RESEARCH NOTE

Movement, Options and Costs: Indexes as Historical Evidence, a Newfoundland Example

LOCATED ON THE SOUTHEAST HEADLAND of Bonavista Bay in Newfoundland, Bonavista was, according to the 1891 census, a medium-sized fishing town of 3,551 inhabitants. Almost all the adult men and women worked in the fishery, which it would appear was largely, but not exclusively, an inshore family-based cod fishery. Apparently these people still relied primarily on the hook and line technique, as 291 of the town's 350 dories had a capacity of less than 30 quintals. Most of the 59 larger dories were presumably used to haul the 54 cod traps owned by residents of the town. Bonavista was not solely an inshore cod-fishing community, however, for the town also had five small lobster factories, a schooner on the Grand Banks and a seasonal fishery down on the Labrador, along with a limited seal hunt. As one would expect in a mature town on the English Shore, Wesleyans and Episcopalians predominated, although there was a small Catholic parish and Booth's Salvation Army had already made 40 recruits in the community by 1891. Illiteracy was high and 371 out of the 850 school-aged children had not attended any of the community's five schools in the year prior to the census. Eight merchants and traders, occupying seven premises, a handful of professionals and a small group of mechanics rounded out the community.[1] In short, Bonavista, although larger than many outports, was not an exceptional late-19th-century Newfoundland fishing community.[2]

We recently initiated a case study of Bonavista at the end of the 19th century as part of a larger study of the historical relationship between merchant and petty commodity producer capital in the Atlantic fishery.[3] The historical importance of merchant credit in the inshore fishery is well established, but as J.K. Hiller has noted, historians remain largely ignorant of how this important aspect of the relationship

1 All figures are taken from the printed returns in *Census of Newfoundland, 1891*, vol. 1, pp. 117-21 and vol. 2, pp. 105-9. We would like to thank Jane Greenlaw, James K. Hiller, Rosemary Ommer, Danny Vickers, Bill Wicken and the *Acadiensis* readers for their critical comments on earlier versions of this research note.

2 For a study of the subsequent history of this community, see Rosemary Ommer, "Merchant Credit and the Informal Economy: Newfoundland 1919-1929", *Historical Papers 1989 Communications historiques*, pp. 167-89.

3 This aspect of our research is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, whose support we gratefully acknowledge.

Robert C.H. Sweeny, with David Bradley and Robert Hong, "Movement, Options and Costs: ndexes as Historical Evidence, a Newfoundland Example", *Acadiensis,* XXII, 1 (Autumn 1992), pp. 111-121.

between merchants and fishing families actually worked.[4] Ironically, our ignorance is due in large measure to the very importance of merchant credit. In the last half of the 19th century and the first 30 years of the 20th century, merchant credit was so pervasive in the fishery of outport Newfoundland that the accounting records generated by mercantile firms are almost too large to permit systematic analysis. Nearly complete runs of the accounting records of two Bonavista merchant firms, J.T. Ryan and Philip Templeman, have survived.[5] These records illustrate rather well the problems inherent in dealing with such detailed historical evidence. By the end of the 1880s, each firm was generating between 1,000 and 1,500 folio-sized pages of handwritten ledger and journal entries every year. Little wonder that the history of the fishery has tended to be based largely upon government statistical series, reports of inquiry and consular documents, supplemented by scattered qualitative written sources and, more recently, oral history.

