facilities, Bowring's emphasized its display of bathroom fixtures, declaring in one ad that, judging from the

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<sup>70</sup>Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 13 August 1947 and 8 October 1947; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 26 August 1947; City Service Co., Ltd., ad, *The Daily News*, 10 February 1949.

<sup>71</sup>The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 20 May 1941 and 28 June 1941.

<sup>72</sup>Steers ad, *The Daily News*, 23 September 1941; Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 17 April 1947; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 28 April 1948; Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 18 February 1949.

number of people visiting their Fair. "BATHROOMANIA" was now "very prevalent."<sup>73</sup>

The primary targets of store campaigns to promote a modern lifestyle were those benefitting from waged employment associated with the construction of military bases, especially recent arrivals from the outports and returning soldiers with war brides needing to establish households in St. John's. Immediately following the war, firms like Bowring's and Baird's ran ads aimed specifically at the war brides arriving from Europe, welcoming them to their new home and offering to help them "set up house."<sup>74</sup>

The stores had no doubt benefited from the increase in construction of new buildings in St. John's in the late 1940s - the value estimated at almost \$2,500,000 in 1947, of which approximately one million was spent on new houses and apartments or the remodelling of residences. In 1944, city council and Commission of Government jointly funded the creation of the St. John's Housing Corporation meant to construct housing in the suburb of Churchill Square, at that time just outside city limits. Between 1945 and early 1948, the corporation alone built 242 new homes, described in the *Newfoundland Journal of Commerce* as "Modernly designed and fitted wherever possible with the latest household appliances ... eagerly sought after by the house-hungry public ..." Built for war

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<sup>73</sup>"Home Furnishings Display at Bowring Brothers," *The Daily News*, 19 April 1947; Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 21 April 1947.

<sup>74</sup>Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 28 March 1946; "Newfoundland Extends Welcome to War Brides," *The Daily News*, 29 March 1946; "Ex Servicemen's Wives Spend Day Shopping," *The Daily News*, 30 March 1946; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 1 April 1946.

veterans and the middle class, however, the houses were not within most working-class family budgets.<sup>75</sup> Ironically, while the construction of suburban housing meant a significant increase in the sale of goods and materials for the stores in this period, it eventually led to the decline of the downtown area and the demise of the large Water Street stores over the following decades as they were replaced by strip and shopping malls located in the suburbs.<sup>76</sup>

The prosperity of the war years and the influx of foreign servicemen greatly

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<sup>75</sup>"Trade Topics," *Newfoundland Journal of Commerce*, 14 (1), (December 1947) 7; "Building and Construction," *Newfoundland Journal of Commerce*, 15(4), (April 1948) 7-8; Melvin Baker, "Municipal Politics and Public Housing in St. John's, 1911-1921," *Workingmen's St. John's: Aspects of Social History in the Early 1900s*, Robert Cuff, Melvin Baker and Bill Gillespie, eds. (St. John's, NF: Harry Cuff Publications, Ltd., 1982) 41.

The trend towards suburbanization was common to most American and Canadian cities in the post-war period. As Valerie Korinek has noted, it involved mostly ex-servicemen and their families who received government-secured mortgages as few working-class and immigrant families could afford homes in the suburbs. In Canada, however, where disposable income was far lower than in the States, suburban living - entailing home ownership, automobiles, and household appliances - often required two incomes and the use of instalment buying for families to live out their "consumer dreams." Valerie J. Korinek, *Roughing it in the Suburbs: Reading Chatelaine Magazine in the Fifties and Sixties* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000) 5-6.

<sup>76</sup>Barth suggests the growth of suburbs and the widespread use of automobiles ended the "downtown focus of modern-city life" in American cities. This was also the case in St. John's. Some of the Water Street stores attempted to meet changing conditions by later opening stores in the suburbs and shopping malls in the 1960s and '70s but few survived beyond the 1980s. Barth, *City People*, 8; Interview with D.B.: William R. Knowling, "Ayre & Sons and the Newfoundland Economy Since Confederation" (Unpublished paper, Center for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1986) 8.

strengthened social and economic trends already evident by 1939. Newfoundlanders had long been aware of the mass culture spreading throughout much of North America due to the influence of foreign media and the import of foreign brand name goods. The Water Street stores had played a central role in introducing these trends to the people of St. John's through their advertisements and in-store promotions. By adapting American merchandising methods to sell American products and a North American way of life, the stores had a profound impact on local patterns of consumption contributing to the introduction of a consumer culture to St. John's. On the eve of Confederation with Canada in 1949, "modern" was the catchword to describe how most Newfoundlanders wanted to live and the large Water Street stores offered themselves as the experts to advise consumers on how to remodel their homes to suit the times. As in the past, the stores served as educators, alerting shoppers to changing trends and new products, providing what they needed to present the correct image in society, to show that they had indeed "arrived." World War II and the prospect of Confederation furthered the process by increasing opportunities for waged employment, raising awareness of a North American mass culture and creating consumer demand for North American products and a North American way of life. Wartime prosperity gave the Water Street stores the means and the incentive to further modernize and expand their operations to meet Newfoundland's future as a province of Canada.

## **Part II: Socio-Cultural Themes in Consumer History**

Seen as "a prism through which many aspects of social and political life may be viewed," studies of consumerism have been used to explore a variety of subjects such as gender relations, political activism, labour movements and ethnic identities, topics which often appear unrelated to the consumption of goods. But as one of the defining characteristics of modern society and mass culture, consumerism's relevance to investigations of almost every aspect of life in the industrialized nations of the western world is becoming increasingly apparent, resulting in a significant increase in studies of the subject. These works are typically cultural critiques of the causes, consequences and morality of mass consumption with scholars adopting a variety of approaches and methodologies from marxism to feminism, structuralism to post-modernism, and psychoanalysis to sociological theory in order to gauge consumerism's impact on society. In many cases a combination of these and other frameworks or models are employed as analytical tools in attempting to interpret texts and behaviour in order to understand modern consumer society.<sup>1</sup>

In gauging the impact of the retailing activities of the Water Street stores and their role in the introduction of a consumer culture to St. John's over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the options for avenues of exploration are numerous. No one

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<sup>1</sup>Strasser, McGovern and Judt. "Introduction," *Getting and Spending*, 4; Lawrence B. Glickman, "Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History," *Consumer Society in American History*, 1-2, 10; Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*, 21; Glickman, "Preface," *Consumer Society in American History*, viii.

methodology or theory has been adopted in these investigations but rather a variety of approaches inform the following chapters, among them Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, gender discourse analysis, and sociological/cultural theory. As this study is an introductory foray into the subject of retailing and consumerism in Newfoundland and is intended to serve as a basis for future examinations of consumption and society, it would seem most beneficial - not to mention expedient in the absence of secondary sources - to explore the consequences of rising consumption and the expansion of city stores by looking at those most affected: working-class consumers, women and retail workers.



**Chapter Four - Mass vs. Class in the Water Street Stores:  
Cultural Hegemony or the Democratization of Luxury?**

As the Water Street stores modernized their operations and up-dated their premises from late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, they also played a role in altering the class experience of consumption in St. John's. Most, if not all, historians of the department store have argued that, wherever they were located, the stores were central institutions in the development of a consumer culture and, through their retailing and merchandising activities, they helped spread that culture throughout much of society.<sup>1</sup> Yet, it is a difficult, if not impossible, task with the limited sources available to determine how people responded to the changing methods of retailing and advertising goods. It would, therefore, be folly to suggest how the consumers of St. John's viewed the efforts of retailers to draw them into their stores. Yet, with the aid of several concepts and theories popular among sociologists and historians of consumerism, it is possible to reach some conclusions regarding the impact of Water Street store expansion on working-class consumers. Advertisements and newspaper descriptions of store designs, services, and special promotions are the primary sources used in this class-based exploration of retailing and consumption in St. John's during the period of study. Descriptions of consuming habits in the local press also provide insight into how working-class consumers were viewed by the middle class and help answer the question of whether or not the Water

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<sup>1</sup>See Miller, *The Bon Marché*; Leach, *Land of Desire*; Benson, *Counter Cultures*; Reekie, *Temptations*; Lancaster, *The Department Store*.

Street stores were instrumental in democratizing luxury in St. John's.

Cultural hegemony and the democratization of luxury are two themes frequently encountered in explorations of the impact of consumer culture with regard to class. Although not opposites, these concepts, in a number of ways, offer opposing viewpoints of the development of consumer societies. Cultural hegemony, a theoretical framework invoked by many scholars on the left, its most influential adherent being Italian marxist Antonio Gramsci, suggests that ideas, beliefs and attitudes which support the current distribution of power in society are transferred from the elite to the masses through a variety of everyday experiences.<sup>2</sup> In the case of consumer culture, it has been argued that the conspicuous consumption of the upper class, as noted in the late nineteenth century by American sociologist Thorstein Veblen, has become a widely accepted value over the course of the twentieth century, first among the middle class and later spreading to the working class. And as the dominant institution in the retail revolution during this period, some historians see the department store as central to the spread of consumer culture and

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<sup>2</sup>Lears offers the most accessible explanation of Gramsci's theory that I have yet to find. He defines cultural hegemony as "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production'.... [The] components of a dominant culture [which] require the consent of subordinates ... [are] the values, norms, perceptions, beliefs, sentiments, and prejudices that support and define the existing distribution of goods, the institutions that decide how this distribution occurs, and the permissible range of disagreement about those processes." T.J. Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *American Historical Review*, 90( 3), (June 1985) 568-9.

conspicuous consumption throughout much of the western world.<sup>3</sup>

For some marxist critics, the most serious consequence of modern consumer society is the destruction of working-class consciousness. They argue that consumer culture, shaped and promoted by retailers and advertisers, is a bribe to workers who "are offered freedom and plenty in the sphere of consumption in exchange for accepting intensive rationalization, alienation and [an] utter lack of control over their worklife ..."<sup>4</sup> Evoking Veblen's idea of conspicuous consumption, Stuart Ewen is perhaps the best-known proponent of this idea, arguing that American manufacturers and mass merchandisers, through the development of a vast and influential advertising industry in the early decades of the twentieth century, have bought off the working class in the U.S. with false promises of material abundance, thereby destroying their class consciousness

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<sup>3</sup>Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 3, 159; Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 165-6.

Not all cultural critics see consumerism arising out of the drive for social emulation or mere acquisitiveness. Colin Campbell suggests that the desire for goods in consumer societies has more to do with the quality of modern day dreams in which objects are idealized to such an extent that they can never live up to the fantasy. This results in the endless pursuit, acquisition and discarding of idealized objects which can only offer disappointment. Campbell, "Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming," 19-30.

<sup>4</sup>Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, 188; Arthur Asa Berger, *Cultural Criticism: A Primer of Key Concepts* (Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Sage Publications, 1995) 53-7.

Doubtful of assumptions regarding the effectiveness of ads or the suggestibility of consumers, Schudson has argued that advertising does not require us to believe the message it carries but rather serves primarily to reinforce existing social and economic conditions. In his words, "Advertising is capitalism's way of saying 'I love you' to itself." Michael Schudson, *Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) 232.

and encouraging them to identify themselves as consumers rather than as workers or producers of the goods they consume. In so doing, it is argued, capitalists have gained the complicity of the working class in their own subordination.<sup>5</sup>

Lears, however, rejects Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption as a "top-down model of cultural domination" which dismisses "nearly all sensuous or material cultural forms," although admits it led scholars to look beyond "the simple-minded utilitarianism of orthodox economics" to explain consumer behaviour. He, therefore, finds more utility in Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, despite having its own set of problems and critics, suggesting that it should not be confused with social control. Instead, Gramsci's theory allows for change originating from below as there is room for counterhegemony (how much room is determined by the dominant bloc) and new historical blocs can rise up to replace the old. Consequently, consumerism may be part of

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<sup>5</sup>Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 28, 33, 79-80.

Bryan Palmer adopts this idea in his study of the Canadian working class, suggesting consumer culture had, by the 1920s, put an end to the struggle of the working class as it had replaced many traditional working-class practices. Cohen disagrees with this embourgeoisement thesis, arguing that mass consumption actually fostered a working-class identity in the early decades of the twentieth century because members of the working class were first introduced to new products, radio and movies within their own communities. Experiencing and interpreting consumer culture as a group was an important factor in strengthening their sense of belonging as shared interest in music, national sports, and brand name goods, for example, provided common ground for a working class divided by other issues such as race, ethnicity, and religion. Furthermore, manufacturers' and advertisers' recognition of a working-class market and attempts to create products appealing to this group has also helped the working class maintain a sense of identity. Bryan Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1900* (Toronto: Butterworth, 1983) 190; Cohen, "The Class Experience of Mass Consumption," 135-60.

a dominant culture promoted by social elites but it is not simply imposed upon the masses in society, rather there is evidence that ideas or practices may filter up from the bottom to become part of the accepted cultural corpus.<sup>6</sup>

For other critics of consumerism, their concern is the negative impact of mass consumption on society as a whole. They argue that manufacturers and merchandisers sell consumption to the general public in order to create both a market for mass-produced goods and support for the existing social structure which determines the distribution of wealth and power in society. They do so through persistent advertising and luxuriously appointed department stores which create the illusion of existing in a dream world, a world where unrestrained consumption is without consequence, thereby fostering unreasonable, unlimited, and unfulfillable desires for material possessions. Leach charges that in so doing, department stores (in collusion with others, among them banks, museums, manufacturers, and government agencies) have managed to equate the ownership of goods with happiness and fulfilment, making materialism a widespread social value.<sup>7</sup> As Berger explains, however, it is not the ownership of goods which troubles critics like Leach but the "overemphasis put on personal consumer goods by individuals ... and the frenzy for the acquisition of these goods.... [which] breeds privatism, selfishness.

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<sup>6</sup>Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," 568-9; Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 161.

<sup>7</sup>Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 81-100; Leach, *Land of Desire*, xiii, 388-90.

and reluctance to take care of social needs and to spend money in the public realm."<sup>8</sup>

Those who share this concern see a clear shift in the ethics and values of nineteenth-century "Protestant producer culture," a time during which the relationship between people and goods was supposedly balanced and healthy, and twentieth-century "secular consumer culture." Although once a proponent of this notion, Lears has since suggested that American indulgence in the novelty and spectacle of modern consumer society - such as that found in many department stores - has deeper roots than the gilded and progressive eras of American history and so cannot be considered an entirely new phenomenon or a break from traditional values.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Livingston does not question the assumption of a shift in social values since the nineteenth century but argues that in idealizing nineteenth-century proprietary capitalism for meeting man's physical and psychic needs as Leach has done, critics of modern consumer culture tend to ignore "women's confinement and sublimation in maternal roles" within that society. In modern consumer society, he charges, the consumer (identified as female) has a more prominent role than the producer (male) which is therefore threatened by the "feminization of identity," leading critics to lament the passing of proprietary capitalism as a time when the producer was dominant. But, as Livingston sees it, consumer society has opened up many new possibilities for both sexes, but especially for women. The ability to purchase a wide

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<sup>8</sup>Berger, *Cultural Criticism*, 55.

<sup>9</sup>Lears, "Beyond Veblen," 76-7.

variety of goods and services means that individuals can choose from an innumerable array of paths to self-determination and to self-expression. Despite this, those disenchanted with consumer society still worry that the merchandising of brand name goods and the encouragement of conspicuous consumption and social emulation are resulting in cultural homogenization.<sup>10</sup>

The democratization of luxury differs from the theory of cultural hegemony in that it represents a more positive and, in some ways, a more conservative view of consumption. While the latter suggests subordinate groups in society have become participants in the hegemony of the dominant group by accepting the values of elites, those who accept the notion of the democratization of luxury believe that rising incomes, the mass production of goods, and the growth of mass merchandisers have enabled more members of society than ever before to enjoy the benefits of consumerism and a better standard of living. A common theme in early histories of the department store, it suggests large retailers opened the door for working-class experience of leisurely and affordable consumption. Due to their policy of low-priced, quality merchandise selling solely for cash, mass merchandisers made many goods, formerly considered luxury items, accessible to the working class. Furthermore, additional policies such as clearly marked, fixed prices on products freely displayed for customer inspection, eased the pressure to make a purchase and removed a potential source of embarrassment should customers discover

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<sup>10</sup>Livingston, "Modern Subjectivity and Consumer Society," 413-5, 423-5; Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 191-2.

they were unable to afford a requested item upon learning the price. Department stores, due to their size and policy of self-service, also offered anonymity, giving shoppers the opportunity to browse and make comparisons at their leisure, thereby introducing customers to new products and fashion trends while removing many impediments to working-class consumption. In this way, department store shopping was a levelling experience as it offered an opportunity for people from different classes to mix and mingle as they could in few other environments. In Barth's words, "the department store gave urban life a downtown focus, not only bestowing charm and civility but also evoking democratic qualities that enriched the urbanity of the modern city and reaffirmed its egalitarian nature."<sup>11</sup>

Critics, however, respond to such claims with the charge that only the desire for goods was democratized by mass merchandisers as the ability to browse and examine the products for sale did not necessarily entail an ability to buy. Schudson, not unlike Leach, observes that "Luxury was not democratized so much as made markedly more visible, more public, and more often articulate - through advertising - than it had been before. The department store did less to provide equality in consumption than to encourage a democracy of aspirations and desire. They contributed to the democratization of envy."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Miller argues, the department store's targeted clientele was the growing

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<sup>11</sup>Boorstin, *The Americans*, 107; Barth, *City People*, 130-1, 147.

<sup>12</sup>Michael Schudson, "Historical Roots of Consumer Culture," 45-6.



middle class, making it a middle-class institution which reflected and reinforced a middle-class culture. In consequence, it could not take credit for democratizing luxury even though its defenders touted this as one of the benefits of mass merchandising. Although this may have been true of early department stores in major cities, by the turn of the twentieth century, as working-class incomes rose relative to those of the middle class, few retailers could ignore this growing market and many, in fact, catered to it by introducing sales and bargain basements. The department store's role in the democratization of luxury is, therefore, not as straightforward as would appear from early histories and is still the subject of some debate.<sup>13</sup>

Because it is only possible to explore the changes taking place in the buying habits of St. John's consumers through the activities of retailers and reports in the press, it is difficult to determine the extent to which either of these themes - cultural hegemony or the democratization of luxury - are applicable to the local experience of consumption. Yet, both are useful in exploring the impact of mass merchandising and consumer culture on

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<sup>13</sup>Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 165, 215; Santink, *Timothy Eaton*, 43-4; Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society*, 50, 74-6.

John Benson has argued that department stores in Britain tended to reflect the identities, anxieties and aspirations of their customers, whether they were primarily middle- or working-class. In this regard, shopping served to reinforce class culture, an argument similar to that of Liz Cohen in her dismissal of the supposed "embourgeoisement" of working-class and ethnic groups in early twentieth-century Chicago. According to Benson, however, consumption could also work to diminish class tension by encouraging shoppers to identify with others in non-class ways, such as according to gender or age. Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society*, 205-7, 211; Cohen, "The Class Experience of Mass Consumption," 135-60.

class in that they raise important questions about changes in local consuming habits and what these meant for society.

Important to the concepts of social emulation and cultural hegemony is the presence of a social elite to set the standards by which the rest of society lives. Identifying this group in the local context is not difficult - many of them were the very people responsible for the changes taking place in the St. John's retail trade, the store owners themselves. As members of the powerful and influential merchant class in Newfoundland, they held a position likened to that of the aristocracy in Britain. There is little doubt that the Water Street merchants were members of a privileged class: their city addresses and homes with names like "Burn Brae," "Calvert House," and "Westerland;" their country retreats; British education; and even the churches they chose to support and attend, served to reinforce and announce their status. So did their social and professional positions and activities. From the ranks of the Water Street merchants came government representatives, educational reformers, Newfoundland Patriotic Association members, a Grenfell doctor, and proponents of the co-operative movement. They also built parks, hospitals, schools and orphanages. For their efforts, they were decorated by their government and revered in the press and by social commentators.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Catherine Horan, "Hon. C.P. Ayre," "C.R. Ayre," and G.W.B. Ayre," *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, Vol. 1, 100-1, 233-4; Fay Paddock, "A. Macpherson" and "C. Macpherson," *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, Vol. 3, 423-5; J.A. Cochrane, "The United Church College," *The Book of Newfoundland*, Vol. 1, 312; *Newfoundland Directory, 1936*, 121, 149, 395; John J. St. John, "The Legislative Council of Newfoundland," *Newfoundland Quarterly* (Summer 1934) 22; J.R. Smallwood, "The

Although often charged with attempting to dominate local industry and with profiting from the poverty of the fishermen they supplied, their wealth and the mercantile penchant for *noblesse oblige* (the belief that 'privilege entails responsibility') also bought them much praise and respect.<sup>15</sup> Philanthropic deeds discharged their responsibility to the community and, in return, society repaid them with deference and respect as the following quote from a 1937 article by J.R. Smallwood attests:

St. John's has one element not equalled, perhaps, on this side of the Atlantic for aristocratic outlook and cultured background. I refer to a relatively small number of wealthy and near-wealthy merchants and business-men. These men have travelled the world, often speak several languages, are deeply read, often musical, and gifted in more ways than one. Their homes are sanctuaries of culture and refinement ...

In modes of living, accent, manner of speech, dress and general outlook, the English tradition, especially the English tradition of culture, has been best preserved in Newfoundland by this element of St. John's business-men of cultured background. With this Newfoundland difference: that even the wealthiest and most cultured person in St. John's moves about and mixes freely with everybody else ...

Unlike members of similar station in the U.S. or Britain, then, the St. John's business elite, according to Smallwood, demonstrated a remarkable familiarity with those occupying less lofty social positions:

Yes, they may have their golf and country clubs, their comfortable and exclusive city clubs, their salmon and shooting lodges, their magnificent automobiles, their art-gallery homes, and all that their family traditions and

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Co-operative Movement in Newfoundland," *The Book of Newfoundland*, Vol. 1, 278; M.F. Harrington, "Charity Organization Bureau," *The Book of Newfoundland*, Vol. 2, 93.

<sup>15</sup>Patrick Devine, *Ye Olde St. John's* (St. John's, NF: Newfoundland Directories, 1936) 5.

wealth can mean: they can and they do; but the interesting and admirable thing about them, or perhaps I should say about the country and town, is that they retain the typically democratic demeanour and habits of the rest of the people.<sup>16</sup>

These, then, were the people primarily responsible for influencing the buying habits of St. John's consumers with their stores serving as outlets for an increasing quantity and variety of imports. Thanks to their wealth and public profile, this class enjoyed a considerable degree of authority in determining social standards and, if not directly, then indirectly through their buyers and managers, store owners decided what products were sold and how they were represented in ads and displays. Along with foreign movies, radio programmes and magazines, they helped raise awareness of new trends, fashions and fads, thereby fuelling the needs and wants of local shoppers. But unlike American media, the stores could also fulfil the desires they aroused with the merchandise they carried.

Consequently, the owners of the large Water Street stores played a significant role in determining what products were consumed and how they were perceived while also serving as models to those aspiring to approximate a middle-class lifestyle. This, according to Barth, was one of the many roles of department stores in the modern city: to guide consumers in their purchase of "status-conferring accoutrements" with advice, ads and displays, much of which reflected the middle-class attitudes and values of their owners.<sup>17</sup> This is clearly evident throughout the period of study in store ads selling

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<sup>16</sup>Smallwood, "Life To-day in Newfoundland," 27.

<sup>17</sup>Barth, *City People*, 142.

clothing, furniture, and housewares with the promise of a modern, respectable, and fashionable appearance. Ads warned consumers that a shoddy or old-fashioned appearance could seriously threaten their social standing but comforted them with the claim that they only need visit the stores to learn of the latest fashions and merchandise. For those customers who wanted not only the appearance of respectability but to make it a reality, the stores also promoted products capable of aiding the ambitious in their bid for social mobility.<sup>18</sup>

In their emphasis on the importance of taste, class, refinement and style, ads, as Miller has argued, reflected the middle-class values of retailers. But, while the large Water Street stores may have been middle-class institutions in terms of ownership and management, they were not with regard to clientele. Although most early department stores in major European and North American cities set out to capture the custom of a growing middle class, only later shifting their attention towards a working class with rising disposable incomes, this was not the case in St. John's.<sup>19</sup> The images and attitudes

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<sup>18</sup>George Knowling ad, *The Daily News*, 16 May 1895; The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 23 April 1900, 1 April 1901, 10 June 1901, 19 May 1902, 29 August 1908, 3 April 1909, 30 August 1910, 12 October 1912, and 25 September 1934; Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 14 April 1908, 13 February 1911, 22 September 1911, 7 October 1911, 2 May 1914, 15 May 1916, 24 October 1919, 29 May 1923, 19 April 1930, and 19 September 1931; James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 29 August 1916, 14 December 1921, 12 April 1924, 10 May 1924, 3 July 1925, 29 August 1925, and 29 May 1936; Broadway House of Fashion ad, *The Daily News*, 17 October 1930; Steers, Ltd., ads, *The Daily News*, 18 November 1937 and 6 July 1938; Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 9 December 1939; London, New York and Paris ad, *The Daily News*, 25 October 1943.

<sup>19</sup>Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society*, 50.

projected within the stores and by store advertisements may have reflected middle-class concerns regarding social mobility and respectability but retailers were well aware that their appeal must reach all sectors of the consuming public. Ads. therefore, did not promote unrestrained consumption but recognized the fact that most customers must maintain a budget by emphasizing the value and practicality of the goods on offer. This was especially true during periods of economic recession when stores frequently made claims to offering the best quality at the lowest prices for the benefit of cost-conscious consumers.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, all of the large Water Street firms were well-entrenched in the general trade of the island, meaning that outport fishermen and sealers had long been a mainstay of their businesses, a factor contributing, no doubt, to the merchants' familiarity and willingness to interact with members of other classes. While St. John's population had grown considerably over the period of study - hence the efforts of store owners to expand and modernize their operations to cater to a local clientele - outport customers remained an important component of city trade. In addition to this, wage-earning workers were the greatest contributors to city growth and, although expanding, the middle class was not

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<sup>20</sup>The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 18 September 1909; Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 27 December 1915; James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 26 May 1916, 15 September 1916, and 8 April 1921; George Knowling ad, *The Daily News*, 6 June 1924; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 25 September 1936.

large enough to allow stores to ignore low income groups.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, unlike some department stores in major cities, these were not middle-class institutions catering to middle-class shoppers with in-store art galleries, theatres and libraries. Instead, the Water Street stores were businesses which attempted to straddle the middle and working class divide, reflecting the values of their owners but also recognizing the budget limitations of their clientele.

In some ways, the Water Street merchants, despite their very different economic and social status, were not that far removed from even their working-class customers, a situation contrary to social conditions in England but one also noted in early twentieth-century Canadian society.<sup>22</sup> Despite his wealth and sophistication, Smallwood described the local merchant as one who

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<sup>21</sup>Aside from the statistical evidence indicating that the majority of St. John's consumers were working-class, there is also some anecdotal evidence to suggest that the Water Street stores catered to practically all segments of society. During an on-going debate over store hours in the early 1900s, the Royal Stores, in opposition to a proposed plan to move the Wednesday holiday to Saturday, argued, "There is no such thing as Saturday afternoon closing in any part of the world, except in very high-class shops (a class having no representative here) ..." In 1924, Baird's admitted that they could not afford a dissatisfied customer because St. John's had a limited clientele. Little had changed by the 1940s when Bowring's embarked on a scheme to drastically overhaul its retail operations and, in spite of its more modern, up-market image, was unable to carry goods in a wide price range because the city market for expensive merchandise was just too small. Editorial, *Trade Review*, 26 September 1903; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 22 May 1924; Interview with D.B.

<sup>22</sup>H.R. Whates, a British visitor to Canada in the early 1900s, observed that "The gulf that separates the labouring from the shopkeeping class in England, and the shopkeeping class from 'those above' is being reduced in Canadian society." Whates, *Canada: A New Nation*, 226.

... moves about and mixes freely with anybody else, and finds himself quite willingly every day of his life 'cheek by jowl' with the ordinary run of people, not so well placed in wealth or culture or refinement, as would probably make many a man of similar status in other countries shudder to contemplate.

Furthermore, because of their involvement in the fishery, the merchants "... must always do such a minimum of 'mixing' with the democracy as to keep their feet on the ground and give them the saving grace of ordinary democratic sympathy and common sense."<sup>23</sup> As a result, store owners and managers were keenly aware of the needs and wants, as well as the budget limitations, of all their customers, regardless of income.

Still, due to their size and the pretensions of their merchant owners, the large Water Street stores were a far cry from the "huckster shops" located on the city's upper streets where the very poorest made their purchases. In the former, wives of merchants and government officials shopped alongside those of office clerks and tradesmen contributing to what Barth called the democratic and egalitarian qualities of the modern city. While one might quickly run to a corner shop to pick up an item or two, shopping on

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<sup>23</sup>J.R. Smallwood, "Life To-Day in Newfoundland," 27-8.