Nominal indexes to accounting records provide a useful point of entry for research that ventures beyond the external viewpoint common to much of the secondary literature. These indexes permit a rapid identification of particular accounts and thus can be used to sample the accounting records. Indeed, when faced with such an imposing mass of documentation it might appear to some that sampling would be the most appropriate methodology. The application of such social science techniques to historical evidence, however, raises a number of problems for a properly historical theory and method. Foremost among them is the difficulty in effectively sampling a body of records without first understanding the historical logic that gave rise to those records. By understanding historical logic we mean approaching these indexes with certain types of questions in mind. For instance, how does the source reflect the specific historical context in which it was generated? Why were specific types of information, and not others, recorded in the source? What function or purpose was the source designed to serve? In short, although indexes are very useful finding aids, we believe they should first be analysed as historical evidence. Furthermore, we believe that such a preliminary analysis helps to minimize an undue imposition of the present onto the past and thereby provides a firmer and richer ground for subsequent analysis of the much more detailed ledgers and journals. Indeed, we contend in this research note that through a critical analysis of the specific contents of these indexes we can test the validity of prevailing explanations in the secondary literature of the relationship between merchants and fishing families.

The results presented here are an initial sounding based on three years of nominal indexes to the general ledgers of both firms. The years chosen were 1889, 1890 and 1891.[6] We are currently examining all of the records for these years and, following

4 James K. Hiller, "The Newfoundland Credit System: An Interpretation", in Rosemary Ommer, ed., *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective* (Fredericton, 1990), pp. 86-7.

5 The records of J.T. Ryan are in the Maritime History Archives at Memorial University, while the records of Philip Templeman are in the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland. All references in this note are from the respective indexes to the general ledgers of these two firms.

6 These years were chosen not because they hold any great significance in themselves; they were neither particularly good nor particularly bad years for the cod fishery. They do coincide with the

the advice of Marc Bloch, in their inverse order of production: first, the credit side of the general ledger; then, the debit side; and finally, the highly revealing journal entries themselves. As will be clear shortly, however, this analysis has been significantly enriched by the new historical questions raised by our treatment of the indexes as historical evidence.

At first glance, the indexes apparently confirm the widely held perception that by this time the Newfoundland inshore fishery was predominately a stable family fishery in which well-established merchant firms occupied a dominant position in the market. In the case of these two Bonavista firms, the larger and longer established firm of J.T. Ryan also appears to have reached a certain stability in terms of the number of clients while, in contrast, the more recent firm of Philip Templeman was still growing.

Table One
Number of Client Accounts on the Ledgers of
J.T. Ryan and Philip Templeman

	1889	1890	1891
J.T. Ryan	1,401	1,437	1,392
Philip Templeman	572	622	678

The apparently dominant position enjoyed by these firms in the region can be highlighted by comparing the number of their accounts with the number of families, according to the 1891 census. Admittedly, this comparison is somewhat problematic, since many of the entries in these indexes did not provide the client's place of residence. Neither firm identified more than a handful of their clients as living in Bonavista, but we believe that the vast majority of those clients without any place of residence indicated lived in the town. It might well be that a particularly well-known client from out of town would not need to be identified by place; however, we do not think that such clients would have been so frequent in the records as to significantly undermine the general results. Indeed the most remarkable aspect of Table Two — the fact that the number of client accounts significantly exceeded the number of families — was also true for those clients identified in the indexes as living in the settlements of Birchy, Newman's and Amherst coves, all "up shore" from Bonavista, and in Spillar's, Sandy and Bird Island coves, around the headland at the top of Trinity Bay.

The sheer number of accounts when compared with the number of families raises questions about the characterization of the inshore fishery as having been simply a family-based fishery — a point to which we will return later. In compiling the data,

early years of the trap fishery — a technology whose historical significance we are studying — and they precede the banking crisis of the 1890s, whose impact on the functioning of the credit system underlying much of the fishery remains as yet unknown. Furthermore, analysing these years does permit a subsequent comparison with the Newfoundland census returns of 1891. The census of 1891 contains information relating to both 1890 and 1891. Unfortunately, part of the 1890 and larger parts of the 1892 journals for Templeman's are missing, which is why we are also examining 1889.

however, it became evident that the relative stability and market domination suggested by these figures were more apparent than real. More than one-third (634, or 37 per cent) of the clients of the "stable" J.T. Ryan and nearly one-half (385, or 47 per cent) of Philip Templeman's clients either appeared in or disappeared from their books during this short three-year period. Thus, beneath the semblance of continuity, domination and changelessness, there was very substantial movement.

Table Two
Number of Client Accounts in 1891 Compared with the
Number of Families According to the Census of that Year

	Number of Families	Ryan's	Templeman's
Bonavista	659	941	599
Up Shore	114	149	36
Top of Trinity Bay	119	224	34

The nature of this movement raises questions about the long-established, circulationist interpretation of the role of merchant capital in the cod fishery. According to this viewpoint, it was the market constraints on merchant capital that were of paramount importance.[7] Since the merchants extended credit many months in advance of actually bringing the product for sale to an internationally competitive marketplace, knowledge and expectation of future market conditions are considered by this circulationist perception to have determined the strategy of merchant capital. Thus, unlike the opposing view of merchant hegemony, this interpretation does allow for movement, but since it was market-led, then what movement there was should have been in the same direction.

The proportional piecharts on Graph 1 indicate the scale and timing of client turnover in each firm. Although a proportionate number of 1889 clients of both firms were no longer on the books the following year, the evident differences in 1890 and 1891 do not support a simplistic circulationist model. Other factors and forces were clearly influencing the firms' strategic decisions of how many producers to keep on the books. Ryan's kept far more 1889 clients on their books into 1890; in relative terms, three times the number that Templeman's did. In contrast, Templeman's growth was based principally on retaining into 1891 nearly twice the relative number of new clients from 1890, while continuing to recruit successfully in 1891.[8] These

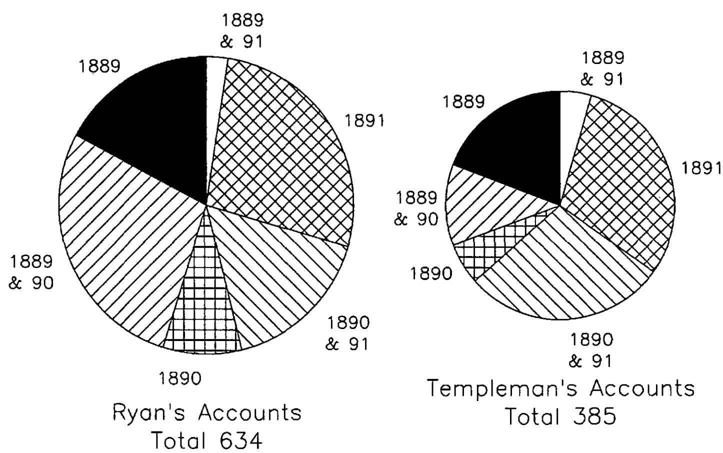
7 Now most associated with Shannon Ryan, *Newfoundland-Spanish Saltfish Trade: 1814-1914* (St. John's, 1983) and *Fish Out of Water* (St. John's, 1986), this interpretation was present as far back as the 1890s in the works of D.W. Prowse and James Murray.

8 This significant variation in the performance of the firms suggests both the importance of competition between mercantile firms and the difficulty that such competition poses for an historian interested in establishing what was a typical or representative pattern in the relationship between merchants and fishing families. Rosemary Ommer has discussed certain of the problems of typicality

variations can to some extent be understood in terms of the firms' varying strategies, according to their respective assessments of market conditions and internal accounting procedures.[9] The significance of these variations, however, does suggest that the dialectical relationship between merchant and petty-producer capital was potentially quite dynamic. At the very least, it indicates that an analysis of this relationship requires a conceptual approach that is both cautious and rigorous.

GRAPH 1

Turnover in Client Accounts
Showing the distribution of accounts
that do not appear in all three years



The indexes of J.T. Ryan permit an even clearer impression of the complexity of the relationship between merchant and petty-producer capital, because in these indexes a number of clients were identified as being linked to another client. The exact nature of this linkage will have to wait further analysis; however, it is clear that in the vast majority of cases this linkage was indicative of a social relationship of production. The names of employers of domestic servants appeared alongside the

in her study "The Truck System in Gaspé, 1822-77" in her edited volume *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies*, pp. 59-60.