In his history of the British department store, Lancaster suggests that Birmingham's retail trade was somewhat backward due to relaxed social distinctions between the city's small businessmen and workers who enjoyed "daily contact on first-name terms." As a result, "Distinctions between bosses and workers were often blurred and of little consequence, and the pressure to create social hierarchies through patterns of consumption may have been less felt in Birmingham than elsewhere." Lancaster also points to the small number of white-collar workers among the city's population which might account for the slow growth of department stores and their "emphasis on cheapness," a situation quite similar to that of St. John's, Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 37-8.



Water Street held greater significance for, although time-consuming, it was also a social activity which necessitated proper attire. In this regard, shopping on Water Street was a levelling experience in that customers, regardless of income, could visit the stores, enjoy the elegant surroundings and benefit from the services offered.<sup>24</sup>

This does not, however, mean that working- and middle-class shoppers received similar treatment in the Water Street stores. The treatment of shoplifters, for example, varied according to their social status as working-class thieves were distinguished from middle-class kleptomaniacs, usually being confronted directly by store staff or managers while those from "respectable" families were typically treated with sensitivity and diplomacy, the matter resolved behind closed doors. Similarly, it was not unusual for store owners to personally greet friends and social equals at the door before escorting them to a clerk or saleslady for service. Working-class customers, however, did not receive such courteous attention. This is where the ambiguous position of retail workers truly came in handy, their status somewhere between that of the working and middle classes enabling them to relate to customers of all incomes. In fact, there is some evidence that customer loyalty owed more to the presence of a favourite clerk or saleslady than to the store itself and that the historical antipathy of the lower classes to the merchants may

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<sup>24</sup>"The Man in the Mart," *Trade Review*, 27 October 1906; Kevin Jardine, "Those Dear Dim Days (Almost) Beyond Recall," *The Book of Newfoundland*, Vol. 5, J.R. Smallwood, ed. (St. John's, NF: Newfoundland Book Publishers, Ltd., 1975) 101; "Letter from Derrick Bowring to parents," 23 November 1945, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA); Interviews with R.C. and E.P.: Neary, *White Tie and Decorations*, 78, 242; Barth, *City People*, 147; Comeau, "Les grands magasins," 61.

have been eased by retail workers who served as "middlemen."<sup>25</sup>

Attitudes toward the practice of approbation, a common policy which permitted customers to buy goods on approval and to return unsatisfactory items, also reveals much about middle-class perceptions of working-class shoppers. As a *Trade Review* article in 1900 warned city shopkeepers, low-income customers were likely to use goods bought on approbation before returning them to the store. Ten years later, the journal again warned local retailers of the dangers of approbation, suggesting that one solution to the problem had been developed in the U.S. by which conspicuous red tags were attached to items of clothing that could not be returned if the tags were removed.<sup>26</sup> How much journal content reflected retailer attitudes is unclear but if not a reflection, it no doubt influenced the

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<sup>25</sup>One woman, described by an informant as a kleptomaniac from an upper-class family, was regularly allowed to return home with the items she had shoplifted, the store then calling her husband to notify him of her activities. He would write a cheque to cover the loss with his wife never the wiser. Interviews with R.C., E.P., E.B., and M.M.: "Notes in Brief," *The Daily News*, 1 April 1897; "Arrested," *The Daily News*, 18 November 1901; "Woman Is Charged With Kleptomania," *The Daily News*, 15 April 1929; "Amongst Business People &c.," *Trade Review*, 28 September 1907; Letter to the Editor, *The Daily News*, 11 December 1917.

The kleptomania diagnosis for middle-class shoplifters illustrates the class-based conceptions of theft. O'Brien, in an examination of kleptomania in nineteenth-century France, notes that "Conventional wisdom explained theft primarily in terms of need and deprivation, or moral failures associated with these factors." The growing phenomenon of store theft by bourgeois women, who presumably had no need to steal, therefore required a new explanation leading to diagnoses of psychological illness. Patricia O'Brien, "The Kleptomania Diagnosis: Bourgeois Women and Theft in Nineteenth-Century France," *Journal of Social History*, 17(1), (Fall 1983) 73.

<sup>26</sup>"Goods On Approval," *Trade Review*, 15 December 1900; "Sanctumettes," *Trade Review*, 5 March 1910.

attitudes of many local businessmen.

Despite class-based differences in the treatment, the stores were still accessible to customers of all incomes suggesting that they did, indeed, play some role in the democratization, if not of luxury, then of shopping. One practice which made department store shopping more comfortable for working-class customers was the "silent sales assistant." Floorwalkers stopped keeping an eye out for "tabbies," as women who shopped without buying were known in Britain, ejecting them when it became obvious they were not going to make a purchase. Instead, stores began inviting people to browse at their leisure without pressuring them to spend money.<sup>27</sup> As early as 1894, some St. John's stores had begun urging customers to "adopt the American system, i.e. to visit our Store and see what we have for sale, not necessarily to purchase," inviting them to inspect their premises and bring their friends, again emphasizing that purchases were not necessary. That this assurance was required indicates that it was not the general practice to browse in stores, suggesting that entering a retail establishment entailed some obligation to buy. Ads, however, urged customer browsing with greater insistence over the coming decades as competition for trade grew and retailers became increasingly

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<sup>27</sup>This policy appears to have originated in the U.S. where greater attention was paid to the comfort of patrons than in Britain. Although British department stores were ahead of their American counterparts in the mid-1800s in terms of departmentalization and the addition of new lines of merchandise, by the turn of the century, stores in the United States had surpassed them in customer service. Lancaster writes that not until American businessman, Gordon Selfridge, who had helped turn Marshall Field's in Chicago into America's preeminent department store, opened a store in London, did most British stores adjust their policies. Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 58, 69-70.

aggressive in their attempts to attract custom at the expense of other stores. By the 1920s, with the arrival of the London, New York and Paris, the Bon Marché and the Broadway House of Fashion to Water Street, the invitation to browse came to include the suggestion that customers also comparison shop to ensure they were getting the best bargain for their money. Raising the old spectre of merchant exploitation, ads also assured consumers that, at these new stores, all classes were welcome.<sup>28</sup>

These appeals to customers of all incomes, in addition to alterations in store design to include tea rooms, rest rooms, better lighting, wider aisles and the open display of goods, helped make the stores more welcoming, encouraging shoppers to visit more frequently and easing the pressure on low income groups to make purchases. In this regard, then, it could be argued that the Water Street stores did democratize the activity of shopping and the demand for consumer goods by expanding their array of merchandise and allowing customers to freely inspect their wares. But this did not necessarily mean that more people could afford to buy the goods on display.

According to supporters of the claim that department stores helped democratize luxury, one important and increasingly popular practice in the late nineteenth century - that of fixed, marked prices - played a significant role in making working-class shoppers feel at

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<sup>28</sup>J.H. Martin ad and Parnell's ad, *The Daily News*, 5 June 1894; The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 19 April 1910, 11 September 1913, 10 October 1913, and 25 September 1936; London, New York and Paris ad, *The Daily News*, 13 November 1922; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 4 May 1923; George Knowling ad, *The Daily News*, 29 December 1913; Bon Marché ad, *The Daily News*, 11 November 1922; J.M. Devine-The Big 6 ads, *The Daily News*, 18 February 1946 and 4 September 1947.

ease in the middle-class milieu of the department store. In St. John's, however, there appears to have been some resistance, from both owners and shoppers, to the practice of clearly priced goods. In 1903, the *Trade Review* commented upon the declining use of "old-time shop marks" to disguise the price of goods, noting that several "modern" stores had hung signs stating, "All goods marked in plain figures." Unfortunately, the journal observed, the practice persisted in "many businesses of longstanding" despite the fact that "In these days of practically one price, the hocus pocus methods of business of fifty years ago would be out of place, and hence they have in a large measure ceased to exist."<sup>29</sup>

The continued use of shop marks in many of the major Water Street stores was largely attributable to the conservatism of the owners and some shoppers. According to Derrick Bowring, the practice continued into the 1940s because some stores liked to give customers the impression of receiving favourable treatment. When buying an item, shoppers would often ask for a special price and, with the floorwalker's permission, the salesperson would give them a discount. It is unlikely that such practices were much of an impediment to working-class buying in St. John's because most shoppers would have been quite familiar with the tradition of asking for "a price." When Bowring's adopted the retail inventory system in the 1940s, however, it became imperative that prices be fixed for their inventory was valued at the selling price of their merchandise and therefore all goods had to be sold at a fixed price. Bowring's directors canvassed their competitors on Water

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<sup>29</sup>"Old-Time Shop Marks." *Trade Review*, 19 December 1903.

Street and succeeded in getting all to agree to a one-price policy. Before long, however, Joseph Goldstone, owner of the London, New York and Paris, had returned to the practice of granting "a price" to "favoured" customers, finding that many still expected to be given the "discount." All the other stores decided to stick with the one-price policy, with some running ad campaigns espousing its virtues.<sup>30</sup>

The stores did play a role in making some consumer goods, particularly ready-made fashions, more accessible to the working class. In the past, most clothing had been tailor-made and very expensive so that only the wealthy could afford to be fashionable. Those unable to pay for tailored clothing were forced to make their own, a process which involved removing the seams from old garments to serve as a pattern for cutting material then sewn by hand or machine. Consequently, home-sewn outfits were typically ill-fitting and far from fashionable. Alternatively, they could buy second-hand clothing, a growing business in St. John's in the early 1900s according to the *Trade Review*. The reasons given for its growth were the "rapid change in fashions" and "that style and finish are now

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<sup>30</sup>One man who worked at the London, New York and Paris in the 1940s before going to work for Bowring's in the 1950s, described this as a bartering system wherein goods would be marked at an inflated price so that customers could be given a discount without a loss to the store. This was most typically done with men's wear and fashions. He described the practice in this way: if a customer asked for a special price on a suit, the salesperson would respond by saying "'Wait a minute now, I'll have to go see Mr. Goldstone.' You'd go around the corner and you knew he'd take off five bucks and if he wasn't there, you'd just go back and take off five dollars." He recalled the day Water Street agreed upon a one-price policy and they marked all the prices down in the store but the next day had to mark them up again when Mr. Goldstone changed his mind. Interviews with R.C. and D.B.

exacted by the poorest girl in the land." Still, the fact that the clothing, although good, was used and slightly dated was a source of embarrassment to some.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, ready-made clothing, a cheap yet stylish alternative to home-made or second-hand clothing, was a boon to working-class consumers and, in her study of Eaton's, Santink writes, "Mass fashion was often procured before more necessary but less visible goods, for it provided the means by which poor people could develop an outward appearance of upward mobility."<sup>32</sup>

Schudson concurs, arguing that, due to mass production, fashion became "a rapidly changing statement of social aspiration.... For more and more people in the late nineteenth century and after, clothing came to be expressive and signifying."<sup>33</sup> For those unable to afford even ready-made clothing, Margaret Walsh argues the dress pattern industry helped further democratize fashion by the 1870s:

At midcentury fashion, both as an indicator of financial strength and social rank and an expression of femininity, had been the prerogative of the rich. Only the wealthy could afford to change their styles of dress frequently. But now, thanks to the mass production of paper patterns, American women and their European counterparts were able to participate in a new social experience of making stylish clothes at will.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>"The Man in the Mart." *Trade Review*, 3 June 1905; Margaret Walsh, "The Democratization of Fashion: The Emergence of the Women's Dress Pattern Industry," *The Journal of American History*, 66(2), (September 1979) 300.

<sup>32</sup>Santink, *Timothy Eaton*, 164.

<sup>33</sup>Schudson, *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion*, 156-7.

<sup>34</sup>Walsh, "The Democratization of Fashion," 299.

In 1910, the *Trade Review* noted that sewing machines, while first owned by the

Cheaper ready-mades and even cheaper dress patterns encouraged frequently changing styles as durability was no longer as important as being current. This was yet another important aspect of the evolving consumer culture which stores contributed to and capitalized upon, deliberately encouraging consumer fascination with novelty and modernity.<sup>35</sup> With the increase in mass-produced merchandise such as ready-made clothes, fashion was now within reach of most incomes and stores, claiming to cater to the "masses and not the classes." argued one's budget should be no impediment to being fashionable.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, then, it may be said that the stores did indeed play a

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"well-to-do", were gaining widespread popularity, becoming a necessity for all young couples setting up house in Newfoundland. Despite this, few stores pushed sewing machines or the idea of home sewing in their ads. Ads clearly favoured ready-made clothing although a shift occurred in the late 1920s, advancing throughout the 1930s, as the availability of American dress patterns (Vogue, Butterick and Simplicity) and the economic pressures of the Depression led store advertisers to promote the benefits of home-sewn clothes. The 1940s saw another resurgence in the popularity of home sewing due to the price and scarcity of ready-mades during the war. "The Singer Sewing Machine Co.," *Trade Review*, 31 December 1910; Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 29 July 1932; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 10 October 1935; "Women and the Home," *The Daily News*, 12 November 1943; "Sewing For Victory," *The Daily News*, 3 December 1943.

<sup>35</sup>Barthel, *Putting On Appearances*, 4; McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, *Birth of Consumer Society*, 11.

<sup>36</sup>The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 19 September 1910; George Knowling ad, *The Daily News*, 29 December 1913; Bon Marché ad, *The Daily News*, 11 November 1922; London, New York and Paris ads, *The Daily News*, 8 October 1921 and 4 May 1932.

As with those who argue that the democratization of luxury is a myth, Barthel claims that "democratic fashion ideology" (the belief that being fashionable is no longer the prerogative of only the aristocracy) is oppressive in that advertisements tell those with low incomes that they, too, have a "democratic right" to have whatever they want. Although told that they can achieve "status, beauty, self-worth, social approval, and love" through



significant role in democratizing fashion, providing one explanation for press references to the increased particularity of St. John's consumers with regard to fabrics and fashions from the late nineteenth century onward.<sup>37</sup>

Conspicuous consumption was clearly becoming an important feature of life in many North American cities but was not restricted to clothing and fashion accessories. Mass production, Santink argues, had made many consumer goods affordable to most people living in Toronto by the end of the nineteenth century and the consequent increase in consumption "was reflected in the greater adornment of both home and person and in the acquisition of novelty items, bicycles, musical instruments and sports equipment.... as urban inhabitants of every class attempted to create a display of individual affluence." Stores responded to rising consumer demand, she adds, "by enlarging their variety of merchandise to include all those items now considered so necessary for everyday life."<sup>38</sup>

This was also true of St. John's society and retailers' response to the growing demand for fashionable products. While some visitors to St. John's saw its stores as

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spending, in reality not everyone can afford it. Barthel, *Putting On Appearances*, 102.

<sup>37</sup>This was not only true of clothing, but of many other household items considered important to projecting the right image. For those unable to afford the real thing, stores stocked cheaper versions or reproductions of popular consumer goods so that lower-income households could approximate middle-class living. The Royal Stores, for example, offered reproductions of imported, expensive lace mats made out of plastic. Editorials, *Trade Review*, 14 November 1892, 12 October 1901, 5 May 1906, and 10 September 1910; "Man in the Mart," *Trade Review*, 15 December 1906; Letter to the Editor, *The Daily News*, 10 February 1906; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 13 December 1946.

<sup>38</sup>Santink, *Timothy Eaton*, 163-4.

backward and their merchandise as out-dated. locals believed there had been a significant shift in attitude from even the mid-nineteenth century when old stock could be shelved and carted out the next season, to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when stores began holding end-of-season clearance sales to rid themselves of last season's merchandise before purchasing new stock. Customers were no longer satisfied with last season's remainders and even if some stores were willing to pass off old stock as new, competitors made this increasingly difficult by offering to show them the latest styles from New York and Paris. Sales of old stock became increasingly frequent over the period as stores attempted to keep up with fashion trends, many also instituting bargain counters and basements to attract the budget-conscious and rid themselves of slow-moving items.<sup>39</sup>

Sales and bargain counters, although introduced by retailers for their own benefit, were also beneficial to customers unable to afford regularly priced merchandise. In England, Hosgood suggests that annual end-of-season sales were particularly helpful to the lower-middle class who were unable to pay full price for merchandise in up-scale shops, the sales enabling them to buy items necessary to maintain a middle-class appearance even if with slightly less fashionable goods. He also notes that during sales, the rules of polite society were overturned, providing occasions when the classes mixed and less genteel behaviour, such as pushing and prodding, was permitted. This discomfited

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<sup>39</sup> Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 24 July 1895, 21 February 1906, 15 February 1908, and 24 July 1913; "Notes in brief," *The Daily News*, 5 May 1897; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 17 August 1905; James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 25 September 1931 and 12 May 1932.

members of the middle and upper classes but "offered a temporary sense of authority" to lower-middle-class shoppers. In reality, however, he argues it was the consumer who "was being manipulated [by retailers] into participating in a cycle of seasonal activities over which they had little control."<sup>40</sup>

Like their English counterparts, St. John's retailers also sought to control consumer behaviour, offering to educate those uncertain about what was "recherche," as one Ayre & Sons ad put it, and presenting themselves as fashion authorities.<sup>41</sup> This is not to suggest that customers readily accepted their dictates but the stores were important sources of information about products and trends and, in the absence of alternative perspectives, shoppers were forced to make purchase decisions based on the limited options presented them. Retailers capitalized on consumer fears of appearing out-dated with frequent warnings and offers of aid but one trait flatteringly attributed to all shoppers, regardless of income, was taste. Several Royal Stores ads promised that everyone could afford tasteful furniture despite the difference in what some were willing to pay and declared that furniture buying had changed in recent years for "popular taste [wa]s becoming educated more and more." With rising competition for a limited clientele, several stores found it necessary to reassure their customers that they were "fully equipped to cater to all classes of trade" and that everyone would receive "equally courteous and

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<sup>40</sup>Hosgood, "Mrs. Pooter's Purchase," 146-61.

<sup>41</sup>Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 14 April 1908.

prompt attention," suggesting even low-income consumers were valued customers. Offering such reassurances to their working-class patrons was one response to the Bon Marché's and the London, New York and Paris's claims that they alone catered "exclusively to the masses and not the classes" in their attempts to capitalize upon the general mistrust of the Water Street merchants.<sup>42</sup>

Another important change which significantly eased restrictions on working-class consumption was the business community's acceptance of consumer credit. This was very different from the traditional, long term credit merchants gave fishermen at the start of each fishing season under the truck system, a practice attracting much criticism by the turn of the century, although critics rarely distinguished between it and the short term credit offered to wage-earners. In 1903, the *Trade Review* ran an article suggesting the pass book system was "one of the greatest evils that has ever befallen the working man, and should be discountenanced by everyone having the good of the wage-earner at heart" for a cash trade allowed stores to offer lower prices and a better variety of goods. In spite of its opponents, some city retailers began offering easy payment plans in the early 1900s to make more expensive goods "within reach of the working class."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 28 September 1909, 19 September 1910, and 29 May 1913; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 16 May 1913; George Knowling ad, *The Daily News*, 29 December 1913; Bon Marché ad, *The Daily News*, 11 November 1922.

<sup>43</sup>"New Premises of C.L. March & Co. Ltd.," *The Daily News*, 9 March 1906.

One important feature of many early department stores, one which enabled them to lower their overhead costs and offer lower prices, was the cash-only policy. The expanding variety of mass-produced consumer goods, especially electrical goods in the

By 1926, the *Trade Review* was forced to admit that

Business benefits from credit, of course, or it would not grant it, but the public also reaps rich benefits from liberal credit. Automobiles, fine furniture, good clothing, radios, pianos, phonographs and many other quasi-luxuries are possible for most people only through credit.

If the credit method of merchandizing is to endure those who receive the benefit from it must fulfill their contracts. That this has been done is evident from the fact that the great majority of people who buy on credit pay their debts promptly. A cardinal virtue of our people is the honesty they exhibit in their relations with their fellow-men.<sup>44</sup>

Three years later, a *Daily News* editorial echoed these sentiments, adding the subtle warning that "At this time of the year settlements are expected to be made, and it will depend upon the promptness with which the customer pays his accounts as to what his rating will be with the merchant or dealer during the months ahead."<sup>45</sup> It would seem that the business community had come to accept the granting of credit as a necessary evil, one to be practiced with great caution especially in these years of economic upheaval and uncertainty.

Calder notes a similar shift in middle-class attitudes towards credit in the U.S.

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1930s, necessitated a change in policy so that many began offering easy payment plans. Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 98-101.

<sup>44</sup>"Credit and Business." *Trade Review*, 6 November 1926.

Barthel argues that, despite a rising standard of living in England in the nineteenth century, the "old rural ethic that many people brought with them from peasant and craft backgrounds in European villages died a hard death." Even into the early 1900s, it was difficult to convince many that buying on credit was "not a sign of dissolute character or an impoverished pocketbook." Barthel, *Putting On Appearances*, 15-7.

<sup>45</sup>Editorial, *The Daily News*, 16 January 1929.

Stigmatized in the late nineteenth century as a practice of immigrants and the working class, consumer credit was legitimized by the 1920s due to the availability of expensive consumer durables such as cars and electrical appliances. Yet, the automobile, he suggests, was the primary cause of its general acceptance as very few could afford them outright.<sup>46</sup> It would be difficult, if not impossible, to determine how many households in St. John's purchased such goods on credit but it is unlikely that many working-class families owned cars, washing machines or refrigerators. Yet, ads for such items began appearing in city newspapers in the 1920s and more frequently in the '30s and '40s with the promotion of electrical appliances and home improvement as essential to modern living, suggesting there must have been some market for these goods. It is unclear who benefited most from these developments but if St. John's followed trends witnessed elsewhere, it is likely that many were working-class consumers who now enjoyed higher disposable incomes and took advantage of greater credit facilities.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999) 183-5.

<sup>47</sup>A similar trend has been noted in the U.S. in the 1920s which Martha Olney calls a "Consumer Durables Revolution" as many families began spending more on "relatively high-priced and credit-financed goods" such as automobiles, appliances and radios. Martha Olney, *Buy Now, Pay Later: advertising, credit, and consumer durables in the 1920s* (Chapel Hill, Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991) 56.

John Benson also discusses the increased use of credit in Britain between the two world wars as the amount of money spent on household goods and vehicles rose significantly. He argues that working-class consumption changed more than that of the middle-class as their incomes rose and credit became more readily available, allowing them to purchase more consumer durables. Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society*, 62, 76.

Although long considered evidence of the extravagance of twentieth-century consumer society, the extraordinary growth in consumer credit should not, according to Calder, be seen as a break from the traditional value of thrift and aversion to debt. Rather, credit in its various forms had existed for many centuries but evolved over the course of the nineteenth century in response to the same factors which contributed to the growth of department stores. First and foremost, industrialization enabled the mass production of consumer durables while creating a sizable working class with slowly rising disposable incomes. While most incomes did not allow the purchase of furniture, appliances or automobiles outright, they were large enough to permit regular payments and as workers were generally paid weekly, these conditions led to the introduction of instalment plans. Urbanization also played a role. Calder asserts, "by creating social conditions that encouraged people to communicate through the clothes they wore, the way they decorated their homes, and the way they emulated the consumption patterns of those around them." But, instead of destroying traditional values, he argues, the widespread use of instalment plans actually fostered the ethic of thrift as it necessitated careful planning and budgeting to make regular payments.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Calder adds immigration to the list of factors contributing to popularity of instalment buying as new arrivals to the U.S. had to buy practically every item necessary to set up house. This was not a significant factor in Newfoundland although people who moved from the outports to St. John's, especially during the 1940s, no doubt took advantage of instalment plans to establish homes. He suggests that consumer credit "played a large role in determining the nature of consumer culture and sustaining it over time" and argues that the resulting culture of consumption has "surpassed republicanism, Victorian producerism, and Protestant Christianity as the foremost cultural authority for American society." This

Although all of the large Water Street stores had allowed customers to buy goods on approbation since the nineteenth century (the Bon Marché being one exception), few advertised payment plans until Bowring's answered the question of "how to afford the good things in life while keeping a balanced budget" in the late 1940s. The promotion of easy payment plans in this period was the result of several factors, primary among them the economic prosperity brought to Newfoundland by World War II, the number of people moving to St. John's from the outports and setting up house, and raised expectations regarding modern living.<sup>49</sup> Not everyone was a fan of the growing trend towards credit financing following the war, however, and some feared the consequences for the city's "less fortunate classes." In a 1947 *Newfoundland Quarterly* article, Rev. M.T. Connelly charged that easy payment plans were becoming "part of the normal ... economic structure of modern life" and might be beneficial in a community with a "sizable salaried class" but was unsuited to the local economy wherein "so many families depend[ed] on casual and sporadic employment for a livelihood [*sic*] that anything like balancing a budget is just a joke." While admitting that there were some honest firms among the many offering such plans to customers, Connelly declared that there were also many "sharks and racketeers" and called for government regulation because

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is demonstrated by the shift in values from an emphasis on thrift and being debt-free to an acceptance of credit as "morally permissible." Calder, *Financing the American Dream*, 6-10, 26-32, 167-8.

<sup>49</sup>Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 8 June 1948.



... when [credit] is uncontrolled, when it gets into the hands of unscrupulous individuals and corporations whose sole concern is not with the economic and human limitations of their victims, but only with squeezing out the largest possible margin of profit regardless of who suffers, it is time for someone to take a stand. When peoples' normal, understandable desire of living well, of having all the comforts of modern living, is exploited without thought of the consequences; when they are placed on the verge of starvation in their efforts to keep up payments on a luxury which they should never have been allowed to buy in the first place, then this Easy Payment System becomes something evil.... Those who make it easy for people to buy in this manner take upon themselves, whether they like it or not, the obligation of protecting foolish and improvident people against themselves.<sup>50</sup>

Despite concerns expressed by its critics, it is clear that credit played a significant role in permitting many St. John's consumers, especially the working class, to purchase expensive consumer durables and to experience the "benefits" of modern society. In this regard, easy payment plans certainly altered the experience of consumption for many households, vastly increasing the array of goods from which they could choose. As with ready-mades and the democratization of fashion in the early decades of the twentieth century, the department stores were instrumental in democratizing consumer durables by the 1940s with the introduction of easy payment plans.

Clearly, the nature of working-class consumption had changed significantly over the previous half-century. In a discussion of local standards of living in 1906, the *Trade Review* argued that only the expectations of the middle class had risen since the fire of 1892. While the clerk and civil servant had "the laudable and natural desire to have

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<sup>50</sup>Rev. M.T. Connelly, "Buying Things the Easy Way," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 47(1), (June 1947) 11-14.

comfortable, bright and sanitary homes." the cost of food and clothing for the tradesman and labourer had not risen and "pretty well the same house and furniture that suited [the]m ten years ago suit [the]m now."<sup>51</sup> Over the following decades, however, retailers made a concerted effort through their ads and in-store promotions to convince working-class consumers that appearances were important to social standing and that income should be no impediment to respectable living. Rising imports and the reports of social commentators regarding raised expectations and local consuming habits suggest that they were at least somewhat successful in their attempts to sell consumption.

The apparent acceptance of middle-class standards by St. John's consumers would seem to offer some support for the concept of cultural hegemony in that many had come to share the values of local elites with regard to conspicuous consumption thereby supporting the status quo and reaffirming the distribution of wealth and power in capitalist society. Yet, there is also evidence to suggest that the working class resisted retailers' efforts to control their spending habits, leading some members of the St. John's business community to voice doubt about their ability to spend money wisely. Businessmen were particularly concerned about the gullibility of fishermen and wage-earners when it came to pedlars and circuses. For years after the Bank Crash of 1894, many outport fishermen had resisted placing their savings with the local banks for fear of another failure, preferring to bring the balance of their earnings home after settling accounts with city merchants. This

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<sup>51</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 3 February 1906.

practice, the *Trade Review* argued, made them especially vulnerable to travelling pedlars who would dupe the unsuspecting fisherman into buying "worthless goods at higher prices than c[ould] be found in the city."<sup>52</sup>

As for city workers, the *Trade Review* worried that they were apt to spend their money freely on non-essentials such as "the nickels" (movies) and football games, being "proportionate to their means, the best and most generous of all spenders." This was especially troubling after a period of economic recession since, the article charged, with the return of prosperity, the working class tended to make up for years of deprivation with extravagant spending. In the fall of 1925, as Newfoundland began moving out of the post-war slump, the *Trade Review* editor noted that high employment had contributed to a good cash trade after years of economic hardship. What concerned him, however, was the "way in which various amusement halls [we]re being patronized." After all, he argued, it was not the well-to-do who crowded the picture halls and rink every night but the "ordinary week to week wage earner," behaviour which might be open to criticism given the scarcity of employment during the winter.<sup>53</sup> The connection between working-class spending on amusements and the loss of revenue for city retailers was made clear in a follow-up editorial, inspired by the presence of a visiting carnival:

While the Christmas trade is fairly good this week on Water Street it would

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<sup>52</sup>"Sanctumettes," *Trade Review*, 9 December 1905.