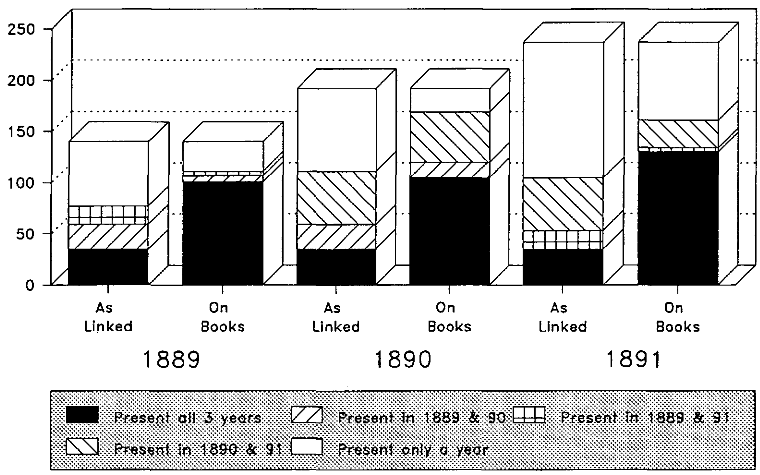
9 We know from the diary of J.T. Ryan, for example, that the year 1890 was marked by tension between Ryan and his accountant, Robert Brown, over the manner in which the books were being kept.

servants' names, just as the master of a vessel's name appeared alongside the men who shipped with him. These linkages within the Ryan's index can be seen, therefore, as a preliminary indicator of the complexity of the social relations of production within the communities in which the Ryans were active.

Graph 2, entitled Mobility & the Labour Market, presents the data relating to these "linked" accounts for each of the three years. The first column of the bar graph shows the number of people who were identified as being "linked" to another client in 1889. It also shows the proportion of these people who were linked to clients in 1890 and 1891. Clearly, if a "linked" client was no longer on Ryan's books in 1890 or 1891, he or she could not have been linked for that year, so the second column on the bar graph shows the persistence on Ryan's books of the people who were linked in 1889. So, for example, the majority of people who were linked in 1889 were not linked in either of the subsequent years. However, this was not due to their having either left or being struck off Ryan's books, for a large majority of the clients linked in 1889 did maintain accounts with the firm for all three years. The number of "linked" clients was different in each year of the study, and the remaining columns present the same type of information for 1890 and 1891.

GRAPH 2

Mobility & the Labour Market
Comparing people's patterns of linkage
with their presence on Ryan's books



As is clear from Graph 2, participation in the labour market outside the immediate family was not an uncommon feature for people who had an account with J.T. Ryan. At one time or another, 405 people were linked to another client of the firm. Yet only 35 individuals were linked to another client in each of these three years. Nor was this lack of continuity in the labour market necessarily due to mobility. In each of the three years, a clear majority of the people hired remained on J.T. Ryan's books for all three years studied. For these people, working outside their family-based fishery was probably a short-term tactic, perhaps serving a much longer-term, life-cycle-based strategy. Clearly, however, for a minority of the people active in this labour market, particularly in 1891, working for someone else might well have been the result of geographic mobility.

The apparent short-term nature of much of this participation in a non-familial labour market does not mean that these people's labour can be dismissed as merely a passing phenomenon without socio-economic significance over the longer term. If their participation was often episodic, their labour was far from marginal. As Graph 3 indicates, there was a significant differentiation within the local labour market. At one extreme were the 51 man-years and 10 woman-years (involving 61 different employers), represented by the first column. At the other end, two employers were each responsible for 17 person-years of employment over the three years. Although only a minority of the employers (37 out of 159) hired on average two people or more a year, these relatively large employers accounted for 57 per cent of the 569 person-years identified as being linked in the indexes. Thus, the labour of the majority of these people contributed significantly to social differentiation within their communities. Indeed, it was in large part their labour that permitted certain people to overcome the limitations on the forces of production that characterize a family-based economy. It should come as little surprise, therefore, that it was these relatively large employers that were also most frequently able to employ female domestic servants.

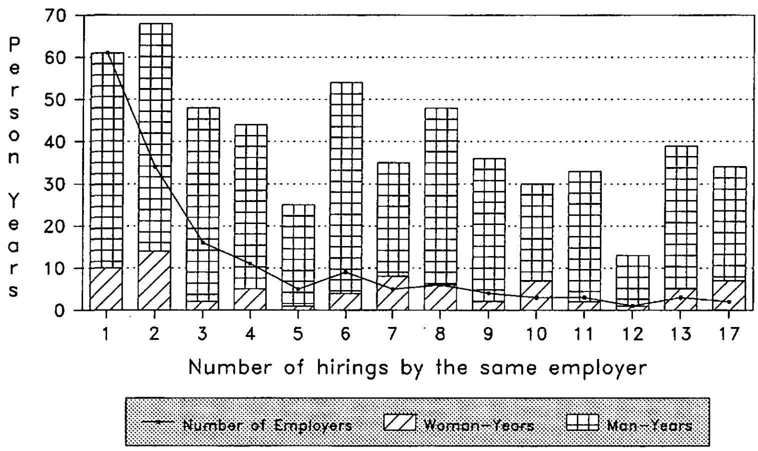
If the Ryan's index provides an indication of the complexity of the social structure within these communities, it is the opportunity to analyse the records of two firms active in the same communities that provides perhaps the most important historiographical lesson. Elsewhere in the Anglo-American world, the main thrust of revisionist historiography has been to downplay constraints in order to stress, and indeed celebrate, human agency. In an influential recent work on the people of Newfoundland and the remarkable culture they created, however, the residents of outport Newfoundland have been portrayed as victims of "the ties that bind".[10] The perception of the merchants as hegemonic, which informs Gerald Sider's work, is not in itself new. In fact it is a touchstone of Newfoundland historiography that not only did the merchants dominate the fishery — the debate being largely one of whether or not this was a good thing — but that their credit system bound the fishing families to particular merchant firms. Dependent on merchants not only for fishing supplies, but also frequently for the wherewithal to get through the winter, the

10 Gerald M. Sider, *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration* (Cambridge, 1986).

options for these petty commodity producers appear, even in the work of Sider's critics, as petty indeed.[11]

GRAPH 3

Differentiation & the Labour Market
Showing the distribution of person-years hired by the known size of the employer



Due to the importance of the question, our analysis of how frequently people maintained accounts with more than one merchant has erred on the side of caution. In both Ryan's and Templeman's indexes people were identified not only by their name and, often, place of residence, but frequently, as is still sometimes the case in the telephone directory for Bonavista, by the name of at least one of their parents. We established three categories; the first, which we called a "firm link", meant that the person had an account at both firms; the second, which we called a "probable link", meant that the person might have had an account with both firms, but we could not be certain of this fact; and the third, which we called "not linked", was for all

11 Sean Cadigan's thesis, which stresses the stealing of topsoil and the eating of fish offal in defence of a resource-based historical explanation, provides a fine example of this "misérabiliste" school. See Sean Cadigan, "Economic and Social Relations of Production on the Northeast-Coast of Newfoundland, with Special Reference to Conception Bay, 1785-1855", Ph.D. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1991.