<sup>53</sup>"Sanctumettes," *Trade Review*, 27 September 1902, 30 June 1922, and 5 December 1925.

have been much better, were it not that so much of the earnings of our people by adventurers [*sic*] coming to our 'easy going' town within the past few months, and taking away something like \$20,000, chiefly from the people who could least afford to spend their money in this way. This money was a clear loss to the city.<sup>54</sup>

One answer to the problem, he suggested, might be to allow the circus to stay only a week, following the practice of several American and Canadian cities. "Otherwise St. John's w[ould] become a dumping ground for all kinds of adventurers and fake show-men who play on the credulity of a section of our people, who really ought to be protected against themselves." Had the money not been spent in such a wasteful manner, he argued, it would have enabled people to buy food and clothing for the winter.<sup>55</sup> Several months later, yet another article appeared lamenting the loss of money to local trade:

Another thing that injures the business and prosperity of the country is the vast amount of money spent in frivolities and amusements. If the money so

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<sup>54</sup>"Easy Money in St. John's." *Trade Review*, 19 December 1925.

<sup>55</sup>"Easy Money in St. John's." *Trade Review*, 19 December 1925.

Such middle-class attitudes towards working-class spending have also been noted in late nineteenth-century American studies of working-class budgets by government agencies which "conveyed the sense that people pursued or should pursue satisfactions in a certain order: first basics, then comforts and luxuries, and finally savings for education or a time when income stopped or slowed.... items like organizational membership and excursions were somehow frivolous afterthoughts." Moderate expenditures on household luxuries were considered acceptable and even laudable for they seemed to represent a working-class family's desire for respectability. Middle-class survey takers, however, continued to frown upon working-class enjoyment of "saloons, amusement parks, and movies" throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. By the 1930s, however, the association of thrift with virtue had eased and both middle- and working-class consumption of consumer goods was encouraged due to a "recognition of the importance of consumer spending to the health of the economy." Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, 24, 27, 131, 169.

spent were directed to every day living requirements it would boost trade wonderfully.<sup>56</sup>

Obviously, retailers were not completely successful in their attempts to guide local consuming habits and the working class continued to spend money on entertainment and diversion despite middle-class disapproval. Although possibly influenced in their purchase decisions by the rhetoric of store advertisements, working-class consumers still disposed of their incomes as they saw fit.

For Veblen, conspicuous consumption in the late nineteenth-century represented the efforts of social elites to demonstrate their wealth and position through the display of material goods. Attempts to emulate this behaviour provide one explanation for rising consumption by the middle and later working classes and for the development of consumer societies. Basing his argument on Veblen's theories, Ewen asserts that mass consumption held serious consequences for the working class as it resulted in their submission to capitalist values and the loss of worker consciousness. To Leach, however, it meant the rejection of traditional values and the loss of a sense of social responsibility. Not every scholar interprets consumer culture negatively, however, as Boorstin sees it as evidence of the democratic nature of American society and Livingston as representing innumerable opportunities for self-expression. According to Barth and Schudson, consumerism was a response to the rise of modern cities and a means of adapting to a new

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<sup>56</sup>"Injurious to Trade." *Trade Review*, 20 March 1926.

urban way of life.

Evidence can be found to support each of these arguments in a class-based examination of consumption in St. John's from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s. Import statistics show that local spending on consumer goods was increasing and advertisements, dominated by middle-class rhetoric regarding respectability and social mobility, demonstrate retailers' efforts to encourage this trend. Yet, it is impossible to concretely link the two as an explanation for increased consumption as St. John's consumers may have had their own reasons for buying more goods, reasons not involving their acceptance of middle-class values or social emulation. Ideas about working-class 'embourgeoisement' and cultural hegemony are, therefore, difficult to prove as they require evidence of personal motivation and of advertising effectiveness which are not easily established. In short, the legitimacy of either theory would seem to depend upon one's political perspective.

Did the owners of the Water Street stores popularize a particular social view through their ads, store displays and brand name merchandise? Did they contribute to the destruction of working-class consciousness by encouraging workers to adopt the values of a consumer society and to identify themselves as the consumers, rather than producers, of the goods they bought? Did the "masses" thereby become participants in their own subordination by the "classes"? These are difficult questions to answer but what is clear is the role of retailers in making consumer goods available to local shoppers and in influencing the way material goods were perceived. Although foreign catalogues provided

an alternative source of goods, the consumer society developing in St. John's from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s was shaped largely by the importation and promotion of foreign goods, fads, and media. The Water Street stores were central to this process and, in this way, influenced local consuming habits. Their inability to prevent working-class spending on "wasteful" activities like circuses, movies and sports, however, demonstrates the limits of their influence.

Whether the St. John's department stores democratized luxury or simply the desire for luxury goods is also debatable but the evidence, in this case, is more definitive. Unlike stores in major European and North American cities which catered primarily to middle-class patrons, the Water Street stores were limited in terms of the quality and price of merchandise they could stock due to the nature of the consuming population, composed primarily of the working class. Consequently, their ads generally appealed to the budget-conscious shopper, emphasizing good quality merchandise at a low price. At the same time, however, the stores were also promoting a certain kind of lifestyle, one which reflected middle-class notions regarding appearance, respectability and social mobility, assuring customers that a limited income should be no impediment to taste.

In making cheaper ready-mades and clothing patterns available to St. John's consumers and in raising awareness of current trends and styles, the stores did help democratize fashion, allowing more people to present fashionable appearances. While ready-made clothing was perhaps the first line of merchandise to enable members of the working class to significantly alter their personal image, the stores made a variety of goods

accessible to more consumers through their sales and bargain counters over the early decades of the twentieth century. The introduction of easy payment plans in the 1940s was another important step in democratizing consumption, allowing many citizens to make home improvements and purchase appliances and furniture considered essential for modern living. In a sense, then, the stores did democratize luxury by exposing shoppers to new trends and new products, placing many consumer goods within their reach by offering cheaper versions of fashionable merchandise, holding sales, and introducing instalment buying.

A final consequence of rising consumption and the creation of a consumer society was the homogenization of the local culture. St. John's retailers, through ads, displays and promotions, urged consumers to buy goods that would reflect a certain lifestyle and, therefore, encouraged Newfoundlanders' acceptance of North American mass culture. Whether or not this is a consequence to be lamented is also debatable. On the one hand, it could be argued that the importation of foreign brand name goods and merchandising techniques contributed to the demise of local traditions and values. On the other, it enabled greater means of self-expression and -identification through more and varied opportunities for consumption, permitting Newfoundlanders to participate in the consumer trends sweeping much of the western world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



**Chapter Five -Women and Water Street:**  
**The Gendered Nature of Consumption**

The growing importance of city trade to the Water Street stores during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to greater competition for a share of local consumer dollars. Simultaneously it seems, women came to be identified as the primary household consumers and, therefore, were the main targets of store attempts to attract customers. The feminization of consumption was a western trend, a central component of the spreading consumer culture,<sup>1</sup> but in St. John's, it was also a reflection of the changes taking place in the local retail trade. With increasing regularity and growing insistence starting in the latter years of the nineteenth century, the women of St. John's were subjected to a campaign by city retailers, one which sought to delineate their consuming role in society. They did so through the merchandise displayed in store windows and on shop floors, as well as through sales, services and special promotions, but most effectively through their advertisements which reveal that retailers' expectations of women, reflecting those of the larger society, were manifold and exacting. They were to be attentive

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<sup>1</sup>As Daniel Cook notes: "Scholars interested in the origins and growth of the modern consumer society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have come to recognize the position of women in this process. As 'purchasing agent' for the family, middle-class and well-to-do women entertained considerable influence on the distribution of a family's finances. Enmeshed in this vital nexus of a cash economy, 'Mrs. Consumer' was placated, cajoled, and enticed by merchants, advertising and manufacturers alike to purchase virtually all types of available goods. The public sphere of the department store provided women an avenue to exert a form of power incommensurate with their subordinate status in the private sphere of the home." Daniel Thomas Cook, "The Mother as Consumer: Insights from the Children's Wear Industry, 1917-1929," *Sociological Quarterly*, 36(3), (Summer 1995) 505.

mothers, attractive wives, efficient housekeepers and inveterate shoppers, their commitment to the latter being inextricably linked to their success at the former - if women were not efficient, economical, and eager shoppers, they were unlikely to be good mothers, wives and housekeepers. In this way, the stores were central to the construction of gender identities in Newfoundland.

Marchand has argued that early twentieth-century advertisements can be very revealing due to advertisers' "enthusiastic naïveté and their facile assumptions" about their target audience. They, therefore, tell us much about the people "who wrote them, the consumers who responded to them, and the cultural anxieties they reflected."<sup>2</sup> The ads examined in this chapter, run in local newspapers by the large Water Street stores, lend themselves well to gender and class analysis of their content, much as Marchand suggested, as they are heavily influenced by the middle-class values of store owners and managers and are indicative of their perceptions of female shoppers. While their ad campaigns helped create standards that few women could reasonably live up to due to the limitations of time, income and energy, they also suggest that women exercised considerable control over family resources and thus enjoyed significant economic influence through their spending. For the poorest women in society, their consuming role no doubt brought more heartache and headache than power in their struggle to make ends meet. But for those coming from families with discretionary income, their numbers rising

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<sup>2</sup>Marchand, "Golden Age of Advertising," 74.

especially in the 1940s, shopping offered an opportunity to influence the economy in ways that restrictions on women's paid work prohibited them from doing.

This is the irony of women's identification with consumption: although performing an important function in the public sphere as consumers, it was within the context of their domestic duties thereby reinforcing middle-class gender roles with the female as housewife and male as breadwinner. During the latter part of the period under study, as the numbers of women in the workforce rose, stores began directing some of their appeals to the young, single, working woman but the emphasis remained on women's domestic role, the assumption being that a woman's participation in the workforce would be short-lived, ending upon marriage. So, while the world of industry and production continued to be male, the world of consumption, seen through store ads, was very much female domain.

In the absence of any studies of local consuming habits, it is difficult to suggest how women's consuming role developed. But based on scant descriptions of consumption in nineteenth-century Newfoundland and the practices of their contemporaries in Canada, it seems likely that Newfoundland women actually did little of the household purchasing until the late 1800s. In communities where long-term credit enabled family survival, men typically purchased supplies which could not be made in the home from merchant stores. This was as true of farming families on the Canadian Prairies as of fishing families in the Maritimes. Yet, with urbanization, industrialization, mass production and the growth of a cash economy, patterns of consumption were altered so that women assumed a greater

responsibility for household purchasing.<sup>3</sup>

A number of explanations have been given for the shift. Abelson has argued that women had long been responsible for meeting family needs through home production and when manufactured goods came available as a result of industrialization, they continued to meet them by shopping. Others, like Veblen and Ewen, have argued that because men were the primary wage-earners and household breadwinners in industrial society, they had little time for shopping and so women assumed responsibility for conspicuously displaying their husbands' financial success and social status through consumption. Newell, meanwhile, suggests that women shoppers were targeted by Toronto department stores because the stores developed out of dry goods stores traditionally patronized by women.<sup>4</sup> No doubt all of these factors played some role in the feminization of consumption in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In a debate over early closing, a 1909 *Trade Review* article noted the change, arguing that there was no longer a need for stores to stay open past six since

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<sup>3</sup>Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, Ltd., 1988) 128.

As mentioned in footnote 46 of Chapter One, when Julia O'Brien's husband returned home after settling his accounts in St. John's at the end of the fishing season, she and her sister-in-law would go to the city by train to buy material for sewing. Their husbands, however, would have already purchased the bulk of household supplies for the winter. O'Brien, "Scrapbook."

<sup>4</sup>Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving*, 3-6; Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 81-100; Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 79-80; Newell, "From Cloth to Clothing," 3, 115-7.

In the old days men bought most of the domestic dry goods, and they were not very particular as to shades and styles, and hence, gaslight was just as good as daylight for them. But things have altered a bit the last few years, and purchasers are more exacting as to fashion, patterns and colors, and very little purchasing is done in the night as compared to twenty years ago.<sup>5</sup>

This would seem to suggest that women were now doing much of the purchasing, necessitating new retail methods to serve them. That store owners believed that women, generally married women in charge of households, constituted the majority of their customers by the early decades of the twentieth century is easily discerned from the services they offered and the nature of store ads. The addition of rest rooms and tea rooms for the comfort of lady shoppers and the hiring of salesladies to serve them are an indication of their growing importance to city retailers.<sup>6</sup> By 1936, "The Roving Shopper," a *Daily News* columnist offering information and advice to St. John's female consumers, suggested that women did ninety per cent of household buying.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>"Sanctumettes." *Trade Review*, 12 June 1909.

<sup>6</sup>Webb also notes that while much of the entertainment portion of the *Barrelman* radio programme was aimed at men, most of the ads, read by a female announcer, were directed at women as the primary consumers. Webb, "Constructing the Community and Consumers," 174; "Life as a Hardware Assistant in Newfoundland," *Trade Review*, 25 August 1906; "The Man in the Mart," *Trade Review*, 17 November 1906; George Knowing ad, *The Daily News*, 25 January 1915; James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 9 August 1918 and 10 June 1921.

<sup>7</sup>There appears to be no statistical evidence to support this assumption but the article indicates society's view of consumption as a female activity. A similar figure was also given in an earlier article. Daniel Robinson notes that in Canada in the 1920s and '30s, women were believed responsible for 80 per cent or more of consumer spending. Consequently, marketers and advertisers viewed them as the family 'purchasing agent' and, as a result, married women, particularly middle- and upper-class urban women, were

Scholars are divided over the consequences of women's consuming role with some arguing that women have achieved unprecedented economic influence through consumption while others charge that women have been deskilled and made redundant in their domestic role while being enslaved by consumer society.<sup>8</sup> More recently, academics have begun taking a synthetic approach to the issue, as this chapter does, suggesting that both sides raise valid points. While women were pigeon-holed into their role as natural and avid shoppers, a role that served to reinforce gender stereotypes, they were also given a great deal of control over, and responsibility for, household incomes and their dispersal as well as increased social freedom to meet publicly in the safe, respectable environment of

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overrepresented in surveys intended to rationalize the marketing industry. "The Roving Shopper." *The Daily News*, 5 November 1936; "Mrs. Consumer." *The Daily News*, 4 May 1928; Robinson, "Polling Consumers." 188, 198.

<sup>8</sup>Among those scholars who have been critical of consumer society from a marxist perspective are Thorstein Veblen, Stuart Ewen, William Leach and Rachel Bowlby while fellow critic, Jackson Lears, has assumed a post-modern position on the subject. Although perhaps fewer in number, consumerism has its proponents in such scholars as Alison Adburgham and James Livingston, the former seeing in it unprecedented economic possibilities for women, the latter arguing that as consumers, both women and men have been given unexplored opportunities for self-expression and self-determination. Alison Adburgham, *Shops and Shopping 1800-1914: Where, and in What Manner the Well-Dressed Englishwoman Bought Her Clothes* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964); Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (New York: Methuen, 1985); Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*; Leach, *Land of Desire*; Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Livingston, "Modern Subjectivity and Consumer Culture"; Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*.

the department store.<sup>9</sup> Whether the consequences of women's growing consuming role were primarily negative or positive was also determined in part by the level of family income, upon which their ability to adequately fulfil their appointed societal role as consumers largely depended.<sup>10</sup>

While there were other factors contributing to women's responsibility for consumption, retailers were instrumental in defining that role. Although they clearly viewed women as the 'home directors,' they also believed that women had to be educated in how to consume. Not only did they, therefore, help guide the shift from home production to mass consumption in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ewen argues that advertising campaigns to encourage the purchase of mass-produced goods led

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<sup>9</sup>Leach assumed a largely critical stance on the subject of rising consumerism in his book *Land of Desire*, which made little reference to women's role in consumer society. In an earlier article, however, he argued that the culture of consumption offered "a new freedom from self-denial and from repression, a liberation that promised to expand the province of rewarding work and of individual expression for women." Bill Lancaster and John Benson concur, suggesting that while consumer society has created, or at least increased, social and economic pressures facing women, it has also provided them with new opportunities in society as economic agents. Still, Benson notes that "... although changes in consumption offered women new economic power, new social possibilities, and new opportunities for improving their social status, it did so within limits that confirmed and reinforced rather than challenged and undermined women's conventional role and status." William Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925," *The Journal of American History*, 71(2), (September 1984) 319-342; Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society*, 181, 185; Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 175.

<sup>10</sup>Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society*, 182; Meg Luxton, *More than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1980) 162; Wright, "'Feminine Trifles of Vast Importance,'" 232.

to the deskilling of women, who were encouraged to buy ready-made items which were "better" and "more economical." In consequence, according to Ewen, the importance of women's domestic skills declined while that of their appearance rose, illustrated by the rising numbers of ads telling women that their goals ought to be "daintiness, beauty, romance, grace, security and husbands," all of which could be "fulfilled in the marketplace."<sup>11</sup>

Many of the store ads appearing in early twentieth-century St. John's newspapers seem to support Ewen's assertions. Not only were women told that they could not possibly make clothes, preserves or baked goods as cheaply or efficiently as they could buy them in the stores, but also that, in most cases, the factory-made item was superior to that which was home-made.<sup>12</sup> Ads told them that instead of needlessly spending their time on domestic production, they should be shopping to fulfil their family and household needs or involving themselves in typically middle-class pursuits, such as fancy silk art needlework and interior decorating, which required them to take lessons from experts

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<sup>11</sup>Matthews agrees with Ewen's assertions, arguing that women's domestic role in the U.S. grew in importance after 1839 but by the 1920s, the idea of the "transcendent home" had largely disappeared, with women being relegated to dull tasks, guided by retailers and advertisers in their role as consumers responsible for keeping up American production. Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 47, 79-80; Glenna Matthews, "Just a Housewife": *The Rise and Fall of Domestic Life in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 352.

<sup>12</sup>Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 11 May 1912 and 26 May 1913; Bowring Brothers ads, *The Daily News*, 15 January 1923, 24 April 1923, and 7 May 1924.



brought in by the stores.<sup>13</sup> Some of the time thus saved could then be spent on maintaining a fashionable, attractive appearance which ads considered an essential attribute of the modern woman. The significant increase in ads for clothing from the late 1800s onwards was one consequence of the introduction of ready-mades and, through them, retailers helped define what it meant to be female, in both behaviour and appearance.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of American department stores, Susan Porter Benson argues that, by the 1890s, they were attempting to shape attitudes regarding style rather than just responding to consumer demand. Similarly, Brenda Newell suggests that Toronto department stores contributed to the standardization of fashion by advocating in ads and catalogues, the styles to be worn each season.<sup>15</sup> Still relatively infrequent and long-

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<sup>13</sup>Similarly, American department stores such as Filene's and Marshall Field offered instruction in embroidery, cooking and even child care. The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 19 September 1908 and 24 July 1926; Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 8 April 1930; Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 100.

<sup>14</sup>Although slow to catch on in some cities, by the early twentieth century the benefits of ready-mades - speed of purchase and lower price - had made them more popular than tailored apparel. In St. John's, the development of a local clothing industry in the late 1800s brought about a sharp decline in sales of tailored clothes. This, however, was confined largely to men's and boys' wear as most ready-mades for women were imported because the variety of dress styles and the small market made producing them locally unprofitable. This difference is borne out in store ads that rarely mentioned the origins of men's clothing but which turned foreignness into a virtue for women's clothes. Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 34; Joy, "Trades and Manufacturing," 61, 67-8; Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society*, 144.

<sup>15</sup>Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 101; Newell, "From Cloth to Clothing," 132.

running, most late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century ads run by the Water Street stores were for ready-mades and accessories, providing evidence not only of the importance of fashion in modern consumer society but also the importance of clothing to store profits.

Suggestive of the tone of early ads, a 1901 Royal Stores ad warned the women of St. John's that "Beauty in the boudoir must have the proper toilet accessories to fit her for her place in society, otherwise she must do an injustice to her friends and herself."<sup>16</sup> There was more for a woman to worry about, however, than the approval of a nebulous 'society,' for in order to fulfil her proper role as a wife, mother and shopper, she had to capture male interest, a goal best achieved with a stylish new hat according to several other Royal Stores ads for. "To storm the citadel of the male heart no weapon is so effective":

The masculine eye always lights up with pleasure on a well dressed lady. The male can't explain where the artistic touches come in, but he knows he is pleased when taste and pretty Millinery combine. If you, the lady, have the taste, we have the Millinery, of which fact we will convince you if you call in.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly reflecting middle-class notions and concerns regarding female propriety, ads suggested a lady's character was revealed by what she wore, her "head dress", for example, reflecting either "loudness and vulgarity" or "quiet taste and gentle upbringing." Attempting to appeal to middle-class consumers, and those with middle-class aspirations,

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<sup>16</sup>The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 1 April 1901.

<sup>17</sup>The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 8 May 1901 and 28 September 1901.

stores emphasized the refinement and taste of their clientele but also offered themselves as guides for those unsure of what to buy.<sup>18</sup> If their ads were to be believed, practically everyone a woman encountered throughout her day would be evaluating her appearance.

As the years passed, store ads became larger as well as more frequent, sophisticated, insistent and explicit in their shopping "advice" to women. This was particularly true of those selling feminine items as ads became increasingly specific in their descriptions of how a woman should look and what she should wear. Everything down to her underwear had an impact on a woman's appearance, determining how she was viewed by others. As an Ayre & Sons ad for Kabo Corsets declared:

The impression you make is governed a great deal by the corset you wear. No maker of fine gowns would ever attempt to give you a stylish appearance unless you wore the right corset.<sup>19</sup>

That the changing fashions seemed to constantly require new corsetry made matters all the more confusing, not to mention costly, but the right corset promised everything from "better health and priceless comfort" to an "untroubled mind" brought about by the knowledge that one was "looking her best."<sup>20</sup> George Knowling, Ltd., went

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<sup>18</sup>The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 19 May 1902, 30 July 1902, and 28 March 1905; Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 17 June 1910, 12 April 1913, 1 March 1918, and 23 June 1919.

<sup>19</sup>Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 2 December 1909.

<sup>20</sup>Newell notes that, from 1881 to 1914, the ideal feminine form changed shape at least three times with each change requiring new corsetry. She argues that department store ads and catalogues were central to popularizing the new fashions. Newell, "From Cloth to Clothing," 119-20; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 22 April 1909; George

so far as to bring in an expert from a Canadian company to have corsets individually fitted for the "woman who really cares about her personal attractiveness."<sup>21</sup>

By the 1920s, ads were targeting, and likely contributing to, women's insecurities about aging and weight gain, early ads having rarely mentioned either. A 1923 Ayre & Sons ad for "The Miracle Re-duc-er" promised a "safe and scientific method" to remove weight and mould "the figure into youthful lines."<sup>22</sup> (See Figure 5.1) A 1930 London, New York and Paris ad for corsets, phrased the issue more bluntly:

How lovely are the new soft, fluttery frocks when worn over 'proper foundations.' But a slovenly figure line simply ruins them. The bearing of these new dress creations depends on their being worn correctly - and this means that the figure must be properly controlled and moulded.<sup>23</sup> (See Figure 5.2)

By 1940, corsets were giving way to the more flexible girdles to suit women's rising participation in the workforce and various leisure activities, but the emphasis remained on controlling one's figure:

Today's smart figure is a natural one ... casual, young, alive. Achieve it the Playtex way with this amazingly different girdle! Not a corset, not an out-dated rubber garment, but a modern method of figure control, as natural as your own lines slimmed down. It slims you for everything from an evening gown to a bathing suit!<sup>24</sup>

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Knowing ad, *The Daily News*, 28 January 1919.

<sup>21</sup>George Knowing ad, *The Daily News*, 7 July 1924.

<sup>22</sup>Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 7 October 1924.

<sup>23</sup>London, New York & Paris ad, *The Daily News*, 26 March 1930.

<sup>24</sup>The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 16 October 1940.

Every Woman may be as slender as she desires!

# MIRACLE RE-DUC-ER

Introducing  
**THE MIRACLE RE-DUC-ER**

Patented.  
 A safe and scientific method—which not only takes off weight—but moulds the figure into youthful lines.

MIRACLE HIP REDUCER

HIP-REDUCER  
**\$13.00**

Without weakening baths, diets, hot drugs, the MIRACLE Re-duc-er gently accomplishes a reduction of three to six inches, in less than two months.

MIRACLE BUST REDUCER

REDUCING BRASSIERE  
**\$7.00**

Required for the fashionable slender silhouette.

## Ayre & Sons

Figure 5.1: Ayre & Sons ad, 1924  
 Source: *The Daily News*, 7 October 1924

# THE NEW STYLE!

Requires that every woman—whether Slim,  
Medium or Stout—wear the

## New Foundation Garments!



The New Silhouette

— AND —

The New Corset Wear

How lovely are the new, soft, flatter-  
ing frocks when worn over "proper  
foundations." But a slender figure  
does simply raise them. The bearing of these new dress  
creations depends on their being worn correctly—and  
this means that the figure must be properly controlled  
and supported.



Medium and heavy figures alike will find ample  
support and comfort in the new Corset wear—  
naturally with the new Silhouette.

The wrap of comfort and trimness in the new  
Corset wear of Satin and Silk with Elastic bands,  
giving gentle support to the slender or growing girl

NOW! WE HAVE JUST OPENED THE NEW CORSET WEAR FOR  
OBTAINING IN A DELIGHTFUL WAY THIS CORRECT SILHOU-  
ETTE, RE-CREATING THE NATURAL, FIRM LINES OF YOUTH.

1.48 2.30 2.75  
3.25 4.50 5.50

Each Garment has been designed for a standard type and produced with the proper styling in accordance—here you will  
find a foundation garment for every occasion, and style type, in a varied range of prices.

LONDON · NEW YORK · & · PARIS

Figure 5.2: London, New York and Paris Association of Fashion ad, 1930  
Source: *The Daily News*, 26 March 1930

Ads were, therefore, central to establishing the standards by which all women were measured, promising dress styles that were "youthifying" and "individual," hats that were "feminine" and "pretty," underwear that was "exclusive" and "refined."<sup>22</sup> According to store ads, being fashionable was the goal of every woman with taste and style and, while the need for most women to economize was often recognized, it was argued that thriftiness should not be an impediment to being well-dressed.<sup>26</sup>

Still, the question of how consumers were to keep abreast of fashion trends remained. The stores, through their ads and displays, promised to show them, holding

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<sup>22</sup>James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 14 December 1921 and 22 April 1929; The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 1 April 1927, 6 September 1927, 16 May 1929, 24 August 1930, 23 September 1938, and 7 October 1938; Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 22 November 1926 and 11 September 1939; Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 4 July 1927; Model Shop ad, *The Daily News*, 15 March 1939; London, New York and Paris ads, *The Daily News*, 21 March 1940 and 17 September 1940; Marchand, "Advertising," 83; Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 108.

A significant development in fashion advertising during the period was the idea of the ensemble: it was not enough to have a dress that was the latest rage in Paris or New York; one had to have the right hat, coat, shoes and hosiery to complete the effect. Miller argues that this reflected the "precision with which the bourgeoisie defined their lives." In France, Bon Marché advertisements and catalogues depicted the particular accoutrements necessary for middle-class living. Women had to have coats for visiting, travelling, balls and the theatre. Men had their shirts for day, for evening and clothes for leisure and for travel. Although not quite as rigorous or detailed, the Water Street stores promulgated a similar lifestyle through ads promoting the items which would signify a respectable, middle-class household and family. Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 180-1; Martin, "Fashion in the Age of Advertising," 253.

<sup>26</sup>London, New York & Paris ad, *The Daily News*, 8 October 1921; Bon Marché ad, *The Daily News*, 11 November 1922; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 20 January 1923; George Knowling ad, *The Daily News*, 6 June 1924; The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 15 March 1934 and 13 May 1938.

themselves up as the city's arbiters of fashion. Ads were meant to inform, to tell consumers where, how and what to buy, retailers believing it was their responsibility to educate consumers. The fact that fashions originated in far off cities, determined by the amorphous "Dame Fashion," being brought to St. John's by the stores and their buyers, made their dictates difficult to contradict. Therefore, Ayre & Sons, the self-named "recognized authority," could claim to stock the "... styles most in vogue in London, Paris and New York" and suggest that "Ladies who like to keep abreast of the times, should make an early visit to our show." The Royal Stores also advised women to visit their Fashion Exhibits to see "the accepted and authoritative fashions" that would give women "a correct idea of the styles worn this season." By inviting women to "Come in and look around to [their] heart[s] content," assuring them that the clerks and salesladies would "be only too pleased to show and explain everything,"<sup>27</sup> the stores presented themselves as sources of knowledge and advice, thus protecting women from the shame of being deemed unfashionable or the disgrace of bad taste. This does not mean that women wholeheartedly accepted their fashion dictates. Still, women could only choose from the products made available to them and, in the absence of alternative sources of information for consumers, retailers could successfully guide their consuming habits through

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<sup>27</sup>S.J. Bronner, "Introduction," *Consuming Visions*, 2; Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 108-9; Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 4 February 1908 and 18 February 1908; The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 12 October 1912 and 10 October 1913.



advertisements, store displays, fashion shows, and magazines.<sup>28</sup>

...

In recent years, with growing interest in gender history, scholars have begun to argue that women were not the only ones affected by increased consumption but that retailers and advertisers have also contributed to social constructions of masculinity. Men, too, were targets of store campaigns attempting to make them consume more with warnings about the social perils of having poor fashion sense. But such ads were less frequent, presumably because men were thought not to be shoppers by nature, nor as preoccupied by matters of dress and appearance. Arguing this point, a 1926 *Trade Review* editorial attempted to give them shopping advice, admitting:

Shopping is one of the oldest of human activities - as old as the Garden of Eden, where the serpent proved himself an excellent salesman and the first woman as keen a bargain hunter as the last. Man is not a shopper by nature, but only so by grim necessity, stern duty and frequent cajoling.<sup>29</sup>

Contrary to this biological argument to explain the male's disinclination to shop, a

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<sup>28</sup>*The Royalist*, for example, included a women's page devoted primarily to fashion advice on everything from office wear to corsetry and exercise to skin care, touching on almost every aspect of a woman's appearance. And in 1935, Steers held a fashion show which *The Daily News* declared had "confirmed all patrons in their shopping habits and enlisted new patrons who desire the latest in New York, London and Paris fashions." Retailers, therefore, shaped behaviour and attitudes in a variety of ways. "Women's Page." *The Royalist*, June 1937; "Women's Page." *The Royalist*, April 1939; "Many Shoppers Visit Steers Ltd.," *The Daily News*, 8 May 1935; Roger Miller, "Selling Mrs. Consumer: Advertising and the Creation of Suburban Socio-Spatial Relations, 1910-1930," *Antipode*, 23(3), (July 1991) 264.

<sup>29</sup>Editorial, *Trade Review*, 20 November 1926.

1928 *Daily News* article argued that women did most of the purchasing, while men rarely bought more than their own clothes, for several reasons:

First, men are too busy to "shop around", in this strenuous age of specialists, and they know that their wives can make better bargains and get more for their money, and also can better spare the time to do the shopping. Second, wives buy so much that there is no need of anything more being purchased. Third, after the women are through, the family purse is flat.<sup>30</sup>

Whether the result of biology or a lack of time, the consensus was that men were not shoppers yet, increasingly throughout the first half of the twentieth century, ads advised them that they should be more fashion conscious, not in order to attract female attention, but to gain the approval of their colleagues and employers, for their economic success and social status depended upon it.

Consequently, store ads appealed to male intellect with an emphasis on practicality, telling men that they could not "command top place in old clothes" and that success and jobs would come easily with the right suit. In case appealing to male ambition failed to convince him, ads threatened him with embarrassment, one Royal Stores ad declaring:

If you have ever had the experience of being the only one in a crowd who was not well dressed, you'll not need to be told the importance of new clothes for Spring. Your friends all appear in new attire, your old clothes may be just as good - but, they're old nevertheless. A Man dressed in one of our made-to-measure Suits or Overcoats, looks capable, confident and

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<sup>30</sup>"Mrs. Consumer." *The Daily News*, 4 May 1928.

convincing.<sup>31</sup> (See Figure 5.3)

In this way, Greenfield, O'Connell and Reid have argued, male consumption was encouraged by distinguishing it from female consumption: women bought clothes out of vanity or gullibility whereas men bought for "reasons of utility or practicality." They suggest men were courted by manufacturers, advertisers, and magazine editors who

... manipulat[ed] many of the concerns and desires that also motivated many of the female consumers, while accommodating men's anxiety regarding the perceived links between consumption and femininity. Surpassing these difficulties often involved stereotyping female consumers who, it was argued, endangered the rational basis of male consumption.... Thus, the commercial targeting of the male consumer in interwar Britain was heavily dependent on gender relations.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 3 April 1909 and 1 April 1930; Anderson's ad, *The Daily News*, 1 April 1920; Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 29 May 1923, 12 April 1924, and May 1924.

Ewen argues that the declining importance of skills and experience as commodities in production with industrialization, resulted in a man's success being attributed to his appearance: "Thus, particularly in ads directed at men, things like personal appearance or an image of dedication were the things which might distinguish one person from another. Productive competition for jobs was integrated within the ideology of a consumer market which was offering men a means to success." Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 155.

<sup>32</sup>In the U.S., Helen Daemon-Moore also links the "commercialization of gender" to magazines, arguing that the content of *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post* contributed to society's equation of women with consumption. Helen Daemon-Moore, *Magazines For Millions: Gender and Commerce in the Ladies' Home Journal and Saturday Evening Post, 1880-1910* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) 3, 93; Jill Greenfield, Sean O'Connell and Chris Reid, "Gender, Consumer Culture and the Middle-Class Male, 1918-1939," *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism*, 183-8; Gail Reekie, "Impulsive Women, Predictable Men: Psychological Constructions of Sexual Difference in Sales Literature to 1930," *Australian Historical Studies*, 24(97), (October 1991) 369; Marchand, "Advertising Age," 79; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 9 April 1927; Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 19 April 1930; Broadway House of Fashion ad, *The Daily News*, 17 October 1930.

**Clothes  
To Be Smart  
Must Be  
Made-To-Measure  
Men--**



Your personal appearance is sixty-five per cent of your personality, and you become unappreciated even though everybody admits a well-dressed man. "Dress well and approved," isn't it the truth?

We want your order for your new Spring Suit and Overcoat, and can assure you we are in a special position to serve you.

The New Spring Suits and Coats are here—a handsome variety—exclusive designs made from all wool yarns and supplied only in The Royal Stores, bought direct from the manufacturers.

Come in and look them over.

**Suits**

We have just received the best selection of Suits we have ever shown. Thousands of pieces in all the latest, extremely stylish for Spring and Summer. Choice of Ties or gentlemen's Shirts \$1.00 each.

Special Offerings:  
\$35.00, 43.50, 45.90, 47.50,  
50.00 — 55.00

**Overcoatings**

Get your Spring Top Coat made here and you will have one that will serve you and last you doing it. An assortment of all your favorite styles in every price to suit the pocket. Weight 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 44, 46, 48, 50, 52, 54, 56, 58, 60, 62, 64, 66, 68, 70, 72, 74, 76, 78, 80, 82, 84, 86, 88, 90, 92, 94, 96, 98, 100, 102, 104, 106, 108, 110, 112, 114, 116, 118, 120, 122, 124, 126, 128, 130, 132, 134, 136, 138, 140, 142, 144, 146, 148, 150, 152, 154, 156, 158, 160, 162, 164, 166, 168, 170, 172, 174, 176, 178, 180, 182, 184, 186, 188, 190, 192, 194, 196, 198, 200, 202, 204, 206, 208, 210, 212, 214, 216, 218, 220, 222, 224, 226, 228, 230, 232, 234, 236, 238, 240, 242, 244, 246, 248, 250, 252, 254, 256, 258, 260, 262, 264, 266, 268, 270, 272, 274, 276, 278, 280, 282, 284, 286, 288, 290, 292, 294, 296, 298, 300, 302, 304, 306, 308, 310, 312, 314, 316, 318, 320, 322, 324, 326, 328, 330, 332, 334, 336, 338, 340, 342, 344, 346, 348, 350, 352, 354, 356, 358, 360, 362, 364, 366, 368, 370, 372, 374, 376, 378, 380, 382, 384, 386, 388, 390, 392, 394, 396, 398, 400, 402, 404, 406, 408, 410, 412, 414, 416, 418, 420, 422, 424, 426, 428, 430, 432, 434, 436, 438, 440, 442, 444, 446, 448, 450, 452, 454, 456, 458, 460, 462, 464, 466, 468, 470, 472, 474, 476, 478, 480, 482, 484, 486, 488, 490, 492, 494, 496, 498, 500, 502, 504, 506, 508, 510, 512, 514, 516, 518, 520, 522, 524, 526, 528, 530, 532, 534, 536, 538, 540, 542, 544, 546, 548, 550, 552, 554, 556, 558, 560, 562, 564, 566, 568, 570, 572, 574, 576, 578, 580, 582, 584, 586, 588, 590, 592, 594, 596, 598, 600, 602, 604, 606, 608, 610, 612, 614, 616, 618, 620, 622, 624, 626, 628, 630, 632, 634, 636, 638, 640, 642, 644, 646, 648, 650, 652, 654, 656, 658, 660, 662, 664, 666, 668, 670, 672, 674, 676, 678, 680, 682, 684, 686, 688, 690, 692, 694, 696, 698, 700, 702, 704, 706, 708, 710, 712, 714, 716, 718, 720, 722, 724, 726, 728, 730, 732, 734, 736, 738, 740, 742, 744, 746, 748, 750, 752, 754, 756, 758, 760, 762, 764, 766, 768, 770, 772, 774, 776, 778, 780, 782, 784, 786, 788, 790, 792, 794, 796, 798, 800, 802, 804, 806, 808, 810, 812, 814, 816, 818, 820, 822, 824, 826, 828, 830, 832, 834, 836, 838, 840, 842, 844, 846, 848, 850, 852, 854, 856, 858, 860, 862, 864, 866, 868, 870, 872, 874, 876, 878, 880, 882, 884, 886, 888, 890, 892, 894, 896, 898, 900, 902, 904, 906, 908, 910, 912, 914, 916, 918, 920, 922, 924, 926, 928, 930, 932, 934, 936, 938, 940, 942, 944, 946, 948, 950, 952, 954, 956, 958, 960, 962, 964, 966, 968, 970, 972, 974, 976, 978, 980, 982, 984, 986, 988, 990, 992, 994, 996, 998, 1000.

\$35.00, 40.00 — 45.00

**Fit and Workmanship Guaranteed**

**The Royal Stores Ltd.**

THE HOUSE FOR VALUE

Custom Tailoring Department

Figure 5.3: The Royal Stores ad, 1927  
Source: *The Daily News*, 9 April 1927

Although both faced pressure from store ads to project a certain image through their buying, men and women were, therefore, targeted in very different ways. Gail Reekie, in her study of advertising in Australia during this period, found that contemporary psychological theories about sex differences influenced retailers and shaped their campaigns, arguing that "... very often the difference between these new scientific ideas and older notions of masculinity and femininity was almost imperceptible."<sup>33</sup> Retailers, attempting to rationalize and control their customer base, divided shoppers into categories, endowing each with a set of characteristics in an effort to predict and manipulate their consuming behaviour. Two basic categories were the male and female shoppers, the differences between them many and "always opposed." Women were 'instinctive' shoppers, fashion devotees, and committed bargain hunters, with a woman's "buying instincts ... rooted in her natural attachment to her home, her domestic duties, and the well-being of her family." This perceived link between a woman's roles as mother and shopper was considered natural and biological. In contrast, men were described as "reluctant, unnatural and even 'peculiar' shoppers with 'a natural distrust of department stores.'" In consequence, women were believed to be better customers as "they were more suggestible and open to persuasion than men."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Reekie, "Impulsive Women, Predictable Men." 359.

<sup>34</sup>Reekie, "Impulsive Women, Predictable Men." 364-8; Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled*, 116.

Slater, in his study of consumer culture, suggests that consumers are seen as either heroes or fools, the former being masculine (rational, autonomous, knows what he wants)

There is little evidence to suggest that St. John's retailers consulted current psychological theory in their bid to rationalize customer behaviour as did their Australian counterparts, but they obviously drew upon similar societal notions of gender difference in creating store ads. Rather than offering to educate men on what to wear, the stores claimed to have just what men sought, implying that men knew what they wanted and did not want to search for it. Men were also thought more likely to stick with a store that satisfied them whereas women were considered fickle when it came to the stores they patronized.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, men were invited to study thoroughly the question of where best to buy while women were admonished for "gadding from store to store" when it was clear where the better values were to be had:

Silly sisters seek samples of new and fashionable goods in every store in town, but ladies of taste unerringly find their way to our place of business.

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and the latter being feminine (irrational, manipulated, a domestic consumer). He traces the idea that women lack rationality back to the Enlightenment and argues that, with modernity, it has shaped societal views of women as consumers, a role that has increased along with their responsibility for domestic reproduction as defined by advertising, state policy, educational institutions, etc. Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, 33, 54-9.

Steven Lubar has also traced the historical roots of the connection of production with masculinity and consumption with femininity and argues that such divisions are misleading as there are many interconnections between those who make technology and those who use it. Steven Lubar, "Men/Women/Production/Consumption," *His and Hers: Gender, Consumption and Technology*, Roger Horowitz and Arwen Mohun, eds. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998) 7-37.

<sup>35</sup>A *Daily News* article on shopping in Paris also informed readers that credit was rarely given in Parisian stores but return policies were liberal as "A well-known weakness of women shoppers is that they never really know their minds." Reekie discussed similar attitudes in her study of Australian retailers. "How They Shop in Paris." *The Daily News*, 29 April 1922; Reekie, "Impulsive Women, Predictable Men," 367-8.

feeling assured that we have always the latest and best to show.<sup>36</sup>

Men, however, were wisely dubious about an ad's claims:

We admire an Honest Doubter! It does not matter how much or how cleverly we advertise the merits of our clothes, we can't prove it that way! Give us a chance to makes [sic] your clothes this season!<sup>37</sup>

In short, then, women were considered natural shoppers, willing to spend their days traipsing from store to store, while men, having neither the time nor the inclination to shop, had to be convinced of the need to visit a store with the assurance that they would find exactly what they wanted, quickly and comfortably. As a result, stores began catering to what they saw as men's special shopping needs. In 1907, Ayre & Sons reorganized their departments, moving Men's Furnishings into the shop once used as a grocery, aiming

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<sup>36</sup>The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 20 February 1901, 28 February 1901, and 20 June 1902.

Those responsible for creating store ads were not the only ones to view women consumers in this way. *The Daily News*, in a report on local trade in 1896, noted: "The big stores could not complain of lack of customers on Saturday night, for nearly all of them were crowded until closing time. The numbers were there, but whether their purchases amounted to much it is hard to say. The majority of them were ladies, and everyone knows that they do more *shopping* than buying." "News in brief." *The Daily News*, 1 June 1896.

The female penchant for browsing without buying also provided fodder for jokes such as one appearing in *The Daily News* in 1913. Entitled "The Lady Shopper Beaten," it told the story of a women browsing in a store for four hours before finally being approached by a clerk who asked if she was shopping. When she replied in the affirmative, the clerk responded that he thought she must have been taking inventory. "The Lady Shopper Beaten." *The Daily News*, 29 July 1913.

<sup>37</sup>The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 10 April 1912; Reekie, "Impulsive Women, Predictable Men," 369.

to make "shopping so much easier and pleasanter for [men]." <sup>38</sup> James Baird, Ltd., also opened a men's shop where they claimed to "always intelligently interpret and anticipate HIS NEEDS" while another clothing store ad declared, "MR. MAN! a separate store for you, where you can buy your clothing without any embarrassment."<sup>39</sup> These ads suggest that separate shops and entrances were meant to make the experience of shopping more comfortable for men, but Lancaster argues that they served to preserve the department store as female territory, ensuring male exclusion.<sup>40</sup> It is more likely, however, that the separate stores responded to both concerns, allowing women to shop in a safe, respectable, predominantly female environment while maintaining gender stereotypes, supporting the notion that shopping was not natural masculine behaviour and that men had an innate aversion to entering women's departments thereby calming their fears of emasculation.<sup>41</sup>

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Although most of the stores' ads in the late 1800s and early 1900s were for clothing, addressing both sexes with comparative frequency, by the 1910s and '20s, store advertisements pitched a increasing variety of consumer goods, the majority of which were

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<sup>38</sup>Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 7 October 1907.

<sup>39</sup>James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 21 April 1922 and 6 June 1922; English-American Clothing Company ad, *The Daily News*, 28 November 1922.

<sup>40</sup>Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 182.

<sup>41</sup>Reekie, "Impulsive Women, Predictable Men," 366-7; Wright, "'Feminine Trifles of Vast Importance,'" 250.



directed at women for family, home or personal use. Ads explicitly linked marriage and motherhood with consumption so that, despite providing an opportunity to escape the home and participate in public life, shopping, seen as part of women's domestic responsibilities, did little to challenge traditional gender roles.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, in addition to ads appealing to a woman's personal needs and wants, many others addressed those of the family and household, often using the appeal of middle-class respectability and family values to sell goods. Ads suggested that "Every good housekeeper ... [should] make her house comfortable, attractive and in keeping with her ideas of 'HOME'" for her family's happiness depended upon it, another ad declaring that "... love of home is engendered in the young by tasteful surroundings in the household." And just as her appearance was constantly being judged, so was that of her home, one Ayre & Sons ad warning, "When You Consider that YOUR WINDOWS are more in the 'public eye' than any other portion of your home, you naturally want to have them above criticism." A later James Baird, Ltd., ad also advised women, "Just as your wardrobes and complexions need a thorough going over from time to time.... so do your homes."<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, ads told women they should take pride in their domestic work.

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<sup>42</sup>Reekie, "Impulsive Women, Predictable Men," 366-7; Wright, "Feminine Trifles of Vast Importance," 231; Leach, "Transformations," 331; Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 190-1; Juliann Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1996) 156.

<sup>43</sup>The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 23 September 1901; Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 15 May 1916 and 25 October 1917; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 22 May 1939.

presenting a pleasant demeanour and an attractive appearance as they went about their household chores. As a 1917 Martin-Royal Stores Hardware Co. ad for mops declared: "Make Your Work a Pleasure. You like compliments, to be told you have a cheerful disposition; how scientifically you do your work; that your home is clean, bright and beautiful."<sup>44</sup> The assumption was that housewives had a special attachment to the home, that they "yearned" for new furnishings, and that a "good" housewife enjoyed shopping for things to "make cosy ... that place she cherishes and loves to call 'Home Sweet Home.'"<sup>45</sup>

The demands on women to be good mothers were just as exacting, everything from her family's health to her son's success at school depended upon her buying the right products. One early ad dramatically declared:

Stolen from home has many a bright young life been, by the non-appreciation of the necessity for warm head covering in cold weather. First the cough, then the coffin and the vacant chair.<sup>46</sup>

Only slightly less melodramatic was a later ad for rubber boots:

Every Man, Woman, Boy, Girl and Child should always have a pair of our good Rubbers at this season of the year. Wet feet always travel the road that ends in Hospital and its [*sic*] usually a short trip.<sup>47</sup>

Other ads advised "careful" mothers to ward off illness and ensure the safety and comfort

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<sup>44</sup>Ayre & Sons ads. *The Daily News*, 26 May 1913 and 2 May 1914; Martin-Royal Stores Hardware Co. ad. *The Daily News*, 16 July 1917.

<sup>45</sup>James Baird ads. *The Daily News*, 16 April 1928 and 5 October 1928.

<sup>46</sup>The Royal Stores ad. *The Daily News*, 6 November 1901.

<sup>47</sup>George Knowling ad. *The Daily News*, 11 November 1918.

of their children by buying warm blankets, Dr. Denton's sleepwear, Vanta baby garments and Pedigree prams, at times invoking scientific and expert authority to lend credence to their claims.<sup>48</sup>

In "Selling Mrs. Consumer: Advertising and the Creation of Suburban Socio-Spatial Relations, 1910-1930," Roger Miller explores the connection between advertising campaigns and societal views of women's domestic responsibilities, arguing that, in order to sell products, advertisers created "idealized images" of family living. In their attempt to sell refrigerators, stoves, washing machines and cars to suburban families, Miller writes that "... predominantly male experts redefined household roles over a period of decades so that women were responsible for the maintenance of increasingly high standards of domestic cleanliness, all in the name of protecting family health." As a result, household appliances, initially seen as luxuries and conveniences, came to be viewed as necessities and wound up creating more work and worry for the women who were supposed to benefit from them, by raising the standards by which domestic abilities were judged.<sup>49</sup> As one 1934 Royal Stores ad told the housewives of St. John's,

You'll bless the day you bought one of these Refrigerators. It isn't enough to provide good food for your family. You must be sure it's safe for them to eat. The only way to be sure of that during warm summer weather is by refrigeration. A refrigerator solves waste, saves time, saves trouble and

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<sup>48</sup>Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 28 February 1916, 25 October 1918, 28 February 1924, and 1 October 1927; The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 6 July 1927 and 19 April 1938.

<sup>49</sup>Miller, "Selling Mrs. Consumer," 264-87.

saves money.<sup>50</sup>

With the increased exposure to a North American lifestyle and products and growing public concern for local living conditions following the St. John's housing survey of the mid-1940s, more and more ads appeared promoting housewares necessary for "modern living" and electrical appliances to save on housework.<sup>51</sup> In Canada, Veronica Strong-Boag argues the upheavals of the Depression and war years had created a strong desire among young adults for the stability and security offered by home ownership and domesticity. This contributed to their movement en masse to new suburban developments and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles by "a commercially fuelled celebration of domesticity and maternity ..." Quoting a 1949 Eaton's ad, Strong-Boag notes that

Typical advertisements credited the housewife with 'the recipe for good citizenship ... for a woman's influence extends far beyond the horizons of housekeeping. She guards the family health by her buying standards; she shares in plans for the family welfare; hers is the opportunity of training her children ... of promoting good character and good citizenship.' Companies readily championed a feminine ideal that offered them real benefits. Corporate profits and male careers alike depended on women's concentrated efforts in the private sphere, more especially in new suburban home where opportunities for purchases were unsurpassed.<sup>52</sup>

Doug Owram, in his study of Canadian baby-boomers, also suggests that "The

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<sup>50</sup>The Royal Stores ad. *The Daily News*, 18 June 1934.

<sup>51</sup>Bowring Brothers ads. *The Daily News*, 21 January 1947 and 17 April 1947; Ayre & Sons ad. *The Daily News*, 13 August 1947; James Baird ad. *The Daily News*, 26 August 1947; The Royal Stores ad. *The Daily News*, 28 April 1948.

<sup>52</sup>Veronica Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945-60," *Canadian Historical Review*, 72(4), (1991) 474-81.

young adults of the 1940s were the most domestically oriented generation of the twentieth century." This would appear to be the case in Newfoundland as well as in Canada and the U.S. Whether Newfoundlanders were responding to similar conditions (according to Owrarn and Strong-Boag, the upheaval and deprivation of the Depression and war years) contributing to increased domesticity or to idealized images of home life espoused by North American experts and projected in the media, is unclear. But, as in Canada, advertisements "... told consumers that what they wanted, or should want, was to be married, and that this or that product would help them."<sup>53</sup>

In no area were ads more specific or demanding in their domestic advice to women than when it came to child care and Cook's study of the children's wear industry in the U.S. provides an interesting insight into the American influence on St. John's retailers. Through an examination of *Infants' Department*, a trade journal published by George Earnshaw, owner of the American company Vanta Baby Garments, Cook illustrates how the publication advised department stores on the most advantageous ways of merchandising infants' clothes and accessories, in turn influencing society's view of their target consumers, mothers. Along with the creation of a department devoted specifically to infants, the journal urged retailers to give mothers information and advice on caring for their children. The resulting image created by staff writers of the "consuming mother" was

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<sup>53</sup>Doug Owrarn, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby-Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 12-3; Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams," 474-81.

as "a self-sacrificing being motivated by love and instinct to carry out her duty as purchasing agent for the family." According to the journal, mothers would make any sacrifice to buy things for their children and so advertisers urged them to express their love through goods. Distributed free to those who bought, retailed, and manufactured children's wear, *Infants' Department* likely had some impact on how baby products were promoted in St. John's since at least one Water Street store carried Vanta baby clothes. Although the connection cannot be made definitively, several of the journal's suggestions such as selling layettes, celebrating baby week with special displays of merchandise beneficial to infant health, and invoking expert opinion in ads were used by St. John's retailers.<sup>54</sup>

The stores did not restrict themselves to advice on infant care, however. If children survived the threat of ill health, mothers also had to worry about choosing clothes beneficial to their educational and future prospects for, according to store ads, how they dressed could determine both. Yet, the concern was always for boys as one Royal Stores ad illustrates:

We Have A Suit For Your Young Hopeful. Start your boy back to school in one of these good suits. Watch him hold his chin up and sail into his studies like a regular fellow. His appearance makes a lot of difference in his attitude ...<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Cook, "Mother as Consumer," 505-22; "An Attractive Window Display," *The Daily News*, 17 June 1925; Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 30 June 1925; Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 1 October 1927; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 6 July 1928.

<sup>55</sup>The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 29 August 1930.

Ads also called upon every "proud" mother to give her son self-respect by dressing him in "stylish looking clothes" so that she could rest assured not one of his playmates would be better equipped for the coming season. Although there were advertisements for girls' school clothes, they never urged mothers to ensure daughters' success with a new outfit but rather appealed to the feminine love of fashion supposedly shared by mothers and daughters by virtue of their sex. Such ads also hint at the early socialization of children into traditional gender roles since, like their fathers, boys required clothes that would give them the confidence to succeed whereas girls needed them to fill the female "craving" for fashion.<sup>56</sup> Because children had little or no purchasing power, mothers were the target of ads for children's merchandise but ads and in-store contests still encouraged children to accompany their mothers on shopping trips. In this way, children, especially girls, were educated into their proper societal roles at an early age.<sup>57</sup>

While early ads addressed women almost solely in terms of their domestic roles, as

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<sup>56</sup>George Knowling ad, *The Daily News*, 11 September 1919; James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 29 September 1920 and 26 August 1926; Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 8 April 1932 and 21 October 1940.

<sup>57</sup>Cook, "Mother as Consumer," 518; Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 100; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 21 December 1908; Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 26 December 1913 and 24 October 1925; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 8 December 1922.

According to Ewen, American advertisers told mothers that by "using certain products on children, and by educating them into certain patterns of consumption, their futures would be assured." Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 174.

female participation in the workforce rose during and after World War I, more ads appeared in the newspapers directed at young, single, working women. Such ads did not promise professional success with the right dress but sold smocks and uniforms for a variety of acceptable female occupations, suggesting that the range of jobs open to women during the period was largely limited to maid, office or shop clerk, beautician, waitress, nurse and teacher. Since single, working women were among the few with the time and money to spend in the pursuit of fun, other ads sold clothes for leisure activities such as dances, movies, card-playing, skating and hiking.<sup>58</sup> Because there were actually higher numbers of young women living in St. John's than young men throughout much of the period, this meant fewer marriage opportunities and a longer stay in the workforce, thereby adding to their importance as consumers and making them worthy of retailers' attention.<sup>60</sup>

Despite this, most store ads continued to target housewives and mothers for several reasons. The vast majority of working women continued to live with parents or other relatives, the remainder living in boarding houses, negating the need to buy household items. Furthermore, most were expected to hand over a portion of their wages to help support the family while the rest paid board and, given the low wages paid to

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<sup>58</sup>James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 7 July 1933, 5 November 1935, and 29 June 1940; The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 17 January 1935 and 29 July 1938; Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 11 December 1935, 9 March 1938, and 25 July 1938; Bowring Brothers ads, *The Daily News*, 17 November 1938 and 19 September 1940.

<sup>59</sup>Forestell, "Women's Paid Labour," 58-9.



women amidst the depressed conditions of the 1920s and '30s, their spending money would have been limited. Finally, going out to work was considered a relatively brief stage in a young woman's life, bridging childhood and marriage.<sup>60</sup> Most would eventually leave their jobs to become wives and mothers, exchanging wages for more substantial spending allowances and ads reflected this social reality by continuing to target women primarily in terms of their domestic duties.

During World War II, with male enlistment and rising employment opportunities on the bases, more women entered the workforce but few ads addressed them in their capacity as wage-earners. When ads targeted single women, it was still largely in terms of their leisure activities. One change, however, was the increased number of ads encouraging women to buy dresses for dates, a response, no doubt, to the presence of foreign troops and their romances with local women. As one 1942 ad advised, "More than ever before you'll want pretty dresses for party-going, movie dates and dinner." Ads frequently promoted items sure to attract male attention, the Model Shop promising dresses that "he likes to see you wear ... the kind that makes him proud to show you off before his friends." The London, New York and Paris also advertised "beau-catching

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<sup>60</sup>Forestell, "Women's Paid Labour," 68-71, 99, 103.