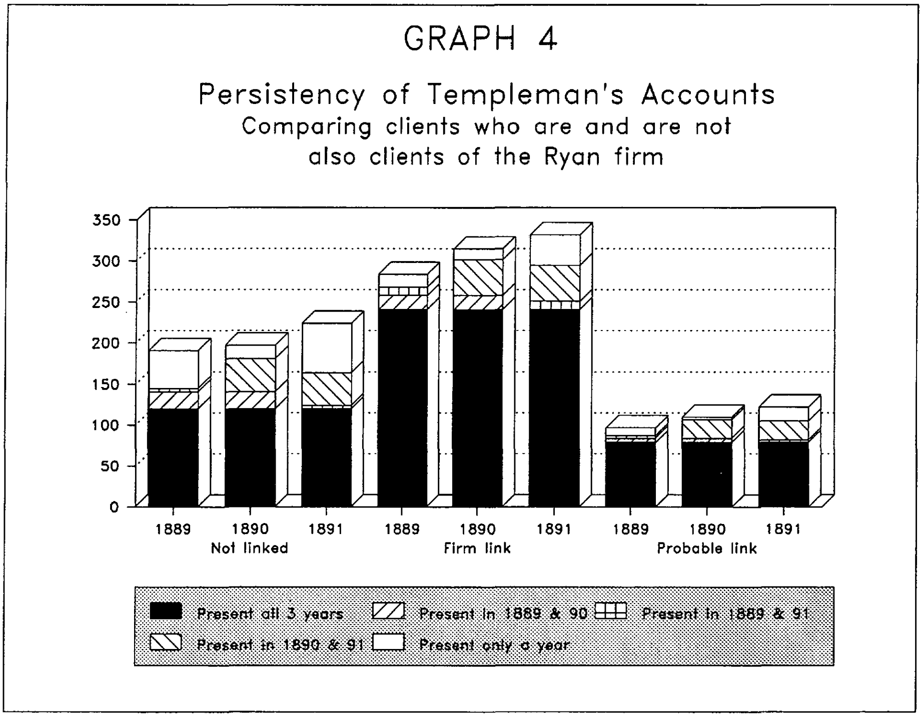
those people for whom the evidence did not strongly support their placement in either of the other categories. In order for a person to be considered a "firm link", the entries on both indexes had to be identical. If either the place of residence or the name of the parent was given in only one of the indexes and everything else matched it was considered a "probable link". All other potential linkages, including those where both the place and parent were absent from one of the entries, were considered not to be linked. Undoubtedly, further analysis of the records will result in many of the "probables" and some of the "not linked" being reclassified. Despite this cautious approach, the results were remarkable.

Of the 825 client accounts on the books of Templeman's in the years 1889 to 1891, 378 people (46 per cent) were classified as "firm links", while a further 140 people (17 per cent) were "probable links". Thus it was a minority of Templeman's clients who did not maintain accounts at both Ryan's and Templeman's. When one recalls the significantly greater number of individual accounts than families in these communities, it is highly likely that families without access to more than one merchant's system of credit would have been in a distinct minority. Graph 4 plots the persistence on Templeman's books of these people by category and the results significantly challenge the revisionist historiographical interpretation of merchant hegemony. People in the "not linked" category, represented by the first three columns on the bar graph, were least likely to remain on the books for all three years. Not only was "leakage" between firms therefore more akin to a flood, but those whom we have been led to believe were bound by the strongest ties — the people who were dependent on only one firm for credit — showed the greatest mobility. In other words, the option of playing one merchant off against another was a real possibility for many petty commodity producers, while for those who, for whatever reason, did not have this option, mobility in the developing labour market was probably important.