In an article examining working-class consumption during the interwar period in the U.S., Benson found that wage-earning daughters gave a greater portion of their pay to their parents than did sons. Furthermore, when daughters failed to contribute as much as it was felt they should to the family income, it was attributed to their consumption habits whereas the same failure in sons was attributed to character flaws or poor work ethic. Susan Porter Benson, "Gender, Generation, and Consumption in the United States: Working-Class Families in the Interwar Period," *Getting and Spending*, 229-34.

dresses" while Bowring's told women to "Dress Up to His Expectations."<sup>61</sup>

For those women successful in their quest to find husbands, stores also advertised bridal gowns and gifts for the "most important occasion in any girl's life," one ad stating:

Newfoundland needs women like you who have the courage and determination to go ahead - make a home for your soldier husband - raise a family - the new generation we are fighting for. We are proud we can be of service to the future Mrs. Newfoundlands.<sup>62</sup>

Four decades earlier, a Royal Stores ad used similar rhetoric to sell women's undergarments suggesting, "Healthy womanhood is the prospective hope of a young country. To have healthy women, we must have healthy clothing, clothing made on scientific and hygienic principles."<sup>63</sup> It appears that, in spite of women's greater public role as consumers and to a lesser extent as wage earners, little had changed over the intervening years in attitudes regarding the role of women in society: a woman's destiny was still marriage and motherhood.

Yet, despite the development of their consuming role within a framework of traditional gender roles, it is clear that women wielded a significant degree of economic

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<sup>61</sup>Bowring Brothers ads, *The Daily News*, 19 September 1940 and 10 October 1947; Model Shop ads, *The Daily News*, 26 March 1942 and 1 May 1942; Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 21 July 1944; The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 5 September 1941, 19 September 1941, 4 June 1942, 23 March 1943, and 1 September 1944; London, New York and Paris ads, *The Daily News*, 28 November 1944, 28 September 1945, and 20 April 1946; MacLeod, *Peace of the Continent*, 33, 38.

<sup>62</sup>J.M. Devine-The Big 6 ad, *The Daily News*, 22 May 1942; Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 20 May 1948.

<sup>63</sup>The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 2 July 1901.

influence through their buying. Even when it came to typically masculine products such as fishing tackle or car care items, or major purchases such as furniture and appliances, ads often appealed to husbands and wives, and sometimes just wives, suggesting store owners believed women would have a say in what was bought.<sup>64</sup> And during World Wars I and II, women were made to feel that, through their role as household purchasers, they, too, could have an impact by buying British-made goods or war stamps, thereby supporting the mother country and demonstrating their patriotic spirit.<sup>65</sup> Ads for a "buy local" campaign in the early 1920s also targeted women in their role as the primary consumers:

To-day, the Newfoundland house-wife, if she is thoughtful, loyal to her home interests, anxious to keep her fellow-countrymen independent and self-supporting, INSISTS on seeing local-made goods first, every time, and whenever possible, purchases them....<sup>66</sup>

Another ad suggested that by buying local products, a portion of the money a woman spent would return to her own purse via her "husband's pay envelope."<sup>67</sup> That such ads were directed at housewives and not their wage-earning husbands indicates an awareness that women were indeed responsible for the bulk of household purchases and were.

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<sup>64</sup>The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 8 December 1926, 18 June 1934, 3 August 1934, and 30 November 1938; Bowring Brothers ads, *The Daily News*, 17 June 1929 and 8 June 1936; Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 25 July 1929 and 19 June 1934.

<sup>65</sup>Ayre & Sons ads, *The Daily News*, 14 September 1914 and 27 October 1914; James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 30 October 1914, 1 December 1916, and 7 March 1942; The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 10 June 1941.

<sup>66</sup>"Buy Local" ads, *The Daily News*, 11 April 1921 and 19 May 1921.

<sup>67</sup>"Buy Local" ad, *The Daily News*, 21 April 1921.

therefore, important economic agents.

In spite of their importance as consumers to families, retailers and the economy, the image of the female shopper presented in the press - reflecting societal attitudes - was far from positive, creating additional pressures for women attempting to balance advertising rhetoric, family needs, limited budgets and society's expectations. Although store ads flattered women by praising their abilities to shop efficiently and maintain a budget, they had a vested interest in doing so. Women were still expected to achieve all of the goals set out for them in the ads but to do so efficiently and economically. Increasingly over the period, store ads emphasized thrift and economy, suggesting it was every woman's duty and responsibility as the family shopper to maintain a strict budget - "you owe it to yourself, to your family, to the wage earner" - but urging them to buy all the same. The characterization of female shoppers in local newspapers and journals did not help, portraying them as irrational, extravagant, demanding, rude to clerks and salesladies, and obsessed with window shopping and sales.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Marchand and Benson note that American and British women encountered similar pressures, Marchand suggesting that, although ads portrayed women as 'domestic managers' and praised them for their efficiency, they also placed them in a competition with other women and urged them to please men. Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society*, 184; George Knowing ad, *The Daily News*, 25 January 1915; James Baird ads, *The Daily News*, 5 September 1913, 10 June 1921, and 4 September 1915; Bowring Brothers ad, *The Daily News*, 13 May 1925; The Royal Stores ads, *The Daily News*, 24 February 1928 and 1 June 1933; "Notes in brief," *The Daily News*, 3 December 1895; "One Reason Why Men Can't Propose," *The Daily News*, 22 February 1902; Letter to the editor, *The Evening Telegram*, 5 February 1913; "Systemless Shopping," *Trade Review*, 18 November 1899;

Clearly, the consequences of women's greater consuming role over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were mixed. A survey of store ads suggests that women were considered important participants in the economy and were given significant control over household income with a high degree of discretion in determining how it was spent. At the same time, however, while stores were urging women to shop frequently and spend freely even if using the rhetoric of thrift, society viewed the female shopper in largely negative terms, often as a subject of ridicule and derision.

The demands placed on women as the primary consumers in society were great and continued to increase over the period of study as discretionary incomes rose, the variety of available merchandise expanded, and competition among retailers grew. Store ads clearly established that women were the "Controllers of the Home Purse" and were therefore in a position to influence the local economy by determining how the bulk of household funds were dispersed. At the same time, however, ads also reinforced traditional gender roles which confined women to domestic pursuits. In this way, retailers

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"Women's Dress," *Trade Review*, 6 June 1903; "Women Say Men Are to Blame For Celibacy," *Trade Review*, 18 June 1904; Letters to the editor, *Trade Review*, 15 April 1905, 29 April 1905, and 22 September 1906; "Courtesy to Clerks," *Trade Review*, 17 August 1907; "Too Much Attention to Dress," *Trade Review*, 25 September 1909; Editorial, *Trade Review*, 13 December 1924; Cartoon, *The Daily News*, 28 July 1926.

Female consumers did have their defenders, although few in number, and even they assumed women were natural and recreational shoppers, arguing that this made them keener bargain-hunters than men and, in this regard, less extravagant. Letter to the editor, *The Daily News*, 10 February 1913; "Are Women the Thriftless Sex? Where Men are Greater Spendthrifts," *The Daily News*, 13 July 1925.

were central to the construction of gender in Newfoundland society. Although stores had begun to address the consuming habits of young, single, working women by the 1930s and '40s, women's domestic role continued to eclipse their role as wage-earner. Whereas men, according to stores ads, were producers, breadwinners and only reluctant consumers, women were naturally avid and impulsive shoppers who, through wise consuming habits cultivated through careful scrutiny of advertisements, could be attractive wives, good mothers, and efficient housekeepers.

**Chapter Six - "Water Street Czars" and "Poor unpaid slaves  
called clerks": Paternalism and Worker Loyalty  
in the Water Street Stores**

In the 1986 CBC film *Undertow*, set around the turn of the century in an outpost just outside St. John's, a lone, brave fisherman dares to break the local merchant's hold on his livelihood by challenging the truck system. Meanwhile the merchant's clerk, appearing only briefly, is portrayed as respectful and obsequious, toeing the merchant's hard line on the granting of credit to fishermen. The film exemplifies the fixation of many in Newfoundland, scholars among them, on the exploitative relationship existing between the island's merchants and fishermen in an earlier era. Although this characterization of truck has been challenged in recent years,<sup>1</sup> it remains the focus of many historians, both popular and scholarly. The Water Street merchants, however, shared much more enduring and intimate relationships with their shop and office employees, relationships also characterized by paternalism, yet giving way to conflict and worker militancy in the 1930s and welfarism in the 1940s.

Retail workers have only recently begun to gain the attention of historians, having long been overlooked for several reasons. The traditional focus of labour historians on the processes of production at the expense of consumption, the tendency of labour relations in the retail industry to be relatively harmonious with low rates of unionization, and the growing presence of women in the retail sector in this century explain the absence of shop

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<sup>1</sup>See Rowe, *History of Newfoundland and Labrador*, 354-5; Cadigan, *Hope and Deception*, 19-22, 29; Ommer, "Merchant Credit," 170.

clerks and salesladies from labour history.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, the oversight has been corrected, in some measure, by Susan Porter Benson, Theresa McBride and Gail Reekie. In Canada, however, the field is limited largely to a study of labour relations in the Dupuis Frères department store in Montreal by Mary Matthews, an examination of Eaton's strikes in 1912 and 1934 by Ruth Frager, and accounts of attempts to organize Eaton's workers around 1950 by Eileen Sufrin and in the 1980s by Bradley Pragnell.<sup>3</sup>

The problem is exacerbated in the Newfoundland historiography by continued interest in the fishery as well as the emphasis on a credit and barter economy which would seem to preclude the existence of a consumer society and, therefore, an extensive retail trade employing a large workforce. Consequently, the only local studies dealing with retail workers are overviews of the labour movement in Newfoundland by Bill Gillespie and Rolf Hattenhauer which briefly discuss this sector of the workforce and only in the context of their efforts to unionize. Nancy Forestell also discusses the experiences of salesladies in the Water Street stores but as this is limited to female workers during the 1920s and '30s, it does not provide a full picture of changing working conditions in the

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<sup>2</sup>Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 125.

<sup>3</sup>Benson, *Counter Cultures*; McBride, "A woman's world"; Reekie, "Humanizing Industry"; Matthews, "Working For Family, Nation and God"; Sufrin, *The Eaton Drive*; Pragnell, *Organizing Department Store Workers*; Frager, "Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Eaton's Strikes."



retail sector.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike their employees in the stores, the Water Street merchants are far from absent in the Newfoundland literature which, due to the negative characterization of the truck system and the failure of the fishery, has made them the chimera of local history.<sup>5</sup> Yet, this image is at odds with accounts of mercantile philanthropy found in the press and travel literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which their charitable works are taken as evidence of their commitment to the belief that 'privilege entails responsibility':

The richest vein that runs through our Island culture and traditional ethics is that of hospitality and humane consideration for our fellow men. The record shows this from the time of the first settlers, especially amongst the mercantile class, who were grand exponents of the motto '*Noblesse oblige*.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Bill Gillespie, "A History of the Newfoundland Federation of Labour, 1936-1963" (M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1980); Rolf Hattenhauer, "A Brief Labour History of Newfoundland" (a report for the Royal Commission on Labour Legislation in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1970); Forestell, "Women's Paid Labour."

<sup>5</sup>Cadigan, *Hope and Deception*, preface.

<sup>6</sup>Devine, *Ye Olde St. John's*, 5.

Although at times reviled, the Newfoundland merchant was also the object of much admiration and respect thanks to their charitable works and in 1894, Rev. Moses Harvey expressed the hope that, when the merchants were found to be "doing their duty," working-class antagonism would disappear and "friendly relations between 'the classes and the masses' w[ould] be restored." Harvey, *Newfoundland as it is in 1894*, 200-1.

Theresa McBride writes that department store owners in France also had "a high public reputation for philanthropy" and, in the case of Dupuis Frères in Montreal, Matthews argues that the owners' participation in civic, religious and national organizations ultimately benefited the company by identifying it with the betterment of the community. Because most early department stores were family firms, company image was

In their relations with shop and office employees, as with the fishermen they supplied, merchants discharged this responsibility through paternalistic acts of generosity and control.<sup>7</sup> Within the large Water Street stores, paternalism helped ensure worker loyalty by fostering familial fealty in the workplace while also challenging negative impressions of the merchant class with positive publicity. Workers were to view employers as benevolent fathers responsible for their welfare, the shifting nature of the Newfoundland economy, with frequent periods of recession and high unemployment, encouraging this kind of relationship between employers and employees.

By the twentieth century, however, paternalism as a method of labour control, increasingly seen as inefficient and out-dated, was being replaced by scientific management in most workplaces yet it survived in the department stores of Europe and North America. Rather than being backward and old-fashioned, Lancaster has argued that paternalism was largely responsible for the overwhelmingly harmonious record of labour relations in the retail trade. Similarly, Miller attributes the successful shift from family-ownership to managerial control at the Bon Marché in Paris, following the deaths of the Boucicauts, to the maintenance of paternalistic principles.<sup>8</sup> At Dupuis Frères, Matthews argues that paternalistic ideology supported the system of labour relations, explaining and justifying

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closely related to the profile of the owners. McBride, "Ni Bourgeoisos, Ni Proletaires," 240; Matthews, "Working For Family, Nation and God," 14.

<sup>7</sup>Gillespie, "History of the Newfoundland Federation of Labour," 42.

<sup>8</sup>Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 142-4; Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 130.

the inequitable distribution of power in the relationship between the owners and workers. She does not suggest that owners consciously used ideology to control and manipulate workers but that there was something to be gained from granting certain privileges and benefits such as profit sharing, pensions, sports or picnics:

The purpose of these optional yet arbitrary benefits was to create and maintain a feeling of family and community amongst the entire organization, as well as to stave off any demands from workers to translate 'gifts' under welfare capitalism into rights through union activity or legislation.<sup>9</sup>

In the Dupuis Frères department store, Matthews suggests paternalism was supplemented by several extraneous ideologies (French Canadian nationalism, Catholicism and patriarchy) which further cemented the relationship between the owners and workers as well as between the store and the community. Working for and shopping at Dupuis Frères was equated with being a proud French Canadian and a good Catholic while patriarchal ideology, defining women's domestic role and subordination in the home, allowed the store to justify the inequitable treatment of female staff in terms of wages and promotions.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, nationalism does not appear to have figured largely in how the Water Street stores promoted themselves or related to their employees, except perhaps in times of war, nor was denominationalism used to gain worker or customer loyalty. Although staff was hired on a denominational basis, this was to ensure a representative

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<sup>9</sup>Matthews, "Working For Family, Nation and God," 11-12.

<sup>10</sup>Matthews, "Working For Family, Nation and God," 2, 4, 11.

balance of the various churches in the stores, a system of accommodation practiced by government, business and other institutions to limit sectarian conflict.<sup>11</sup> Yet, there were important similarities in the treatment of workers in the Water Street stores and at Dupuis Frères with regard to the paternalistic and patriarchal attitudes of the owners which were typical of labour relations in the retail industry, particularly in department stores.

The history of paternalistic relations between store owners and workers on Water Street is a long one, its roots going back to the establishment of the city's earliest

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<sup>11</sup>Despite Nancy Forestell's suggestion that hiring in the Water Street stores was done on a denominational basis (i.e. Catholics hired Catholics, Anglicans hired Anglicans, etc.), this was not the case according to all those interviewed. In fact, none of the major Water Street stores were owned by Catholics although the Macphersons were mistakenly identified as Catholics in Forestell's thesis. Forestell, "Women's Paid Labour," 82-3

In one sense hiring was influenced by sectarianism but store owners actually sought to deal with the issue by hiring even numbers of Catholics and Protestants, one informant describing it as maintaining a "balance of power." Another informant explained that store owners could not afford to offend any denomination for, aside from the fact that many of the customers would have been Catholic, the stores often sought contracts with various religious institutions. The Royal Stores, for example, sold their woolen blankets to the Catholic-run St. Clare's Hospital and when the hospital opened in 1939, each of the stores ran ads congratulating the archbishop, clergy and congregation, some having provided materials for its construction. Several stores also advertised suits for clergymen "of all denominations" as well as a variety of religious books and other articles such as hymn books, prayer beads and crosses. Ayre & Sons ad, *The Daily News*, 23 March 1935; London, New York and Paris ad, *The Daily News*, 1 April 1935; Bowring Brothers ad, James Baird ad, Ayre & Sons ad, and The Royal Stores ad, *The Daily News*, 23 November 1939; Interviews with I.A., E.B., and M.M.

This policy likely contributed to the stores' public image, winning them the approval of customers. Kenneth Kerr also argued that some St. John's lawyers benefited from employing members of other denominations in their offices as in the case of James S. Winter, an Anglican, who trained E.P. Morris, a Catholic. The action probably contributed to Winter's election to the colonial government in a district with a large Catholic population. Kerr, "A Social Analysis of the Members," 368-9.

mercantile firms which hired British clerks as indentured servants. As young men and boys, they were transported to St. John's where they "lived in" with their employers while fulfilling the terms of their contracts and learning the shopkeeping trade.<sup>12</sup> After acquiring the necessary experience and capital, many went on to start their own businesses, often with the aid of their former employers. This was an old practice arising out of the apprenticeship of clerks in England, transported to the North American colonies with the establishment of mercantile communities. Many early St. John's businessmen got their start in this manner, maintaining the paternalistic principles learnt as apprentice clerks. The Bowrings, for example, were responsible for bringing both Charles Robert Ayre, who came from Exeter at only thirteen, and John Steer to Newfoundland in the mid-1800s, helping them open their own shop upon finishing their apprenticeships.<sup>13</sup>

An indenture contract from 1863 between Bowring Brothers and James Warren of

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<sup>12</sup>In most cases, the owners of the stores lived in apartments upstairs "while the bachelor clerks boarded on the premises." In a family history, R.B. Job describes how in the mid-1860s his antecedent, Thomas Bully Job, lived in apartments over Job's premises on Water Street where his wife "used to preside at meals and look after the firm's clerks and apprentices who boarded there." Devine, *Ye Olde St. John's*, 42; Job, *John Job's Family*, 47; Louise Whiteway, "Newfoundland in 1867," *Dalhousie Review*, 46(1), (Spring 1966) 48.

<sup>13</sup>Of Charles Robert Ayre and John Steer, who entered a partnership in 1856, the local informant for the R.G. Dun & Company credit agency wrote: "Both young men who lived with 'Bowring Bros.' believe that 'B. Bros.' first started them. But think they now have the bus[iness] under their own control ..." In 1858, Ayre and Steer dissolved the business to operate independently, the informant reporting in 1861 that Ayre's dry goods firm was not doing well and was probably dependent upon and supported by Bowring Brothers. R.G. Dun & Co., 49, 59; Devine, *Ye Olde St. John's*, 38; "Ayre's Completes 100 Years," *The Evening Telegram*, 3 January 1959; Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 126.

England, illustrates the paternalistic nature of the relationship between merchant and clerk. In signing the contract, Warren agreed not to "commit fornication, or matrimony" during the period of his apprenticeship, nor to play cards or dice, nor frequent alehouses, taverns or playhouses, nor "absent himself day or night from his master's [*sic*] service without their leave." For their part, Bowring Brothers agreed to instruct him in the trade of general assistant, to provide him with sufficient food and drink, and to pay him twenty pounds for his first year, twenty-five for his second, and thirty for his third and final year of apprenticeship.<sup>14</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, paternalism was the guiding principle behind labour relations within the Water Street stores as it was in most department stores. Yet, as Lancaster has argued, the form paternalism took in retail establishments was not static but was constantly being refined to suit the evolution of the trade. The problematic nature of the 'living-in' system in Britain (due largely to criticism following the deaths of some employees in fires) led to its demise and replacement by other, less obvious forms of worker control. In St. John's, it was more likely a case of the system becoming redundant as more clerks were hired locally and lived at home. Yet, as in Britain, paternalism persisted as the dominant feature of employer-employee relationships well into the twentieth century, with store owners continuing to treat workers as wards and assuming responsibility for their welfare. This attitude was clearly evident in the use of rewards

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<sup>14</sup>"People," *The Bowring Magazine*, (Summer 1961) 168.

such as bonuses, dinners, and outings as well as company-sponsored sports teams and choirs which replaced the living-in system.<sup>15</sup>

The growth of the stores and the addition of an expanding variety of merchandise in the latter part of the nineteenth century also necessitated the adaptation of traditional labour-management practices since store owners could no longer oversee all aspects of the business and so were forced to rely more on their employees.<sup>16</sup> McBride argues that "Because of the economic advantages of insuring a contented and disciplined work force, department store owners prolonged the paternalism of shopkeepers long after the size of the new enterprises had destroyed most aspects of the traditional relationship."<sup>17</sup> This, according to Miller, was the case at the Bon Marché where paternalism was an effective response to the expansion and increased bureaucratization of the department store's operations. At one time, the goal of most shop employees was to gain the experience and capital necessary to attain an independent living as owners of their own shops but, as the size of city stores grew in the nineteenth century, it became necessary for the owners to delegate authority to managers and department heads. Reaching management status through promotion, which depended as much upon one's loyalty as upon talent, was, by the end of the century, the way for most employees to achieve respectable middle-class

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<sup>15</sup>Lancaster. *The Department Store*, 129, 136, 142, 144.

<sup>16</sup>Lancaster. *The Department Store*, 137.

<sup>17</sup>McBride, "A woman's world," 672.

status. By combining traditional bourgeois values emphasizing the family with increased bureaucratization (sometimes referred to as the managerial revolution), the owners of the Bon Marché succeeded in getting employees to identify with the interests of the store. Paternalism was so ingrained in the operation of the store, that it continued even after the deaths of the Boucicauts and the assumption of managerial control.<sup>18</sup>

Although the Water Street stores were quite small in comparison to the Bon Marché (the employees of the former numbered in the hundreds, the latter in the thousands), the growing size and diversification of their operations necessitated a similar reorganization of their workforces. A chain of command developed over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, running from the messenger boys and deliverymen up through the clerks and salesladies, department heads, floorwalkers and managers to the owners. It became less common for former clerks to start their own businesses as had Charles Robert Ayre, John Steer, James Baird and George Knowling, and more common for them to spend their entire working lives with one firm, the fortunate ones retiring from management positions. As had the Boucicauts of the Bon Marché in Paris, St. John's department store owners began to meld paternalism with bureaucratization, achieving a relatively successful labour relations record, unmarred by strike action.

The decline of indentured servitude and the living-in system necessitated the

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<sup>18</sup>Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 83, 121, 128-9.



introduction of new methods to induce loyalty in store employees. While some paternalistic practices aimed at getting workers to identify with the firm and its success and encouraged loyalty with monetary rewards, others helped foster a feeling of family fealty in the stores. Perhaps the most important in this regard were company dinners and dances, often to celebrate family events such as birthdays, anniversaries and weddings.<sup>19</sup> Although it is unlikely that they attended the actual ceremonies, store employees were treated to their own festivities to celebrate the marriages of Charles Bowring in 1900, Florrie Ayre to George Knowling, Jr. in 1901, Philip Knowling in 1908, Eric Bowring in 1913, and Ronald Ayre in 1927. This typically involved heading by train to a retreat just outside the city where employees enjoyed a meal followed by music, dancing and games at company expense. Suitably appreciative, they expressed their gratitude with toasts and

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<sup>19</sup>A history of the Bowring family mentions an event held in 1883 to celebrate the birthday and wedding anniversary of Charles Trick Bowring, one of the original founders of Bowring Brothers, who "gave the clerks and captains a nice dinner at the Reform Club which the persons who were at it say was very enjoyable and cheerful without any excess." This quote illustrates the distinction made between their employees for no mention was made of the dock workers employed by Bowring's. Similarly, on the occasion of H. Bowring's wedding in 1895, the clerks, accountants and captains enjoyed an evening at Octagon Castle while the wharf hands were given cheese, crackers and liquor at work in the afternoon. *The Daily News* noted, "All this is being done at Mr. Bowring's expense, and reminds one of an aristocratic English wedding as described by some of the favorite authors of the day." Keir, *The Bowring Story*, 153; "Notes in brief," *The Daily News*, 9 September 1895.

Miller suggests that by distinguishing between the clerks and salesladies who were on salary and those who worked at an hourly or piece rate, such as locksmiths or catalogue sample cutters, the Boucicauts at the Bon Marché in Paris were able to encourage the bourgeois behaviour of the former, thus strengthening their identification with the firm and its middle-class owners. Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 110.

enthusiastic cheers for their respective firms and employers.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to these irregular celebrations, the press regularly reported dinners and dances held semi-annually by each of the firms at which owners did their best to make employees "feel at home and happy." During a supper for Ayre employees in 1904, at which each was given a souvenir programme bearing his or her name, F.W. Ayre expressed "the company's pleasure at thus meeting the employees" and demonstrated his familiarity with them by making "some amusing references to the employees ... which were much enjoyed."<sup>21</sup> Other Water Street firms followed suit. The Royal Stores holding an annual "At Home" at the British Hall where employees entertained one another with musical performances, danced and ate, the local press declaring, "Such gatherings ... where employer and employees meet together outside the work room ... [are] the best

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<sup>20</sup>"The Bowring Party at the Octagon." *The Daily News*, 12 July 1899; "Bowring Party at Octagon Castle." *The Daily News*, 27 June 1900; "Knowling-Ayre Outing." *The Daily News*, 21 June 1901; "Knowling Gathering at Smithville." *The Daily News*, 11 June 1908; "The Bowring Outing." *The Daily News*, 30 June 1913; "Ayre & Sons' Employees at Hotel Reception." *The Daily News*, 29 April 1927.

<sup>21</sup>"Ayre & Sons Dine the Employees." *The Daily News*, 5 January 1904.

Paternalism could only work as a method of worker control if the employer and his family were intimately acquainted with staff, thereby creating a familial atmosphere. Lancaster tells the story of the son of a department store-owning family who, as a young boy, would visit the store and later be quizzed by his father on the names of the workers he had met. In a 1945 letter to his parents, Derrick Bowring described the visit of his young son to the store during which he met with "his friends in the different departments." With great amusement, Bowring reported that "He positively orders the 'hands' around to do his bidding although he also assists in stocking the grocery shelves." Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 143; "Letter from Derrick Bowring to his parents," 23 November 1945, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

index of the good feeling existing between both parties."<sup>22</sup> In 1921, Ayre & Sons also began holding annual "reunions" for their workers. James Ayre expressing the hope that such events "would be a means of strengthening the bonds that existed between the firm and its employees."<sup>23</sup> Around the same time, Bowring Brothers, The Royal Stores, James Baird and George Knowling began holding their own annual reunions involving dinner, cards and dancing at various halls around the city.<sup>24</sup>

The importance of these events and the willingness of store owners to socialize with and include their employees in family celebrations cannot be underestimated in the process of establishing worker loyalty. The generous provision of meals and entertainments were essential to the development of a familial atmosphere in the stores as such events fostered familiarity and intimacy outside the workplace. This would continue well into the 1940s with, for example, an annual day trip to the Macpherson summer home in Beachy Cove so that The Royal Stores' employees could enjoy a brief respite from the city and work.<sup>25</sup> Receiving prominent coverage in city papers, such activities also provided evidence of the merchants' generosity, significantly boosting their public images.

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<sup>22</sup>"Royal Stores 'At Home,'" *The Daily News*, 23 February 1906.

<sup>23</sup>"Ayre & Sons Employees Hold Re-Union," *The Daily News*, 14 April 1921.

<sup>24</sup>"Employees Entertained," *The Daily News*, 13 February 1925; "Employees Re-Union," *The Daily News*, 20 February 1925; "Ayre & Sons' Annual Re-Union," *The Daily News*, 25 April 1925; "Annual Re-Union of Royal Stores Employees," *The Daily News*, 3 February 1926; "Baird's Employees Hold Re-Union," *The Daily News*, 24 April 1926.

<sup>25</sup>Interview with M.M.

Store employees also did their part to maintain the close relationship with employers by showing their appreciation with gifts to commemorate special occasions. To mark the diamond wedding anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. George Knowing in 1923, for example, Knowing's employees sent their congratulations as well as a "bouquet of carnations and a diamond ring for Mrs. Knowing, as a mark of esteem in which they [we]re both held by all those employed by the firm."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in 1927 the staff at Ayre's presented Mr. and Mrs. C.P. Ayre with an "elaborate and handsome gong" in honour of their nuptials and, at The Royal Stores, employees gave Campbell Macpherson a purse of gold on the eve of his marriage in 1929. Like weddings and birthdays, other special events were marked with gestures of affection from store employees. In 1932, when James Ayre won the Port de Grave seat for the United Newfoundland Party, Ayre's employees headed out to greet 'Mr. Jim' at the train station upon his victorious return to St. John's.<sup>27</sup> And in 1946, in honour of the Golden Jubilee of The Royal Stores, workers presented the firm's president, Harold Macpherson, with a desk set decorated with a caribou emblem in memory of the employees who had served in the two world wars, a lasting reminder of

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<sup>26</sup>"Employees Make Presentation to Hon. George and Mrs. Knowing Yesterday." *The Daily News*, 24 July 1923.