If this was indeed the situation, then Sider's interpretation, which reduces the complexity of outport Newfoundland communities to a situation wherein the presumed, hegemonic dominance of merchants explains so much, is clearly in need of serious revision. The anthropological culturalist explanation, which Sider represents so well, is not however the only approach that is thrown into question by our findings. More generally, the apparent consensus among historians that a top-down approach is the appropriate way to understand the socio-economic development of Newfoundland is also challenged. For some this challenge might not appear to be too serious, for after all Bonavista was a relatively large community. Three points need to be stressed in this regard. First, the patterns we have been describing were not unique to the town of Bonavista itself. Residents of the numerous smaller communities "up shore" and around the headland at the top of Trinity Bay also enjoyed the same options. Second, the presence of more than one merchant in an area was the norm rather than the exception in late-19th-century "rural" Newfoundland. Indeed, the options we have been describing are based on the records of only two of the merchant firms operating out of Bonavista. There is no reason to believe that the other merchant firms serving this area, whose records have not survived, would have decreased the options available to these fishing families; quite the contrary. Third, in the period we have been studying most fishing families in

Newfoundland lived in or relatively near towns not greatly dissimilar from Bonavista. The exceptional communities were those studied by anthropologists in the mid- to late 20th century, such as the fictionally titled "Deep Harbour" on Newfoundland's south coast, which was used to illustrate Sider's work.[12]

Our admittedly preliminary findings therefore raise an important question: why has there been the assumption of a historical relationship that bound fishing families to particular merchants? Although hardly definitive, the indexes do provide indications for further research on this central question. Sixteen people or firms were identified in Ryan's index as employing an average of three or more people in each of the three years studied. Strictly speaking, none of these people or firms were firmly established as also being clients of Philip Templeman, although two people (James Ryan of J.T. Ryan and Abraham Skiffington, Sr., of A. Skiffington & Company) did have individual accounts with Templeman's, while Roger Abbott and



12 The choice of these communities was deliberate, for anthropologists believed that by studying isolated outports they would be examining the "traditional" Newfoundland fishery. The ahistorical nature of this assumption reflects the disciplinary denial of the centrality of time in ethnographic studies.

Hugh Hicks were classified as "probable links". In other words, 12 of the 15 largest employers doing business with Ryan's had no apparent connection with Templeman's. It might well be that historians and social scientists have taken the most prominent part of the fishing community for the altogether more complex whole.

If the ties that bound the dealers and traders to a particular merchant were stronger than those binding the majority of fishing families, then there are important repercussions for the staple theory. For as we have seen there was clear evidence of differentiation among commodity producers, while those at the top of the scale enjoyed different, but not necessarily greater, options. In this context, the cost for the traders and dealers of operating beyond the limits imposed by their own family fishery would have been an increased dependence on a particular merchant's credit. If this was indeed the case, then the limits to capital accumulation by these "tied" dealers and traders were not dictated by the nature of the available resource base, but were the result of the historical development of the social relations of production in this industry. Thus the limits to, and pace of, capitalist development in outport Newfoundland were not inherent in "staple" production, but were socially constructed.

The socially constructed nature of capitalist development raises the complex question of the dialectical relationship between the social relations of production and the forces of production in a fishery where the family constituted the basic unit of production. On the one hand, limited as it may have been, the potential for enhanced capital accumulation by the "tied" dealers and traders was based on the growing differentiation among petty commodity producing families. To go beyond the limits to the forces of production in a technologically rudimentary, family-based fishery required a "surplus" of labour in certain families that could be exploited by others. Thus, the greater the differentiation within the community, the greater the potential for growth of the traders and dealers, and the greater the strain that would have been placed on their "tied" relationships with their merchant suppliers. On the other hand, in a truck system, a merchant's profits could come just as much, and perhaps more, from the nominal prices charged for goods purchased as they did from the actual sale of the fish produced. Merchants would therefore have an obvious interest in maintaining the largest number of solvent families on their books.

The varied options open to the majority of fishing families stemmed in part from these contradictory forces at work within their communities. By permitting families to maintain multiple accounts, merchants slowed the process of differentiation upon which the further development of their "tied" dealers and traders depended. How this dialectical relationship affected productive and gender relations within the producing families will have to await further work on the highly revealing substantive ledgers and journals. The fact that we can now pose such a question, however, is the result of having treated these indexes for what they are in the present: no mere finding aids, but important historical evidence from the past.

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