<sup>27</sup>Lancaster notes that it was "a common feature in virtually all family-owned stores ... to address the male members by their Christian names." "Employees' Gift To Mr. & Mrs. C.P. Ayre." *The Daily News*, 20 July 1927; "Royal Stores Staff Make Presentation to Mr. Macpherson." *The Daily News*, 24 December 1929; "Royal Stores Staff Honor Director As He Leaves to Wed." *The Daily News*, 14 May 1932; "Ayre Employees Acclaim 'Mr. Jim.'" *The Daily News*, 14 June 1932; Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 146.

their loyalty to store and country.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond the company dinners, outings and gifts, paternalism was also evident within the workplace. Bonuses were a popular tool of worker control in the Water Street stores for their size often depended upon the individual worker and company sales so that, through them, store owners could reward or penalize workers as they saw fit.<sup>29</sup> Despite this, workers gratefully received their bonuses, no matter how arbitrarily determined or unpredictable. Christmas bonuses were likely the most dependable expression of employers' appreciation, their distribution an important yearly event in the maintenance of the paternalistic relationship between store owners and workers. This was especially true at Bowring Brothers where the event took on a ceremonial aspect:

all the clerks and other employees joined the 'Procession' and entered the board room to be greeted by the directors and receive their Christmas bonuses. These were usually handed over by Fred Bowring, while Henry added a personal gift of a bright new half-sovereign to each member of the staff.<sup>30</sup>

In 1911, the rewards of a company dinner and bonus came together at a celebration of Bowring's centenary held at Octagon Castle during which chairman Sir Edgar Bowring announced that the employees would each receive an extra month's salary.

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<sup>28</sup>"Presentation Made to President Royal Stores." *The Daily News*, 14 March 1946.

<sup>29</sup>While fines were also used to control retail workers in other department stores, there is no evidence of their use in the Water Street stores. Reekie, "Humanizing Industry," 7.

<sup>30</sup>Considering that store employees were expected to work much longer hours during the busy Christmas season without extra pay, the bonus was arguably not a bonus at all but wages they were no doubt due. Keir, *The Bowring Story*, 208.

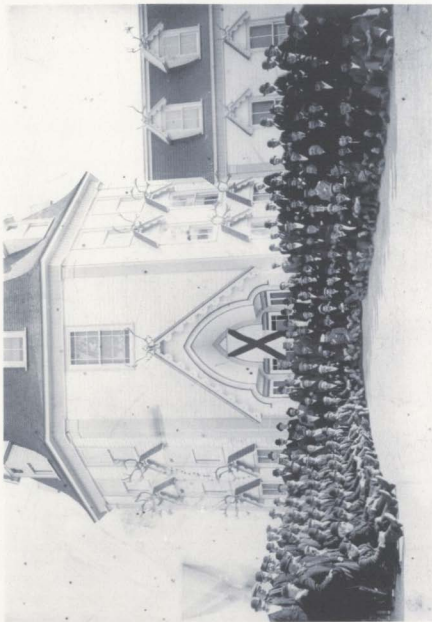
land would be donated to create a park for the city, and \$10,000 given annually for the next five years to various Newfoundland charities. (See Figure 6.1) *The Daily News* reported that "No firm in Newfoundland had advanced more, nor had any fulfilled [*sic*] the obligations to themselves, the public and employees" as had the firm of Bowring Brothers. Bowring's centennial celebrations represented the ultimate opportunity for publicity, boosting the company's labour and public relations simultaneously.<sup>31</sup> Even in death, employees were not forgotten by paternalistic employers for when Bowring died 34 years later, he bequeathed nearly \$30,000 to the permanent staff.<sup>32</sup>

Adopting Durkheim's argument that rituals are "the most forceful affirmation of those bonds that hold collectivities together," Miller has explored the nature of paternalism at the Bon Marché in Paris, suggesting that house ceremonies and celebrations strengthened the personal bonds between owner and worker. "At no moment was the

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<sup>31</sup>Octagon Castle, a wooden building so named because of its shape and located just outside St. John's on Octagon Pond, was opened in 1896 by Professor Danielle who had come to St. John's in the 1870s, presumably from France, as "a Costumier and Dancing Professor," becoming one of the city's more colourful and well-known characters. Described as a "pleasure resort," Octagon Castle was a popular site for such occasions. Devine, *Ye Olde St. John's*, 101-3; "The Centennial of Bowring Brothers, Limited," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 11(2), (October 1911) 20; "Bowring Centennial at Donovan's," *The Daily News*, 19 July 1911.

<sup>32</sup>Although Bowring's directors did not appear to begrudge the bequest, there was some quibbling as to which of the employees actually deserved it. Much concern was expressed regarding several employees who were not considered permanent and so were ineligible and some who were but whose work was considered substandard and therefore not worthy of reward. Wardle, *Benjamin Bowring*, 155; "Letter from Eric Bowring to E.R. Bowring," 14 April 1945, Bowring Brothers Ltd. Collection, MG 39, Box 8, File: Employees, Wages, Pensioners, etc. (PANL).



6.1: Bowring Brothers' Centennial, Octagon Castle, 1911  
Source: MHA, PF\_055.2-Z72

*grande famille* image so vividly projected, the collective spirit so intensely summoned, the cohesion of a store community so dramatically manifest," he argues, "as during the special rites of the House." He describes the summer picnics at the Boucicaut estate, the in-house Christmas parties, concerts by store employees, and staff gatherings to announce the Boucicaux' latest act of generosity such as the creation of a pension fund, as examples of the ritualistic affirmations of the bond between employer and employee.<sup>33</sup> As in the large Water Street stores, these rituals fostered feelings of fealty, creating a workforce whose first loyalty was to the firm.

Store owners also found ways to control employees in their free time, filling their recreational needs by organizing and sponsoring company teams on which they served as honorary captains. By 1897, most of the Water Street firms had rowing teams in the annual St. John's Regatta as well as hockey and football (soccer) teams in the Mercantile

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<sup>33</sup>Miller describes the funeral processions of Aristide and Marguerite Boucicaut, owners of the Bon Marché, in which their employees participated, pointing to this as evidence of the "fealty relationships" among those involved. Similarly, Water Street retail workers paid their respects to deceased employers in a variety of ways. In April 1908, The Royal Stores' clerks were among those to join the funeral procession of chairman, Campbell Macpherson. A month later, they presented his brother with a portrait of Macpherson, to be displayed in the company boardroom. Intending to present Macpherson's widow with a second portrait, the employees gave it to another brother after Mrs. Macpherson died prior to its completion. And when C.P. Ayre died in 1937, Ayre & Sons' employees were given a place of honour in the funeral procession, walking in front of the hearse, the family following behind. "Passing of Campbell Macpherson," *The Daily News*, 25 April 1908; "Interesting Event at Royal Stores," *The Daily News*, 23 May 1908; "Royal Stores Employees," *The Daily News*, 30 December 1910; "Funeral Obsequies Late Hon. C.P. Ayre," *The Daily News*, 17 December 1937; Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 121-7.



Hockey League and the Mercantile Alliance. When a store team won a race or tournament, they were typically photographed and rewarded with celebratory dinners, the employees ceremonially presenting their employers with the trophy. (See Figures 6.2 and 6.3) The results of games and races were prominently featured in the press which praised the Mercantile Alliance for its efforts in allowing employees to meet and socialize, thereby giving the stores extra publicity. But mercantile teams and sporting events served another purpose as well, fostering team spirit within the stores and encouraging players to identify with the firm for which they worked, at both work and play. Employees felt they were actually playing for the glory of their firms, that they were indeed "Bowring's boys." These company-sponsored activities cost little - only one dollar a week for four of The Royal Stores' employees to go bowling, for example - but went a long way towards establishing the "intensely" paternalistic system department store owners everywhere created because their concern for employee welfare "promised a loyal, hard-working labour force whose close identity with the company guaranteed first-class customer service ... the store's best advertisement."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Notes in brief." *The Daily News*, 7 April 1897 and 30 April 1897; "Ayre's Athletic Association." *The Daily News*, 21 April 1897; "Royal Athletic Club." *The Daily News*, 22 April 1899; "Bowring's A.A.." *The Daily News*, 14 May 1900; "Royal Athletic Association Dinner." *The Daily News*, 14 September 1905; "Sports Trophy Presented At Ayre and Sons." *The Daily News*, 14 July 1922; "125th Birthday of Bowring Bros. Ltd.." *The Daily News*, 2 July 1936; "Hockey Dinner Programme, 28 May 1925." Royal Stores Collection, MG 528 (PANL); "Bowring's Mercantile Crew in the 'Cadet' - Winners 1921 - Time: 10.23 2-5." *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 21(2), (October 1921) 22; "Mercantile Alliance." *The Daily News*, 15 September 1905; Interview with I.A.: Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 137; Matthews, "Working For Family, Nation and God." 41.

The practice of photographing employees, especially in the company of the owners, also contributed to the feeling of unity in the stores. As a kind of "family album" approach to labour relations, photographs capturing a wedding celebration at Octagon Castle or the winners of the Mercantile League trophy, served as permanent reminders of employers' generosity and company pride long after the event itself. Perhaps even more significant in this regard were the posed pictures of store staff and directors, the gathering together of workers and owners to obtain a photograph fostering a sense of importance and belonging. The owners of The Royal Stores were especially adept at the practice, with a variety of company pictures from the early decades of the twentieth century surviving in archival collections.<sup>35</sup> (See Figure 6.4) Most impressive among them, but too large to reproduce here, is a poster featuring pictures of the firm's business interests, each surrounded by individual portraits of the employees with larger portraits of the

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When Bowring teams won both the St. John's and Harbor Grace Regattas in 1949, Derrick Bowring wrote that "our crowd were tickled to death and next day we presented the girls with 6 pairs of nylons each and the men with an order for \$10 worth of goods.... it's all good advertising and adds to the team spirit of the whole firm." "Letter from Derrick Bowring to his parents," 9 August 1949, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA).

Benson also argues that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Britain's middle class viewed sport as one way "of distracting the working class" and "defus[ing] class tension." Many employers of large workforces sponsored sports teams for this reason, one such businessman declaring that "'no one had ever heard of a good sportsman rising among the Socialists or Bolshevists. Sport in itself is the best antidote to revolution and revolutionary ideas.'" Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society*, 222.

<sup>35</sup>Royal Stores Directors and Employees, ca. 1900, C3-3 (PANL); Royal Stores Directors and Employees, ca. 1924, C3-2 (PANL); Matthews, "Working For Family, Nation and God," 43.

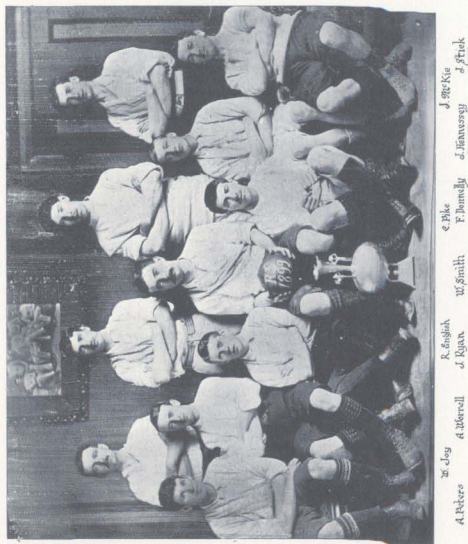


Figure 6.2: The Royal Stores Soccer Team, 1899  
 Source: PANL, B16-27



Figure 6.3: The Royal Stores Hockey Team, 1920  
Source: PANL, C4-4



Figure 6.4: Directors and Employees of The Royal Stores, 1900  
Source: PANL, C3-3

executive above, all connected by a ribbon running from one person to the next. The effect is that of a family tree headed by its patriarchs, each person clearly representing an important link in the chain, all integral parts of the whole.<sup>36</sup>

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the nature of company clubs began to change due to the changing composition of the retail workforce as more women were hired to work in the stores. Although the first women had been hired to work in a city dry goods store, Thomas & Company, in 1863, not until the turn of the twentieth century and after did their numbers increase significantly. As previously discussed, the number of women employed in the Water Street stores rose in this period due to the expansion of the retail trade in St. John's and to retailers' recognition of women's growing consuming role. As store staffs grew, a hierarchy developed so that, under the supervision of managers, department heads and floorwalkers, less experienced clerks and salesladies could be hired at lower pay.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>"Royal Stores Poster," ca.1920, C3-4 (PANL).

<sup>37</sup>By the late 1930s, women comprised anywhere from a fifth to nearly one half of the staffs in the large Water Street stores. The percentage of female employees in a store was determined in part by the firm's business interests as women totalled 33% and 37% respectively at Ayre & Sons and The Royal Stores, where the focus was on retailing and wholesaling, but just 22% at Bowring Brothers which was also involved in shipping as well as the seal and cod fisheries. "List of Firms and Number of Employees," ca. 1938, Walter Sparks Papers, COLL-049, Box 1, File 1 (CNSA).

The feminization of the retail workforce was typical of most department stores. With regard to French department stores like the Bon Marché, McBride suggests that the rising employment of women was the result of "the evolution of commercial and industrial organization," creating a demand for workers. Since selling in the department store also required "less skill and responsibility from the salesperson, the owner could hire cheaper,

In the early 1900s, there were no female sports teams as the women who worked in the stores were "considered ladies." Salesladies were, however, encouraged to attend events in which their male co-workers competed in order to support the store team.<sup>38</sup> Although sports teams for male employees remained popular in the stores, these were supplemented by choral groups and dance clubs, activities considered suitable for female employees. In January 1905, the first annual dance of The Royal Stores Club was attended by 70 couples, among them members of the company's executive.<sup>39</sup> In 1906, the *Trade Review* reported another first, a concert held by the employees of a store:

Within the last few years some of the larger business places in the city have [had] their football and cricket teams, but as far as I know, this season sees the first public concert by the members of one firm. The Royal Stores have led the way, and their concert in the Methodist College Hall on Monday evening last, was an undoubted success. The audience was large despite the attractions in the other halls of the city, and those present enjoyed themselves.... Concerts of this kind lead to good-fellowship and the esprit

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less skilled labor" which, for the most part, meant women. At Dupuis Frères in Montreal, Matthews has also argued that patriarchal attitudes about the domestic and subordinate role of women in society were used to justify their lower wages and positions in the store because women were not seen as breadwinners with families to support and because it was assumed that upon marriage, they would leave their jobs. This was also true of the Water Street stores where women were paid significantly lower wages than men and where the vast majority left their jobs upon marriage because it was expected and because there was little incentive to stay. In general, only women who did not marry obtained positions in management, usually as buyers or as heads of women's departments. McBride, "Ni Bourgeois, Ni Proletaires," 237; Matthews, "Working For Family, Nation and God," 11, 79; Interviews with I.A., S.B., R.C., and M.M.

<sup>38</sup>Interview with G.W.

<sup>39</sup>"First Annual Dance of The Royal Stores Club," *The Daily News*, 2 February 1905.

de corps of the store.<sup>40</sup>

As the range of acceptable female activities broadened, however, women became involved in more of the company-sponsored sports events and, by the 1930s, were permitted to bowl in the commercial league (created in 1922) and to row in the Regatta. The Royal Stores also instituted a beauty pageant for its female employees in this decade, the winners being photographed in clothing made by The Royal Stores Woolen Mills. (See Figure 6.5) These clubs and societies were organized as much for employee enjoyment as for the positive publicity attending such events and reflect the changing nature of the retail workforce, not only in St. John's but in all major western cities, as paternalistic department store owners adjusted their methods to combat negative publicity and to suit female employees.<sup>41</sup>

Paternalism was not just about dinners and company sports teams, however, but

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<sup>40</sup>The evening must truly have been a success as in 1907, The Royal Stores Choral Society held its first meeting to elect officers, their inaugural concert scheduled for the following week. It appears that some stores also had their own orchestras to provide music for their socials. "The Man in the Mart." *Trade Review*, 28 April 1906; "Royal Stores Choral Society." *The Daily News*, 10 January 1907; "Knowing's Barn Dance." *The Daily News*, 1 May 1925.

<sup>41</sup>In many ways, the St. John's stores were simply following developments in the paternalistic practices of their European counterparts, as similar employee groups had previously been organized by such well-known department store owners as Aristide Boucicaut in Paris and William Whiteley in London. Interview with G.W.: "Bowling League Organized." *The Daily News*, 4 November 1922; "Lady Employees In Bowling Game." *The Daily News*, 11 April 1935; McBride, "A woman's world," 677; Reekie, "Humanizing Industry," 16-7; Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 136; Matthews, "Working For Family, Nation and God," 41.





Figure 6.5: Miss Riverside 1934 (right) and Miss Riverside 1935  
Source: *Newfoundland Quarterly*, December 1935, p. 30.

entailed a responsibility for employee welfare, especially during economic downturns, fairly common occurrences in Newfoundland due to the unpredictable nature of its primary industry, the fishery. The Bank Crash of 1894, resulting in wage cuts, lay-offs and high unemployment, provides one example as, instead of laying off workers, some firms arranged schedules so that half their staff worked one week, and the remainder worked the next. This enabled their employees to maintain jobs during a time of rampant unemployment yet still allowed the stores to halve their expenditure on wages.<sup>42</sup> Bowring Brothers solved the problem of paying wages despite the severe devaluation of local bank notes by printing their own wage notes in differing denominations, negotiable in their stores.<sup>43</sup> Employer efforts to ease the financial suffering of employees in such times cemented the close relationship between them and seemed to justify worker loyalty.

Although such actions on the part of store owners might appear selfless, paternalism brought its own reward in the form of worker loyalty, appreciation and hard work. In a letter written to his son Charles, C.T. Bowring advised him that the firm must have certain standards for their ships as "you cannot carry fish in a slow craft and you will never get a crew worth having to go in a vessel which is very uncomfortable."<sup>44</sup> The statement expresses Bowring's attitude - both the man and the company - towards workers

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<sup>42</sup>Hickey. "The Immediate Impact of the 1894 Bank Crash." 24-5.

<sup>43</sup>Wardle. *Benjamin Bowring*. 128.

<sup>44</sup>Keir. *The Bowring Story*. 154.

and business: both were inextricably linked in that it was good business to keep crews content.

The same held true for store employees. In 1899, following an especially busy and profitable evening for Ayre's, a *Daily News* reporter noted that "Much of the success of this prominent firm is due to their excellent staff of hands who are courteous and obliging, which means a great deal to any business concern."<sup>45</sup> Good customer service, especially in the days before the introduction of self-service, was central to retail success, so much so that some *Trade Review* articles cautioned store owners against leaving all the socializing with customers to their clerks for a popular clerk could take a firm's patrons with him if he opened his own business or joined another firm.<sup>46</sup> Many customers had favourite clerks or salesladies for whom they felt an affinity and even affection after years of regular visits to the stores.<sup>47</sup> Paternalism, therefore, contributed to good customer service as it

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<sup>45</sup>"Notes in brief." *The Daily News*, 8 May 1899.

<sup>46</sup>"Importance of Sociability." *Trade Review*, 5 May 1900.

In 1907 the *Trade Review* reported that Edward Landry, who had worked at both Jackman the Tailor and The Royal Stores, was now employed at the U.S. Picture & Portrait Co., observing, "He is a very popular salesman and should induce a good trade." The expectation that a good clerk could bring customers to a new store provides evidence that many patrons felt more loyalty to a favoured clerk than to the owner. This would also explain the numerous articles appearing in the journal warning store owners of the peril of relying too heavily on their clerks to befriend their clientele. A popular clerk could also lead to other problems such as a back up of customers waiting to be served by their favourite salesman. "Reflection of an 'Old Hand,'" *Trade Review*, 16 June 1906; "Amongst Business People &c.," *Trade Review*, 28 September 1907.

<sup>47</sup>Interviews with S.B., M.M., and E.P.

encouraged clerks and salesladies to identify with their middle-class employers which in turn helped them relate to their middle-class customers. Lancaster argues that it was "this ethos of respectability that formed the common ground between the worker and the employer" as well as between staff and customers.<sup>48</sup>

To foster such relationships with customers, there were certain codes of behaviour and dress expected of retail workers which emphasized their respectability, distinguishing them from factory workers, longshoremen and domestics. As one former office worker at The Royal Stores recalled, salesladies, who always wore black dresses, were "different." "they were very lady-like in their way." As for the store clerks, they, too, had a dress code and were expected to wear a shirt, tie and jacket every day, clothing such as dungarees being "strictly for the poorer classes."<sup>49</sup> Along with manners and clothing, their origins set them apart, for most appear to have been the children of either shopkeepers, independent

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<sup>48</sup>Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 140-1.

McBride suggests that department store workers were "socialized to regard the interests of the firm as their own" and to "internalize" the commercial motivations of their employers. McBride, "Ni Bourgeoises, Ni Proletaires," 242.

<sup>49</sup>Interviews with I.A. and E.B.

In a letter to the editor of *The Daily News* in 1902, a clerk responded to charges that women were extravagant spenders by complaining that the city's men were also expected to dress well and to wear jewellery, he himself having spent \$300 in the past year trying to keep pace. Miller also writes that clerks at the Bon Marché were "expected to be well dressed for work, and all had middle-class pretensions, so that even the frugal employee was obliged to spend a fair percentage of his salary on his attire." Letter to the editor, *The Daily News*, 26 February 1902; Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 93.

tradesmen or other store employees.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, however, their somewhat ambiguous social position allowed retail workers to relate to the stores' working-class customers, enabling store owners to gain the trust of consumers who likely shared the historical mistrust of merchants in Newfoundland.

In addition to store rules regarding behaviour and dress, owners attempted to mould their employees in other ways. In the early 1900s, a series of articles under the byline, "Clerks' Corner," appeared in the *Trade Review*, likely written by a store owner or manager. These offered advice on a variety of topics, such as one which advocated a good work ethic, warning clerks that Newfoundland men were 'spurters' (working hard one day and slacking off the next) and that they must fight this tendency, especially those from the outports. Another advised clerks on choosing a wife, emphasizing domestic skills and downplaying the importance of appearance. They were also warned against emigrating to the U.S., being told they were better off at home where rent was lower enabling them to marry sooner. Although there were also articles on customer service and opening one's own business, these were less intrusive, restricting their advice to the workplace and not attempting to control the personal lives of clerks.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>McBride argues that in the French department store, most employees were also the children of artisans or shopkeepers and so retail work was not really a means of social mobility as they were already members of the lower middle class. McBride, "Ni Bourgeois, Ni Proletaires," 239; Forestell, "Women's Paid Labour," 76; Interviews with I.A., E.B., S.B., M.M., D.W., and G.W.

<sup>51</sup>"Clerks' Corner," *Trade Review*, 16 August 1902, 30 August 1902, 27 September 1902, 31 January 1903, 18 April 1903, 26 September 1903, and 6 August 1904.

Although a definitive connection between paternalism and the apparent absence of militancy in retail workers cannot be drawn, it certainly offers a convincing explanation for the relatively harmonious record of labour relations in the Water Street stores. This, at least, was the conclusion drawn in the press and by social commentators. In response to rumours of an anticipated strike by clerks in the early 1900s, letters appeared in local papers both in defence of the clerks' position and denying the legitimacy of their grievances. The author of "Clerks' Corner" suggested that employees of particular stores had valid complaints as they worked under the old style of management whereby owners kept a distrustful watch over workers, likening this kind of "barrier between employer and employee" to the "black and unclimbable fence of the penitentiary." He distinguished this "most damning fossilized incubus on the life of a successful business ... the black-browed boss, who entrenches himself behind a pile of flannelette to watch the clerks" from the up-to-date proprietors who took a personal interest in their employees, regularly consulting them on business:

I know two stores in this town, my son, in which a mutual tho unwritten, understanding has been arrived at, by which every hand feels his master's interest is his interest, and the proprietor takes as much interest in his hands as if they were members of his own family.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>The author is unknown although he wrote under the name Wynn C. Brown, likely a pseudonym. He continued to write "Clerks' Corner" for several years, his salutation, "paternally yours," suggesting a store owner or possibly a manager. Letters to the editor, *Trade Review*, 21 and 28 September 1901; "Clerks' Corner," *Trade Review*, 26 July 1902.

A few months later, a *Newfoundland Quarterly* article entitled "Our Local Strikes." expressed a similar sentiment regarding the benefits and responsibilities of paternalism:

As a people we are much more acquainted with our employers than are the employe[e]s of larger cities; and there has always existed a spirit of entire satisfaction between both parties. This feeling is very desirable, yea! Almost a necessity between labour and capital everywhere; but essentially so with us ... It may be all right to seek for reform, and to advocate the people's rights; and it is perhaps quite time for some steps to be taken in this direction; but at the same time it is well to bear in mind the fact, that capital has its rights as well as labour.<sup>53</sup>

Going on to bemoan the sacrifice of good relations between employer and employee on "the altar of socialistic ideas," the author argued, "there must be confidence in our businessmen" who bear unimaginable burdens. Businessmen were to be protected, he added, as only this would mutually benefit worker and owner. Strikes, on the other hand, served only to defeat the "greater good and thereby frustrate our common interests." While reform might be needed, strikes were unequivocally rejected as unnecessary and destructive because when it was "right and honourable," employers had proved willing to institute change.<sup>54</sup> Clearly, the general response of city businessmen to the threat of worker organization and collective action was to play upon the need for intimacy and

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<sup>53</sup>Isaac Morris, the author, owned a sail-making business and was involved in city politics. He often wrote political and social commentaries for the local press. In this article, Morris referred only to strikes by sealers and miners on Bell Island specifically. Isaac Morris, "Our Local Strikes," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 2(2), (September 1902) 21; Cuff, Baker and Pitts, eds., *Dictionary of Newfoundland and Labrador Biography*, 235.

<sup>54</sup>Morris, "Our Local Strikes," 21.

understanding between employer and employee, a reaffirmation of the paternalistic principles upon which labour relations in the Water Street stores were founded.

In consequence, attempts to organize retail workers generally met with little success, an outcome not unusual for the occupation. A number of explanations have been advanced for the failure of retail unions in Newfoundland and elsewhere, among them high employee turnover rates and the limited skills required for the work, making the replacement of recalcitrant employees easy. There is also the status of shop employment to consider. Although they often earned little more than their factory counterparts, retail workers were considered to be members of the middle class, even if the *lower* middle class. Consequently, retail positions were sought after, meaning labour shortages were rare.<sup>55</sup>

This is not to suggest that retail employees did not voice their share of complaints about wages and working conditions as letters appeared frequently in the press lamenting the long hours shop clerks and salesladies were made to work. As early as 1865, there had been an Early Closing Association in St. John's although it apparently accomplished little as the issue was still being debated in 1893 when the *Trade Review* declared:

[The public] only wants to be educated to the fact that the habit into which it had fallen is burdensome to the merchant, to his clerk, and to his family, and the millennium of early closing will have arrived. The merchant who

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<sup>55</sup>In 1905, the *Trade Review* reported that many young men were choosing commercial work over other trades, that "having got a little education they [we]re above soiling their hands in order to become mechanics." "The Man in the Mart," *Trade Review*, 6 May 1905; Hattenhauer, "A Brief Labour History of Newfoundland," 114-6.



then keeps his store open till late at night will do so because he loveth slavery better than freedom or long hours better than short.<sup>56</sup>

That year, the journal received a number of letters from clerks complaining that the stores were being kept open beyond "the hours prescribed by rule as laid down by the Importers' Association last spring." The Importers' Association, composed of the city's leading retailers and wholesalers, had been created to deal primarily with the troublesome issues of hours and holidays and each year set guidelines for its members to follow. The journal's proffered solution for the problem of businessmen who failed to abide by the rules was for the Importers' Association and the United Assistants to confer on the matter, arguing that "The greater part of the importers are gentlemen who will keep their word."<sup>57</sup>

The issue of early closing remained a frequent theme of letters and editorials in local papers, the *Trade Review* editor regularly rebuking store owners for their failure to reach an agreement and complaining that there was "a conspicuous lack of esprit de corps between St. John's retailers." The refusal of smaller dry goods and grocery stores to comply, claiming that the demand for early closing was simply a ploy on the part of the large Water Street stores to put them out of business, hindered the Importers' Association's attempts to create guidelines for hours of operation. Since shops on the city's upper streets remained open past the hours prescribed by the Association, so, too,

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<sup>56</sup>"Long Hours in Stores," *Trade Review*, 22 April 1893; Whiteway, "Newfoundland in 1867," 48-9.

<sup>57</sup>"Sanctumettes," *Trade Review*, 21 October 1893; "Minutebook," Importers' Association of St. John's, MG 634, Box 1 (PANL).

did many of their competitors on Water Street. As the *Trade Review* editor declared with no small measure of sarcasm in 1903:

The whole trouble seems to lie in the existence of the second and third street stores, which constitute such a bug-bear to some Water-street houses. Every bullseye and apple shop on the upper streets becomes a menace in the eyes of certain super-sensitive Water-street proprietors, and they will never consent to close their stores at six o'clock hours [*sic*] til the last 7x9 spruce beer shop takes its lighted kerosene lamp out of the window.<sup>58</sup>

Their inability to reach a consensus on early closing kept the issue in the press, leading the *Trade Review* editor to remark that "Only a mixture of stubbornness and covetousness would keep stores open night after night ..."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Lancaster, McBride and Reekie noted similar rivalries in Britain, France and Australia between department stores and small traders over hours. According to McBride, "... the chief opponents of reform were those who were concerned about the autonomy and survival of small shops that remained open longest in order to compete with the department stores." Lancaster, however, found that the small shops were located in the suburbs and catered to working-class clientele and so their longer hours were not a major threat to the large stores. He concludes, therefore, that department store support for the early closing movement was "mainly for public relations purposes." Reekie agrees, suggesting it was also a way of safeguarding "their own economic position by forcing their competitors to conform to standard trading hours as much as to improve the working conditions of retail employees." "Sanctumettes," *Trade Review*, 10 October 1903; McBride, "A woman's world," 674; Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 133; Reekie, "Humanizing Industry," 9.

<sup>59</sup>In general, it was self-interest that motivated department store owners support for early closing as their apparent concern for employee welfare was good for their public image and, more importantly, staying open late was a drain on profits due to the extra overhead costs it entailed. An 1899 letter in *The Daily News* aptly summed up the arguments in favour of early closing, suggesting that all business could be conducted during the day "... such is the case in nearly all the large business concerns in both hemispheres, and the people of this colony should be no exception to the rule, our business men would effect a great saving in gas and electric light, there would be just as

In spite of complaints and public support, little progress was made towards early closing. Store employees worked as much as ten hours a day during the week and thirteen hours on Saturday during the peak season from September to December. This did not include time spent cleaning and stocking shelves after the stores had closed their doors to customers. Leading up to Christmas, the stores were open until at least ten every night, although employees were not paid for the extra hours worked, and during the busiest periods they often worked a full day without a break. Following Christmas, extra and sometimes even permanent staff would receive layoff notices as trade fell off during January and February. Business would then pick up again until July and August at which time employees were encouraged to take their unpaid vacations to avoid more layoffs. Even vacation time was not completely their own, however, as store employees were expected to rest up for their return to the shops, one shop clerk, found painting his house while on holiday, being chastised by his employer.<sup>60</sup>

Wages were also a source of employee grievance since retail workers, despite the

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much business transacted, and no necessity for keeping clerks on their pins for fifteen or sixteen hours, when the same volume of trade would be done in half that time." Similarly, a 1903 *Trade Review* editorial dryly observed: "As a whole, we are a conservative people, but our business people are not so blind to their own interest as to burn gas for three months of the year, in order to see their clerks stand behind the counter, with never a customer to disturb the serenity of their souls, and with not enough work for them to take their top-knots out of curl." Letter to the editor, *The Daily News*, 12 June 1899; "Sanctumettes," *Trade Review*, 19 September 1903, 8 and 15 October 1910.

<sup>60</sup>Forestell, "Women's Paid Labour," 108-9, 111; Letter to the editor, *The Daily News*, 20 December 1910; Interviews with I.A. and M.A.

respectability of their positions, were paid little better than factory workers. In 1925, the average wage for saleswomen was \$5.00 per week and by 1935, only \$277.00 a year. In comparison, female factory workers in the 1920s earned anywhere from \$2.50 to \$7.00 per week depending on whether they were paid an hourly or piece rate. One female office worker at The Royal Stores during the 1930s later described the pay she received as little more than pocket money.<sup>91</sup> Clearly, salesladies were not much better off than their counterparts in the city's factories, despite the respectability that shop work lent them.<sup>92</sup>

Hours and wages were, therefore, the most common complaints voiced by the

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<sup>91</sup>Female employees earned far less than their male counterparts, one saleslady complaining to the editor of the *Trade Review* in 1901 that clerks were paid four times as much as salesladies for what she considered to be similar work. Presumably, the discriminatory policy of employers was justified by the assumption that women worked for "pin money" and were not expected to support families on their wages. Letter to the editor, *Trade Review*, 28 September 1901; Forestell, "Women's Paid Labour," 108-9, 111; Interview with I.A.

Although men earned higher wages, they were still considered insufficient to support a family. In the late 1930s, general clerks in The Royal Stores earned between \$7 and \$8 a week while clerks after ten years of service earned just \$13 a week. By 1940, wages had risen little despite a contract settlement with employers. That year, a trade dispute board, set up under the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act of 1940, determined the cost of living per month for a family of five was \$32.00 but found that the minimum wage per month for retail workers was just \$18.00, clerks only earning \$30.00 after nineteen years of service. "Evidence Taken from Martin Hardware, Royal Stores, Steele's Crockery, Jas. Baird, Ltd., Bowring Bros., Ltd.," Walter Sparks Papers, COLL- 049, Box 1, File 1 (CN5A); Newfoundland, *Settlement of a Trade Dispute: Newfoundland Protective Association of Shop and Office Employees in the Whole and Retail Trade at St. John's* (St. John's, NF: Robinson and Company, 1942) 11.

<sup>92</sup>Lancaster found that some women in Britain accepted lower wages at stores with greater prestige, suggesting that the respectability of retail work was as important as the pay. Forestell, "Women's Paid Labour," 80, 87-8, 111-2; Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 141-2; McBride, "Ni Bourgeois, Ni Proletaires," 241.

city's retail workers and, although they never struck, numerous attempts were made to organize, usually with limited and short-term success. As early as 1868 there was a United Assistants' Association in St. John's which was formed and disbanded several times over the following decades. This was typical of such organizations, a 1903 *Trade Review* article claiming that, although useful in the fight for early closing, they were hindered by "petty jealousies" among the clerks. But in 1907, upon the formation of a Shop Assistants' Association, the journal suggested past attempts had failed because department heads, who did not want to jeopardize their positions by demanding concessions from employers, had been made union officers. This particular association, however, reportedly had the support of employers because they, too, wanted shorter hours. It also had Sir E.P. Morris, a local lawyer and politician, as a member of the committee chosen to write a constitution, "promis[ing] to help [the association] along in any and every way possible that would safeguard the employer and employee."<sup>63</sup> As with its predecessors, the organization proved short-lived, the *Trade Review* commenting in 1909 that "For some reason or other the clerks never seem to be able to hang together in this city. As far back as thirty years ago there was a Clerks' Association in St. John's, but it died of dry rot in a

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<sup>63</sup>Although gaining most of his political support from working-class voters in his district, it is surprising that such a prominent figure in local government (Morris became prime minister two years later) would take a keen interest in the formation of a clerks' association and is no doubt an indication of the conservatism of such organizations. "Clerks' Associations," *Trade Review*, 3 January 1903; "Shop Assistants' Association," *The Daily News*, 10 October 1907; "Sanctumettes," *Trade Review*, 12 October 1907; Cuff, Baker, and Pitts, eds., *Dictionary of Newfoundland and Labrador Biography*, 233.

few months, and subsequent attempts to revive it were all unsuccessful.<sup>64</sup> Clearly, these were far from militant labour organizations. Management's participation and evidence of employer support also raise questions about the impetus for their formation.

The story was very different, however, when store employees organized in response to real grievances over wages during World War I. Calling for higher wages to combat the rising cost of living due to inflation, a 1917 letter to *The Daily News* reminded store owners of the integral role of the clerk in their business success:

The most essential wheel of the whole commercial machinery is the clerk. He it is who makes or damns a business. If he is courteous, capable and honest, he is the most potent factor in amassing wealth for his employer. The services of good clerks cannot be overestimated ...

The year closing has been one of unusual prosperity.... the merchants' coffers have been filled to overflowing, but it must be borne in mind that the clerk is the channel through which all this wealth had flown; he has been, and is, and shall always remain, the manipulator and the principal in gathering in profits. Is the time not ripe, Mr. Merchant, I ask you, when your loyal and faithful clerks should receive the reward they are

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<sup>64</sup>"Sanctumettes." *Trade Review*, 21 August 1909; "Clerks' Meeting," *The Daily News*, 23 March 1909; Hattenhauer, "A Brief Labour History of Newfoundland," 114-6.

Retail workers may have found other ways of expressing their resentment towards their employers. Incidents of employee theft are impossible to quantify as some store owners preferred to fire offenders rather than prosecute but there are a number of press reports of store theft by insiders during the period of study although it is also difficult to speculate on the motivation behind them. Stealing, however, would certainly seem to indicate a breach of the loyalty paternalistic employers expected from their employees. "Theft At Royal Stores," *The Daily News*, 19 November 1901; "Police Doings," *The Daily News*, 21 November 1901; "Clerk Suspended," *The Daily News*, 11 January 1907; "Big Theft Committed," *The Daily News*, 25 January 1915; "Trusted Employee Arrested For Theft," *The Daily News*, 27 January 1915; "Another Girl Arrested," *The Daily News*, 10 February 1915; "Charged With Theft," *The Daily News*, 28 March 1916; Interview with E.B.: Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 135-6.

mostly entitled to?<sup>65</sup>

A subsequent letter suggested clerk delegates meet with employers to discuss the issue but the dispute was not resolved and in 1919 a call went out for shop and office workers to create another association: "All other workers are organized: it is up to the Clerks to stand together or go to the wall." Their aim was to obtain a "living wage" through negotiations, with leaders assuring members there was no intention to strike. The association was not open to floor-walkers or "officials of the concerns," suggesting organizers were well aware of problems experienced by earlier unions and were serious about getting employers to the bargaining table.<sup>66</sup> Yet, no subsequent mention was made in the press of the Clerks' Association and, just over a year later, it was announced that the Importers' Association was planning to meet with employees to get an agreement on wages or some firms might have to cut their staffs. This forced workers to choose between pay cuts or lay offs and suggests the Clerks' Association had failed in their quest for a "living wage."<sup>67</sup>

Were employers behind previous attempts to form clerks' associations, with the intention of forcing competitors to accept early closing? The participation of department heads in the associations and the quickly waning interest of their members supports this

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<sup>65</sup>Letter to the editor, *The Daily News*, 11 December 1917.

<sup>66</sup>Letter to the editor, *The Daily News*, 13 December 1917; "Notice to Clerks," *The Daily News*, 21 June 1919; "Clerks Will Form Organization," *The Daily News*, 27 June 1919.

<sup>67</sup>"Laying Off Employees," *The Daily News*, 15 December 1920.

conclusion, one also reached by members of government during the debate over early closing in the early 1930s. In 1930, a bill to legislate hours of operation for the stores was introduced in the House of Assembly but was quickly defeated, largely due to the concerns of small shopkeepers and outport members who feared the bill might be extended to encompass the whole island and not just St. John's. The following year, a petition signed by 1200 store employees was presented to the House, urging members to take action on the matter. Subsequently, "An Act for the Closing of Shops Within the Electoral Districts of St. John's East and West" was introduced, yet was again defeated for the same reasons that the proposed 1930 bill and earlier attempts by the Importers' Association had failed to resolve the issue of hours.<sup>88</sup> Some MHAs claimed that the bill was an attempt by Water Street to put their competitors out of business, the Minister of Finance and Liberal member for Ferryland, Peter Cashin, declaring the act was not, in fact, in the interest of retail workers but that "the clerks on Water Street [were] being used by the merchants" and calling it an example of class legislation meant to benefit the merchants to the detriment of the poorer classes.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup>It was estimated that a Shop Closing Act would affect 1500 to 3000 shop workers and 250 small store owners in the St. John's area. "Letter from R. Gushue to Sir Richard Squires," 25 March 1931, Secretary of Commission, Commission of Government, GN 38 (PANL); Forestell, "Women's Paid Labour," 109-10; "Letter from the President of the Board of Trade to Hon. A. Barnes, Colonial Secretary," 21 May 1930, Newfoundland Board of Trade, MG 73, Box 22, File 2 (PANL).

<sup>89</sup>Newfoundland, *Proceedings of the Newfoundland House of Assembly, 1930* (St. John's, NF: King's Printer, 1930) 69-71; Newfoundland, *Proceedings of the Newfoundland House of Assembly, 1931* (St. John's, NF: Manning & Rabbitts, Printers,



During the debate over the Shop Closing Act, some MHAs suggested that retail workers should organize and take the matter up with their employers, even striking if necessary. Yet, others claimed it was a "well-known fact that it had been found impossible to unite in this country ...." the Minister of Finance, not favourably disposed towards St. John's merchants, arguing that the "Water Street Czars" would not tolerate such action by their employees. The Minister of Fisheries, Clyde Lake, representing Burin West, concurred, suggesting that the clerks "ought to be very careful, otherwise they [were] bound to be penalized."<sup>70</sup> The debate suggests that Water Street merchants had no objection to clerks' associations as long as their aims were mutual but would not accept employee organizations with goals counter to their own interests.

Finally, in 1936, the Commission of Government acted on behalf of the shop workers after receiving a letter from the clerks of St. John's which stated: "After waiting two years, we have seen the Commission tackling every kind of an Act, even one for dogs, we ask you with patience exasperated and exhausted when are you going to legislate an act for the long houred, poor unpaid slaves called clerks in this town." Despite the tone of the letter, the Clerks' Association had the backing of the Importers' Association in approaching the commissioners, leading critics to again call it a "Water Street act." Still, some retail workers wondered what the act might mean for labour relations within the

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1931) 501-6, 518.

<sup>70</sup>*Proceedings of the House of Assembly, 1931, 523-9.*

stores, fears one employee expressed in a letter to *The Daily News*:

As an employee on Water Street for about thirty years, I contend that in the main, employers study the welfare of their assistants; pay them full-time during illness; grant them additional holidays without any deductions in salaries, pay bonuses whenever business conditions warrant; respect and appreciate faithful service, and show their appreciation by many kindly acts of consideration....

If the act were to pass, the author argued, "the city business concerns will cease to entertain even a modicum of sentiments towards their employees, and the present happy condition of affairs will be no more."<sup>71</sup> The person clearly believed that regulation and legislation were incompatible with paternalism and would therefore lead to the loss of paternalistic privileges. This was indeed what would happen but many of the benefits enjoyed under paternalistic employers would be replaced by a more formal arrangement with the introduction of welfarism, its purpose still being to gain worker loyalty and good publicity.<sup>72</sup>

The "Act to Regulate the Closing Hours of Shops"<sup>73</sup> offered some measure of

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<sup>71</sup>Letter to the editor, *The Daily News*, 13 May 1936.

<sup>72</sup>Reekie, "Humanizing Labour," 1-19.

<sup>73</sup>The Act stated that all shops were to close from 7:30 p.m. to 8:30 a.m., closing 12:30 p.m. on Wednesdays, and remaining open one night a week until 9:30, except during the Christmas season when the stores could remain open every night until 9:30 excluding Sundays. It also stipulated that female employees and those under eighteen could work no more than eight hours a day, no employee working more than fifty-four hours a week. Furthermore, employees were not to work more than five consecutive hours without a break and female shop assistants were to be given seats. Newfoundland, *Acts of the Honourable Commission of Government of Newfoundland, 1936* (St. John's, NF: King's Printer, 1936) 21-5.

protection for retail workers but there was still the issue of wages outstanding. While it had been in the interest of store owners to support the clerks and salesladies in their demand for shorter hours, the failure of the 1919 association to gain a wage increase in the face of a unified Importers' Association had demonstrated the limits of employers' paternalism. More militant organizations were hindered by the threat of worker replacement, well-entrenched worker loyalty, and a reluctance to strike. By the late 1930s, however, the hardships endured during the Depression would alter this pattern as paternalism's promises were broken by wage cuts and lay-offs.

Because so many relied upon waged work in St. John's, it has long been argued that city residents were among those most affected by the Depression and, with consumer spending severely reduced as a result, retail workers were one of the groups feeling its impact. In September 1932, Bowring Brothers laid off a fifth of their employees and in January of the following year, George Knowling, Ltd., went out of business, throwing its entire staff out of work. Those fortunate enough to still have jobs faced wage reductions, the total paid in salaries by The Royal Stores in 1933 being little more than half that paid in 1929, the year when the store's salary expenditure had reached its peak. After 1934, salaries began to rise once more but the 1939 total was still only 3/4 of the 1929 figure. Wages also fell at Bowring's, not rising again until 1934 when Edgar Bowring authorized the company to "restore ... 50% of the salary cuts found necessary since the slump." Sales had risen by 24 per cent in 1933 and the "raise" was to be a reward to the employees who had remained "loyal to the core and proud of the old concern they [were] working for."

Despite such signs of economic revival, the 1934 to 1936 Annual Reports of the Newfoundland Board of Trade described only minor improvements in the retail and wholesale trades.<sup>74</sup>

Although trade unions had been doing very poorly at the beginning of the Depression, Bill Gillespie, in a study of the Newfoundland Federation of Labour, argues that wage cuts and the loss of security "were a rude awakening to many workers used to the paternalism which had characterized employer-employee relations."<sup>75</sup> Worker loyalty was tested by worsening conditions in the stores as the economic situation continued to deteriorate, opening the door to union organizers. In the mid-1930s, the Newfoundland Trades and Labour Council (NTLC) decided the time was right to strengthen its organization by unionizing as many workers as possible, including the shop and office workers of St. John's. The employees of over 70 stores were approached and when the level of interest was deemed sufficient, a meeting of clerks was called in early 1938. Despite poor weather, 650 attended the meeting with 550 signing up. An executive was

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<sup>74</sup>"Here, There and Everywhere," *The Evening Telegram*, 26 January 1933; "26th Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade," *Journal of Commerce*, (January 1935) 19; "27th Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade," *Journal of Commerce*, (January 1936) 19; "28th Annual Report of the Newfoundland Board of Trade," *Journal of Commerce*, (January 1937) 15; "List of Directors and Permanent Employees," Bowring Brothers Ltd. Collection, MG 39, Box 8 (PANL); "Letter from Edgar R. Bowring to the directors of C.T. Bowring Co.," October 1934, Bowring Brothers Ltd. Collection, MG 39, Box 7 (PANL); "Balance Sheets," 1929, 1933 and 1939, Job Family Papers, Box 3 (MHA).

<sup>75</sup>Gillespie, "A History of the Newfoundland Federation of Labour," 41-2.

also appointed, a constitution adopted and a name chosen. A month later, the Newfoundland Protective Association of Shop and Office Employees (NPASOE) made an application for charter in the NTLC and, by July 1939, claimed to have 1863 members.<sup>76</sup>

What appeared to bother retail workers most, contributing to their willingness to join a union not sanctioned by their employers, was evidence of profits being made and

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<sup>76</sup>"Letter from W.W. Gillies to NTLC," 22 March 1938, Newfoundland Federation of Labour Collection, MG 668, Box 1, File: Retail Clerks (PANL); "Register of Trade Unions," Department of Labour, GN 22/1 (PANL); "Shop, Store and Office Workers Formed Labour Union Last Night," *The Evening Telegram*, 18 February 1938; Bill Gillespie, *A Class Act: An Illustrated History of the Labour Movement in Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's, NF: Creative Printers & Publishers, Ltd., 1986) 71-4; "Shop and Office Employees of St. John's Organize," *Labour Herald*, 26 August 1938; "Report of the Meeting Held Between the Committee of the Importers and Employers Association and the Committee of the Newfoundland Protective Association of Shop and Office Employees," 7 July 1939, Walter S. Sparks Papers, COLL-049, Box 1, File 1 (CNSA).

Matthews describes a similar situation at Dupuis Frères where employers encouraged workers to create a union under the CTCC, Quebec's Catholic unions. In so doing, the firm "was able to circumvent labour protest by offering a vehicle that appeared to give the workers power, while shaping it for their own purposes." Unlike most unions, management were members and its activities were more those of a "social club" with little or no discussion of employee grievances.

In 1950, however, in a climate of growing tension between labour and capital in Quebec, the union registered with the Provincial Department of Labour, allowing it to negotiate with the firm for a collective agreement or to strike. Their grievances involved primarily wages, which were lower than the Montreal average, and hours. Another contributing factor may have been the retirement of the firm's well-liked vice president and his replacement by a stranger advocating a new, more scientific style of labour management. This may have been seen as a break from the firm's paternalistic principles, absolving workers of loyalty to the firm. The owners viewed the move as a betrayal and attempted to undermine the union by offering a retroactive pay raise and, when this failed, to dictate concessions in negotiations. After a thirteen week strike, an agreement was reached and "Paternalism from the Dupuis Frères management would no longer be accepted by workers, and the privileges employees had traded for loyalty in the past were secured as rights." Matthews, "Working For Family, Nation and God," 13, 23-4, 83, 89-93, 108-9.

spent on store renovations while they continued to receive reduced wages. *The Daily News* editor defended local businessmen, declaring it was not a crime "to strive to get a little profit out of business after the wage rolls and taxes have been met," adding that "Despite all the talk of economic royalism there [we]re few employers ... who d[id] not at least give a thought to the public results of their conduct of their private business."<sup>77</sup> Unconvinced, the clerks charged that they had been "driven into Unionism" by the actions of their employers:

Improvements and modernization have taken place in many establishments, so it is time now for some of this surplus to be shared by the employees, who by loyal service and attention to the interest of their employers, have largely helped to make their surpluses possible.<sup>78</sup>

Employers' initial response to the creation of a shop workers' union was to discourage their employees from joining. Within days of NPASOE's first meeting, Ayre & Sons called their employees together to announce that "... not only were they to receive a larger bonus than usual, but that there would be an increase in wages all around." When it became clear that few employees would be dissuaded, employers founded the Importers & Employers Association with a view to combatting pressure on individual firms. This,

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<sup>77</sup>Editorial, *The Daily News*, 5 March 1938.

<sup>78</sup>Based on store ads, renovations were being undertaken in at least two Water Street businesses, James Baird, Ltd., and the Bon Marché. Employees appear to have reluctantly accepted wage cuts when warranted by economic conditions but evidence of merchant spending on store renovations or even for charitable purposes provoked worker resentment. Letter to the editor, *The Daily News*, 8 April 1938; James Baird ad, *The Daily News*, 26 March 1938; Bon Marché ad, *The Daily News*, 3 July 1938.

according to Hattenhauer, was the typical response of paternalistic employers to employee organization in Newfoundland. While opposing unionization, employers would reluctantly negotiate once a union was formed.<sup>79</sup>

Claiming to represent 95 per cent of eligible retail workers, NPASOE demanded the standardization of wage rates and working conditions. Negotiations lasted eighteen months with meetings between the Importers & Employers Association and NPASOE described as "amicable" in the press. The union had sent their demands to 161 St. John's firms but not all were represented by the Importers & Employers Association and, in the end, only 74 firms, including all of the major Water Street stores, signed the contract. One impediment to a settlement had been the variety of businesses represented by the Importers & Employers Association and, again, the issue of small shopkeeper versus Water Street merchant arose to hamper negotiations. Finally, in May 1940, an agreement was reached which included the regulation of working conditions, minimum wage rates, holidays and hours.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>"Employees Notified Wage Increase." *The Daily News*, 21 February 1938; "Employees Notified Wage Increase. Bonus." *Observer's Weekly*, 22 February 1938; Hattenhauer, "A Brief Labour History of Newfoundland," 25-7; Newfoundland, *Industrial Survey of Newfoundland*, report by T.K. Liddell (St. John's, NF: Robinson & Co., Ltd., printers, 1940) 33; Ernest Akyeampong, "Labour Laws and the Development of the Labour Movement in Newfoundland, 1900-1960" (M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1967) 61-2.

<sup>80</sup>"Letter from L.M. Marshal to J. Ash," 9 April 1940, Hattenhauer Labour Collection, Box 4, File 7.2 (CNSA); "Letter from Mr. Gillies to Employers," 25 October 1938, and "Reports of Meetings Held Between the Committee of the Importers & Employers Association and the Committee of the Newfoundland Protective Association of Shop and

Over the course of the negotiations, however, interest among retail workers had waned, forcing the union to send out letters reminding members to pay their dues and attend meetings. Articles appeared in the short-lived union-sponsored paper, *The Labour Herald*, attempting to reestablish support by reminding workers of the reasons for NPASOE's formation:

At that time, Feb. 17, year 1938, when the depression was still the pet excuse of most Newfoundland employers, for the existing low wages, and the attending poverty and misery among workers there arose in our midst a certain good Samaritan [NPASOE] with high ideals and a keen sense of justice. This good man saw how badly many of the workers were being treated at the hands of some employers. This certain good man sowed the first seeds of unionism that was [*sic*] soon to be sown all over our fair land.<sup>41</sup>

NPASOE leaders, aware of member apathy, consciously edited letters and articles to remove any suggestions of union militancy or strike action. They also protested the press's use of the word "demands" with reference to NPASOE, suggesting "proposals" be

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Office Employees." 8 December 1938 and 7 July 1939, Walter Sparks Papers, COLL-049, Box 1, File 1 (CNSA); "Clerks Union Employers Sign Labor Contract," *The Daily News*, 21 May 1940; Editorial, *The Daily News* 22 May 1940.

<sup>41</sup>An open letter to NPASOE members in the *Labour Herald* supports the claim that the impetus for earlier organizations had come from employers, the author charging that "Several attempts were made in previous years to form an association, but the men who proffered to be our benefactors in those years were merely trying to help themselves." The letter urged them to be patient and to support the union, suggesting workers did not earn enough to live but only to exist, arguing that many clerks had put off marriage for as much as ten years because they could not afford to support a family. "To Shop and Office Workers," *Labour Herald*, 20 January 1939; "N.P.A.S.O.E., Birth of a Union," *Labour Herald*, 17 February 1939; "Letter to NPASOE members," 20 January 1940, Walter Sparks Papers, COLL-049, Box 1, File 1 (CNSA).



substituted, and denied any claims that the union was growing impatient for a settlement or that a "further dispute might result."<sup>82</sup> Despite NPASOE's eventual success in obtaining a contract, the union would soon follow its predecessors, leaving shop clerks and salesladies unrepresented until attempts to organize retail workers were renewed, again with little long-term success, in the 1960s.<sup>83</sup>

The explanation for NPASOE's demise is likely to be found in the resumption of certain paternalistic privileges in the Water Street stores and the replacement of other benefits by welfarism, especially as the economy began to recover from the Depression with the start of World War II.<sup>84</sup> At a 1940 reunion of Steers' employees at Octagon Castle, held just as an agreement was being reached between NPASOE and the Importers & Employers Association, J. Butler, manager of the grocery department, gave a toast to the company which recognized that "... the welfare of worker and employer were

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<sup>82</sup>"N.P.A.S.O.E. Take Exception to News Item." *The Labour Herald*, 10 November 1938; "Letter from W. Sparks to W.W. Gillies," ca. 1938, Walter Sparks Papers, COLL-049, Box 1, File 1 (CNSA).

<sup>83</sup>Hattenhauer, "A Brief Labour History of Newfoundland," 117.

<sup>84</sup>Employers' amiable dealings with NPASOE likely hindered union support by easing worker resentment. At a 1941 Board of Trade meeting, Campbell Macpherson went so far as to suggest, "[Unionization] is an effort on the part of Labour to adjust grievances, which in many cases, have been apparent to us all. Provided our house is in order, I am confident that a fine and close co-operation between management and staff will be apparent in most trades and businesses." A few weeks later, NPASOE expressed its appreciation for the cooperation of the Importers & Employers Association in negotiations. "Board of Trade Meeting," *The Daily News*, 1 February 1941; "Clerks' Union Pleased With Progress Made," *The Daily News*, 18 February 1941.

inextricably mixed and inseparable and emphasized loyalty to the firm by word and deed." In response, Calvert C. Pratt, president of Steers, Ltd., referring to the war, stated "... it would be a stark tragedy if, in the life of the country at this particular time, experimental issues were to create divisions, which might produce opposing camps at a time when unity [wa]s essential."<sup>85</sup>

In addition to continuing to sponsor sports teams, holding reunions and resuming raises and bonuses, store owners introduced new benefits for employees in the 1940s. The large Water Street stores were not alone in the move towards a more formal arrangement with workers as "The *ad hoc* nature of staff benefits ... [also] gave way to a more systematic style of welfare provision" in many British department stores. As Lancaster points out, however, "The new welfare systems operated alongside the idiosyncratic nature of paternalism," the same occurring in Australian stores where, according to Reekie, "... twentieth century welfarism evolved gradually out of nineteenth-century paternalist social relations between 1890 and 1930." In Australia, this was the result of state legislation in the late 1890s and early 1900s to regulate store hours and working conditions as well as the unionization of retail workers and rising public concern for their welfare. In an attempt to stave off further government interference and negative publicity,

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<sup>85</sup>"Employees of Steers Ltd. Hold Annual Re-union." *The Daily News*, 17 May 1940.

Pratt led a group which bought out Steers Brothers in 1925 and was responsible for getting the firm out of the retail trade in the 1940s to focus on its wholesale and insurance interests. Cuff, Baker, and Pitts, eds., *Dictionary of Newfoundland and Labrador Biography*, 277.

store owners reluctantly exchanged the traditional method of dealing with employee grievances through private negotiations between "master and man" for a more "humanist" approach to labour relations. Utilizing psychological theory, employers addressed the mental and physical needs of workers through social activities, dining rooms, medical advice, staff training, libraries, and provident funds. Reekie concludes that the new welfare schemes "did little to challenge the material basis of paternalist social relations," but that welfarism "presented the human face of paternalism while institutionalizing and legitimating the authority structure of the store."<sup>86</sup>

Similarly, labour relations in the large Water Street stores also changed in response to government regulation and worker unionization in the 1930s. In the early 1940s, most of the large Water Street stores created cooperative credit societies - similar to the provident funds of Australian retailers - which allowed employees to deposit money and receive interest on their savings. They could also take out loans for holidays, Christmas gifts, medical costs, and house renovations.<sup>87</sup> Bowring Brothers also introduced staff

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<sup>86</sup>"Bonus Paid to All Employees," *The Daily News*, 3 February 1941; "Bonus Given to All Employees of Ayre & Sons," *The Daily News*, 7 March 1941; "Bowring's Employees Get Raise in Salary," *The Daily News*, 18 June 1941; "Wage Increase and Bonus For Employees," *The Daily News*, 22 July 1941; "Gives Bonus to Employees," *The Daily News*, 19 August 1943; "Ayre & Sons Ltd. Pay Bonus To Employees," *The Daily News*, 1 March 1944; Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 145; Reekie, "Humanizing Industry," 10-19.

<sup>87</sup>"Annual Meeting of Bairsoe Co-op," *The Daily News*, 12 January 1940; "Annual Meeting of Steersoe Co-operative Credit Society," *The Daily News*, 20 January 1940; "Annual Meeting Roysoe Co-operative Credit Society," *The Daily News*, 25 January 1940; "Second Annual Meeting of Ayrsoe Credit Society," *The Daily News*, 27 January

training programmes and, in 1946, began formulating a pension plan for its employees but in this, as Derrick Bowring has admitted, they were motivated less by concern for the employees and more by company finances. The firm was already paying pensions informally, keeping on elderly employees even when they could no longer do the work as a kind of "working pension" and when retirement became inevitable, paying them a small pension "out of pocket." Not only was this costly but the presence of older employees prevented Bowring's from hiring younger workers and instituting plans to reorganize the company. Consequently, the main aim of the firm's pension plan was not to look after retired employees better but to reduce costs and create openings for new staff.<sup>88</sup>

Paternalism, as a system of labour management, dominated employer-employee relations in the large Water Street stores throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but was constantly being adapted to suit changing conditions in the stores as

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1940.

<sup>88</sup>"Letter from Derrick Bowring to parents," 12 August 1946, Bowring Family Papers, COLL-157 (CNSA); Interview with D.B.

The *Trade Review* had predicted the end of the "ancient retainer" in the Water Street stores as early as 1907, suggesting rising wages were making elderly employees too costly: "Therefore the ancient retainer will have to go, for this is a utilitarian age, my masters, and the picturesque and sentimental can't exist in the atmosphere of modern strenuousness." A government-commissioned industrial survey of the island in 1940, however, reported that "Firms ... continue to carry old employees and to fill vacancies in many cases from the sons and daughters of old employees irrespective of their economic value. This practice, very laudable in its sentimental aspect, cannot but produce the reverse of efficiency." "The Man in the Mart," *Trade Review*, 28 September 1907; Newfoundland, *Industrial Survey*, 53.

staff size grew and became feminized. With the decline of indentured servitude and the living-in system in the late nineteenth century, paternalistic employers adopted other methods of controlling their workforces involving rewards such as bonuses, sports teams, choral societies, company dinners, and staff outings. In return, store owners benefitted from the loyalty, respect and hard work of grateful workers as well as from the positive publicity attending their efforts and the reluctance of employees to support militant action to resolve disputes. Paternalism also involved responsibility for employee welfare, however, and the Depression of the 1930s tested the limits of worker loyalty as paternalistic promises were broken by wage cuts and layoffs, leading to high rates of unionization among retail workers. Despite NPASOE's success in obtaining a contract, the return of economic prosperity to Newfoundland with World War II and the persistence of paternalistic practices in the Water Street stores in conjunction with a shift towards welfarism in the 1940s, contributed to member apathy and eventually resulted in the union's demise. Long seen as an outdated method of worker control, paternalism in the Water Street stores, as in the department stores of most major western cities, produced a record of overwhelmingly harmonious labour relations and, while evolving to meet the changing needs of employers and employees, continued to guide store owners' efforts to control employees and create loyal, hard-working staffs well into the twentieth century.

### Conclusion

By 1949, when this study ends, the large Water Street stores had long ago achieved departmental store status but continued to evolve in response to changing socio-economic and political conditions with Newfoundland's entrance into the Canadian federation. Although St. John's retailers, as has been shown, were constantly adapting old methods and adopting new ones in an attempt to maintain a share of local trade, in the years immediately preceding and following Confederation, they vastly increased their efforts to expand and modernize their operations. This was, in part, spurred on by the wholesale transformation of Bowring Brothers' store, in accordance with Derrick Bowring's determination to put Bowring's "on the map," in the late 1940s. His actions, in turn, were largely motivated by anticipation of Newfoundland's joining Canada but also by a change in store management and the economic prosperity of the war years. Although some store owners, such as Lewis Ayre of Ayre & Sons, had predicted the demise of the local firms as a consequence of union with Canada, for a decade or more after 1949, the stores appeared to prosper as they had throughout much of their histories. Eventually, however, the end did come and the last of the large Water Street stores shut its doors in the 1980s.

Whether their collapse was the result of Confederation and competition with mainland firms is debatable. However, many pro-Confederates claimed that it would break the merchant monopoly by allowing consumers to obtain goods more cheaply - especially through mail order from Canadian firms such as Eaton's - once Newfoundland

had achieved provincial status and duties were removed.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the opening up of the Newfoundland market and increased competition were expected to have some impact on local business. It is likely, however, that the eventual demise of the Water Street firms' retail operations was the result of a number of factors, some connected to Confederation but others reflective of changes taking place in many North American cities. Just as shared social and economic change had resulted in the rise of department stores in cities like New York, London, Paris, Toronto and St. John's in the late 1800s and early 1900s, by mid-century most department stores were encountering similar troubles due to competition from chain stores and speciality shops.

A number of studies addressed the troubles facing mass merchandisers but few stores proved themselves capable of meeting the challenges posed by changes to the urban landscape and the growth of new competitors. Pasdermadjian's work outlines many of the troubles encountered by mass merchandisers by the 1950s, primary among them the growth of chain stores sharing the department store's advantage of bulk buying but with a fraction of the overhead costs associated with large establishments renowned for their luxury and elegance. In attempting to compete with one another for consumer loyalty, department stores had also saddled themselves with the high cost of an ever-expanding array of customer services, services which chains did not offer. The stores were, therefore, quickly losing the edge they had had on competitors since the late 1800s and to

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<sup>1</sup>"That was a wonderful day," *Confederation Celebrations*, 25 January 1999.

survive, many formed buying groups like Federated Department Stores in the U.S. Despite such efforts, retailers were also competing for fewer consumer dollars due to the growing popularity of expensive consumer goods and activities such as cars, sports and travel.<sup>2</sup>

Changes to the urban landscape also created troubles for many stores. While urbanization had contributed to the evolution of the department store, the increased use of automobiles and the trend towards suburbanization by the 1940s led to the demise of downtown cores and the growth of suburban shopping and strip malls. Barth notes that this ended the "downtown focus of modern-city life" of which the department store had long been a cornerstone.<sup>3</sup> All of these factors had an impact on the Water Street stores suggesting that Confederation alone was not to blame for their later troubles. Island-wide changes in distribution of population with the growth of service centres, new methods of transportation and rising incomes were accompanied by changes within the capital city which also affected the retail trade. The declining importance of shipping and the fishery to the local economy and the growth of city suburbs had a profound effect on the urban landscape as the waterfront gradually lost importance. The increased use of motor vehicles also contributed to the demise of the downtown commercial core as parking became a problem, affecting the firms situated there. While their position on

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<sup>2</sup>Pasdermadjian, *The Department Store*, 33, 46-8, 52, 56, 66; Davis, *Fairs, Shops, and Supermarkets*, 294.

<sup>3</sup>Barth, *City People*, 8.



Water Street had once offered the stores a distinct advantage in both city and island trade due to their proximity to the harbour and the importance of shipping to the movement of goods and people in Newfoundland, it was now becoming a definite disadvantage in their attempts to maintain a share of consumer dollars.

The construction of a highway and paved roads throughout much of the province dealt another blow to the St. John's business community for the city's importance as a metropolis serving an island hinterland declined as a result. The deflection of trade from the capital starting with the introduction of ferry, steamship and the railway, continued apace with the construction of roads and the replacement of steamships and rail with motor vehicles for the movement of goods and people. This allowed outport people to travel to larger service centres such as Gander, Grand Falls and Corner Brook to make their purchases as opposed to mail ordering goods from St. John's. Merchant firms with wholesale divisions were affected as well, as this business was also lost to Canadian wholesalers thereby "eliminat[ing] the importer as a link in the distributive chain" in Newfoundland. As a result, firms like Bowring Brothers and Ayre & Sons closed out their mail order and wholesale departments in 1950s.<sup>4</sup>

Bowring Brothers' response to these developments was to expand and diversify its retailing operations. Their first move in anticipation of Confederation

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<sup>4</sup>"Bowring Brothers Today." *The Bowring Magazine* (Summer 1961) 170-2; Knowling, "Ayre & Sons," 4-6; Parzival Copes, *St. John's and Newfoundland - An Economic Survey* (St. John's, NF: Newfoundland Board of Trade, 1961) 20-1.

... was to modernise and secure the company base in St. John's. The next was to reduce the company's vulnerability to an invasion of the St. John's market by major Canadian chain store operations by establishing a number of branches outside St. John's. The third was to attempt an invasion of the lush pastures of mainland Canada.<sup>5</sup>

These, they accomplished with the opening of stores in Churchill Park, a St. John's suburb, in 1955, on Bell Island in 1957, and in Grand Falls in 1958. These were short-lived ventures, however, and in hindsight, Derrick Bowring observes that it was a mistake to open these branches as most of the towns did not have the customer base to support them. When their Water Street store burnt in a fire in the 1960s, the firm rebuilt on the original site because, as Bowring says, it was a "part of [their] history" and it was their "place." But he now notes that this, too, was a mistake, saying the company should have "packed it up" to concentrate on their gift shops, the first of which they opened in the Gander airport in 1959, expanding after 1960 into eastern Canada.<sup>6</sup> As they had so often dictated company policy in the past, history and tradition continued to guide Bowring Brothers' operations, preventing even Derrick Bowring, who had rejected so many of the firm's antiquated practices, from seeing clearly where retailing was headed in Newfoundland.

Other firms, recognizing that the trend was now towards suburbanization, opened stores in uptown shopping centres. Responding to this shift in commercial focus, Ayre & Sons opened the city's first true self-service, bargain-oriented department store in

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<sup>5</sup>"Bowring Brothers Today," 172.

<sup>6</sup>"Bowring Brothers Today," 172; "Grand Falls Venture," *The Bowring Magazine* (Autumn 1958) 66-8.

Churchill Park in 1962 and, in 1967, opened a store in the new Avalon Mall, eventually closing its Water Street location. Like Bowring's, Ayre & Sons also diversified their operations to include grocery and clothing stores, some of which were located on the Canadian mainland.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, however, the Water Street firms would close all of their department stores, some, such as Ayre's and Bowring's, continuing to pursue other commercial endeavours deemed less affected by mainland competitors, urban reorientation, and changes within the Newfoundland economy.

Although small in comparison to cities like Paris, London or New York and less industrially developed than Britain or the U.S., St. John's and Newfoundland had been experiencing the impact of industrialization and urbanization, even if somewhat slowly and less intensively, since at least the government development schemes of the late 1800s. In response, city retailers, whose operations had long been geared towards outport trade, began focusing their attention on local consumers benefiting from waged employment resulting from industrial development, increased resource extraction, and railway construction. This entailed reorganization of store layouts (the 1892 fire providing a prime opportunity), more extensive and sophisticated advertising in city newspapers, and the introduction of new methods of displaying and promoting merchandise. Growing competition for consumer dollars with the arrival of new stores on Water Street in the

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<sup>7</sup>Knowing, "Ayre & Sons," 6-10.

early 1920s created additional pressure to cultivate customer loyalty with extra services and provided further impetus for constant vigilance of developments in the trade, both local and foreign.

In altering their methods, store owners altered their customers' experience of shopping, turning it into a feminine, social and leisure activity. They also played a role in shaping consumers' perceptions of goods which for more and more people had acquired the ability to define and even change their social status. In this regard, retailers were at the centre of a developing consumer society in St. John's, one in which the acquisition of material goods was of growing importance, by not only making manufactured goods available to the consuming population but also by popularizing fads and establishing fashion standards. St. John's retailers and consumers were, therefore, aware of similar developments throughout much of Europe and North America and were participating in the trend towards mass consumption and the spread of consumer culture.

One of the primary aims of this thesis, then, was to explore the impact of store expansion and mass consumption on local society. Changes in local retailing had important social ramifications for three groups in St. John's: the working class, women and retail workers. It has been argued that the department store was a consequence of urbanization, one contributing to and reflecting the egalitarian nature of the modern city. It was one of few places where consumers from different classes could mix freely and it made mass-produced, status-enhancing goods such as ready-made clothing and electrical appliances accessible to most income groups with lower prices, sales and instalment plans.

In this way, the stores were in part responsible for the democratization of luxury for they allowed more people than ever before to obtain consumer goods and to enjoy a better standard of living.

Department stores had a similar impact in St. John's. By bringing the products of industrial society within reach of a growing number of consumers, local retailers introduced many in the working class, whose incomes had rarely stretched beyond food, clothing and shelter, to the benefits of mass production. At the same time, of course, they also influenced consumer attitudes and behaviour, turning many middle-class concerns and values such as conspicuous consumption, respectability and social mobility into widespread social values. This has led many scholars to charge manufacturers, advertisers and retailers with the 'embourgeoisement' of the working class and to lament the loss of worker consciousness. But working-class spending on amusements and sporting events, expenditures criticized by many in the middle class, are evidence that the working class had not completely internalized middle-class values but spent as they saw fit.

None were perhaps so affected by the stores' adoption of new retailing methods as women. Up until the late nineteenth century in Newfoundland, men had assumed primary responsibility for obtaining household supplies which were purchased on credit and in bulk from local merchants. This was also true in St. John's but here, retail expansion and a shift in focus towards city consumers contributed to the feminization of consumption. With waged employment and the decline of household production, more families adopted the middle-class model of male as breadwinner and female as housewife. At the same time,

many items formerly made in the home by women were being replaced by manufactured alternatives. As the variety of available goods expanded in the stores and the definition of what constituted a household necessity grew to include many items previously considered luxuries, purchasing for the family became a more time-consuming activity, one which required extensive knowledge of products and considerable financial planning in order to maximize family resources. Because more men were working fixed schedules in factories and offices, women's responsibility for home-production was declining, and purchases could now be paid for in cash, housewives began doing the household purchasing and were declared the "controllers of the home purse" by local retailers.

As a result, women were given a public role as shoppers, allowing them to temporarily escape their confinement to the domestic sphere during visits to city stores. Through their spending, they also gained authority and influence, the St. John's business community recognizing and reaffirming their importance as economic agents in their addresses to women as the primary consumers. Consequently, most store advertisements were directed at women in the belief that they would determine how much of the family income was spent and, in their attempts to guide and control women's shopping habits through ads, promotions and services, retailers therefore played a significant role in defining gender roles and perpetuating sexual stereotypes. Due in part to their efforts, women have become imprisoned by expectations and assumptions regarding their "natural" and "biological" urge to consume.

Retailers encouraged women to view shopping as a social and leisure activity.

urging them in ads to come browse and to bring their friends, introducing tea rooms and rest rooms to facilitate longer stays in the hopes that women would be induced to buy more. Although "shopping" has recent historical roots, primarily in retailers' efforts to foster consumption, women are portrayed in ads, as well as in the press and other media, as having a biological inclination to shop. This has contributed to the construction of gender stereotypes which depict 'woman' as a natural and avid consumer and 'man' as an unnatural, reluctant consumer. Woman is also constructed as being house-proud and fashion-loving because this is how retailers wanted her to be. When she did not follow their advice or dictates on how to shop and what to buy, she was portrayed as fickle, uncontrollable, and a spendthrift. Yet, store ads and, by extension, society placed such intense pressure on women to maintain their personal, family and household appearances through consumption, and to do so on a budget, that it is not surprising few could live up to their expectations. The feminization of consumption since the late nineteenth century has therefore had manifold and often conflicting consequences for women, granting them an important public role to play in economic matters but rarely granting them the respect deserving of their endeavours to maintain households on often limited budgets.

A third group to feel the impact of changes in the retail trade were the employees of the stores. Paternalism had long characterized the nature of labour relations in the Water Street stores beginning with the indenturing of clerk apprentices from the earliest days of trade in St. John's. As the practices of indentured servitude and living-in declined towards the end of the nineteenth century, store owners found new ways of controlling

their employees by adapting paternalistic principles of labour management to suit changing conditions. This was especially important as staff size grew with store expansion, making close supervision of workers impractical and necessitating hierarchical organization and delegation of authority which in turn required loyal employees. These retailers acquired with careful cultivation of feelings of family fealty through a system of rewards which included company dinners, sports teams, choral groups, and bonuses. In return for these benefits, employees were expected to be respectful and hard-working.

This method of labour management resulted in a long history of largely harmonious relations between employers and employees in the large Water Street stores with attempts at organizing retail workers achieving little success due to member apathy. But paternalism only worked as long as the promises implicit in the relationship were maintained, the most important of which was employer responsibility for employee welfare during difficult economic times. In a number of ways, store owners proved their willingness to care for workers but the lay-offs and wage cuts endemic throughout the Depression represented broken promises to many workers, absolving them of loyalty to the firm. Evidence of monies being spent on store improvements aggravated the situation and resulted in the formation of a shop and office employees' union which was successful in getting employers to the bargaining table and obtaining a contract settlement. But the resumption of paternalistic practices with economic prosperity in the 1940s again contributed to member apathy and led to the union's demise. Still, government regulation and employee unionization in the late 1930s had a lasting effect on relations in the Water



Street stores, contributing to a more formal system of labour management characterized by pension plans and cooperative societies.

This thesis has also attempted to address the erroneous impression, which still persists in some local studies, that Newfoundland society remained largely unchanged and unaffected by external forces until World War II brought foreign troops and economic prosperity from base construction to the island, thereby thrusting it into the twentieth century. According to this scenario, Newfoundlanders' introduction to the ideas, values, behaviours, and products of its North American neighbours was therefore immediate and dramatic, "with devastating consequences for the old social order."<sup>8</sup>

Using the retail trade and patterns of consumption in the colony's capital as a prism through which to examine the socio-economic changes taking place in Newfoundland from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, it is clear that the social and cultural impact of World War II has been exaggerated in much of the literature dealing with the subject. Clearly, St. John's retailers were far from oblivious to new methods of retailing and merchandising goods in North American and European cities as demonstrated by their efforts to expand operations and update store premises throughout the period. Whether they were responding to rising consumer demand or attempting to encourage consumption in order to sell new, low-priced, mass-produced goods is debatable but, either way, it is clear that local shopping habits were changing.

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<sup>8</sup>Neary, *Political Economy*, 67.

The increased volume of imports relative to population over the period of study indicates that the average person in Newfoundland was consuming more. Import statistics also indicate that more of the goods being consumed were what might be termed luxuries. This suggests, and it is supported by anecdotal evidence, that many Newfoundlanders were enjoying a better standard of living which, despite periodic recessions, continued to improve throughout the first half of the twentieth century. This was especially true of those living in St. John's where access to waged employment and a variety of retailers meant more opportunities to consume. Locals were, therefore, not "dazzled by American dollars, hygiene and efficiency"<sup>9</sup> during World War II but had already demonstrated their interest in North American products and lifestyle over several decades of increased exposure. What appeared to be a "revolution" in local attitudes and behaviour was actually the result of a greater capacity, thanks to high employment and economic prosperity, to adopt the values of a consumer culture for which the ground had already been well-laid in St. John's by American media and local retailers.

This study has also addressed, in some measure, the charge levelled by some academics that Newfoundland merchants were largely responsible for the demise of the fishery due to their decision to limit involvement in the trade in favour of other more secure and apparently profitable businesses like retailing. Several scholars have already discussed merchant attempts to improve and rationalize the fishery contrary to this long-

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<sup>9</sup>Neary, "A Mortgaged Property," 182.

held belief by focusing on the "push" factors inducing its abandonment by local firms.<sup>10</sup> No one, however, has examined the factors pulling them in the direction of other trades but, as this thesis has shown, a number of St. John's merchant firms were drawn towards retailing due to the socio-economic changes affecting not only Newfoundland, but much of the western world in this period.

Although in many ways tied to the traditions arising from Newfoundland's heavy dependence on the fishery, the large Water Street stores were instrumental in bringing a modern, North American lifestyle to St. John's. In so doing, they altered many aspects of the local way of life, especially for working-class consumers, women shoppers and the retail workers who served them. Contrary to popular belief, Newfoundland society was not as isolated and unaware as has long been thought. Rather, many were well aware of what was happening in the "modern" societies of Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a result of the mass production and consumption of consumer goods. If Newfoundlanders were a little late in adopting many of the values and behaviours associated with modernity, it was due less to ignorance than to inability as a result of the island's precarious economic situation throughout much of the period of study.

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<sup>10</sup>See Reeves, "Our Yankee Cousins"; Hong, "An agency for the common weal".

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- M.A., St. John's, NF, 3 February 1999. (M.A.'s family owned Ayre & Sons for which he worked in the 1970s and 1980s.)
- D.B., Topsail, NF, 18 January 2001. (D.B. immigrated to Newfoundland from England in 1935 to work for the family firm, Bowring Brothers, later becoming managing director.)
- E.B., St. John's, NF, 1 June 2000. (E.B.'s father was the retail manager of The Royal Stores where he was also employed from 1933 to 1941, starting as a messenger boy and leaving as department head for the wholesale division.)
- S.B., St. John's, NF, 24 July 1999. (S.B. began working at Ayre & Sons in 1925 as a saleslady, leaving in 1932 to get married.)
- R.C., St. John's, NF, 13 September 1999. (R.C. was employed as a clerk at The London, New York and Paris Association of Fashion from 1946 to 1952 before going to work at Bowring Brothers from 1952 to 1970, where he eventually became a manager.)
- M.M., St. John's, NF, 14 April 1999. (M.M. went to work at the A.K. Wood Five and Ten Cent Store in 1938 and then accepted a position at The Royal Stores in 1940 as a saleslady, leaving in 1947 to get married. Her father had also worked at The Royal Stores as an expressman, delivering groceries.)
- E.P., St. John's, NF, 12 October 1999. (E.P. was employed at Ayre & Sons in 1944 as a messenger boy, eventually becoming manager of the firm's Churchill Square branch in 1962. He retired as a director in 1982.)
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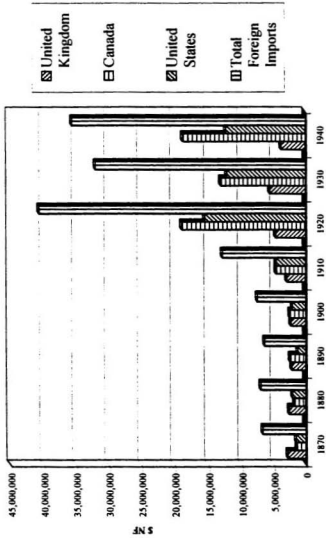
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#### Maps

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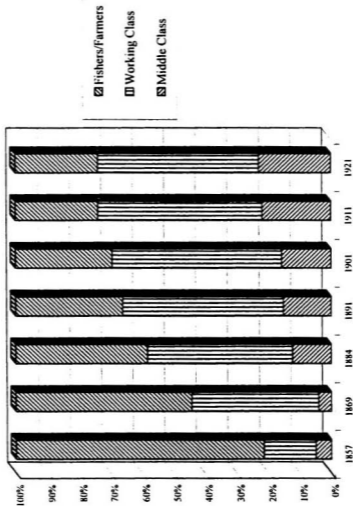
Appendix

Chart 1:  
British, Canadian, American and Total Foreign Imports,  
Newfoundland, 1870-1940



Source: Newfoundland, *Journal of the House of Assembly - Customs Returns, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 and 1941.*

Chart 2  
 Class Composition of Employed Persons Living in the  
 St. John's East and West Electoral Districts, 1857-1921

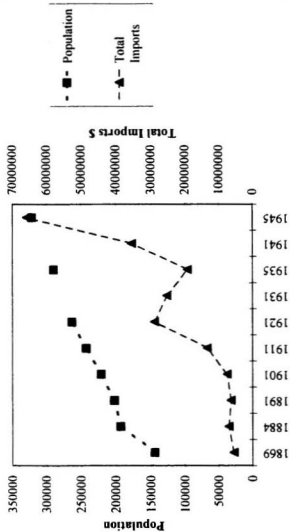


Source: Newfoundland, *Census of Newfoundland*, 1857, 1869, 1884, 1891, 1901, 1911 and 1921.

Note: This chart shows the class composition of the workforce as percentages of the total of those employed in the electoral districts of St. John's East and West. The middle class includes ministers, teachers, lawyers, doctors, merchants and traders, government officials and office workers. They would have earned cash to be spent in city stores as would have the working class, composed of mechanics, lumberjacks, miners and those categorized as being employed in miscellaneous occupations. Fishers and Farmers include those listed in either or both occupations as well as those working on fishing boats and women and men employed in curing fish. Most of the people in this category would have bartered the produce of their labours for supplies from the merchants and so would have had little access to cash. Based on census data, Chart 2 demonstrates that the middle and working classes were on the rise in the St. John's area, no doubt as a result of the city's growing population and the colonial government's efforts to encourage industrial development on the island. Meanwhile, the percentage of farmers and fishers as a total of those gainfully employed was decreasing as problems in the fishery and opportunities for waged labour led to a shift in the class composition of the local workforce. The number of fishers and farmers would be even lower in the City of St. John's as St. John's East and West Electoral Districts included outlying areas where the proportion of people involved in the fishery would have been higher than that for the city proper.



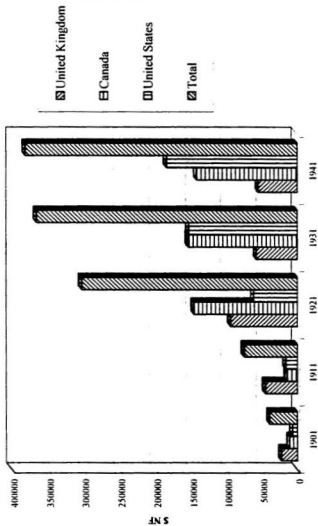
Chart 3:  
Population vs. imports, Newfoundland, 1867-1945



\* Import figure for 1945 includes imports for foreign military and bases in Newfoundland. There is no census data available for the periods between 1921 and 1935, and 1935 and 1945.

Source: Newfoundland, *Census of Newfoundland*, 1869, 1884, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1935 & 1945; Newfoundland, *Census Returns*, 1867, 1880, 1890, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931, 1935, 1941 & 1945.

Chart 4:  
**Value (\$) of Parcels Arriving in Newfoundland by Post from the United Kingdom,  
 Canada and the United States, 1901-1941**



Source: Newfoundland, *Customs Returns*, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 and 1941.







