

The Merchant Triangle in Transition: Managing the Cod Fishery from Eastern Harbor, Cape Breton, in 1891

ROBERT CAMPBELL*

Beginning in the late 1700s, the management of the cod fishery in Cape Breton was dominated by the Jersey merchant firm of Charles Robin and Company. In the final decades of the 1800s, a number of changes were taking place, both with respect to ownership of the Company, and in terms of economic developments in Cape Breton. The period was characterized by a combination of clinging to long-established traditions and adapting to new challenges and opportunities. The impact of this transition on the day-to-day operations of the Company is illustrated through an exploration of Company records generated during 1891.

À partir de la fin du XVIII^e siècle, la gestion de la pêche à la morue au Cap-Breton a été dominée par la Charles Robin and Company, une entreprise commerciale de Jersey. Dans les dernières décennies du XIX^e siècle, un certain nombre de changements se sont produits, tant en ce qui concerne la propriété de l'entreprise qu'en ce qui a trait aux progrès économiques au Cap-Breton. La période se caractérise à la fois par la persistance de traditions établies depuis longtemps et par l'adaptation à de nouveaux défis et à de nouvelles possibilités. Un examen des dossiers de la compagnie produits en 1891 permet de brosser un tableau des répercussions de cette transition sur les activités quotidiennes de la compagnie.

THE STORY of the Acadian people has generally focused on two elements – expulsion (deportation) by the British in 1755¹ and the long-term struggle to establish and maintain an autonomous identity, distinct from both the English and other French Canadians.² Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a

* Robert Campbell is associate professor in the Shannon School of Business at Cape Breton University. He would like to thank Andy Parnaby and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

1 See Sally Ross and Alphonse Deveau, *The Acadians of Nova Scotia: Past and Present* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1992), pp. 54-70; and Naomi E. S. Griffiths, *The Acadian Deportation: Deliberate Perfidy or Cruel Necessity* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969).

2 See Naomi E. S. Griffiths, "The Formation of a Community and the Interpretation of Identity: The Acadians, 1604-1997," *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1998), pp. 32-46; Christina Keppie, "Understanding the Meaning of Acadie," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2011), pp. 200-227; and André Magord, *The Quest for Autonomy in Acadia* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2009).

systematic drive for self-determination was initiated through a series of Acadian national conferences,³ the first three of which (1881, 1884, 1890) resulted in the establishment of a patron saint, a national feast day, a flag, and a national hymn, along with a strong resolve to resist assimilation.⁴ While Chéticamp was relatively isolated compared to Arichat and the Acadian communities in the rest of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island during this period, the local people engaged in efforts to ensure the maintenance of Catholicism and the French language, with the community's priest, Father Pierre Fiset, encouraging entrepreneurial activities aimed at establishing economic independence from the Jersey merchant firm of Charles Robin and Company (CRC) that had controlled the local fishery for the previous century.⁵ The combination of isolation and the integral role of CRC in the economic life of Chéticamp meant that this community followed a unique trajectory among Acadian settlements in Canada.

Through the optics of business history and social history, part of my objective here is to contribute to a broader understanding of economic life in late-nineteenth-century Atlantic Canada. We know a good deal about how the truck system operated in the Atlantic fishery, but we know much less about its undoing. This case study opens up that quest. More specifically, through an examination of the operational details of managing the fishery in this understudied locale, I seek to show that, despite the attempts of the Company's representatives to cling to long-established traditions, the ways in which both they and their clients were responding to advances in communication and transportation technologies, coupled with the community's drive for self-determination, contributed to the demise of the Robin firm's truck system and its merchant triangle.

During the nineteenth century, the three primary economic activities carried out on Cape Breton Island were coal mining, farming, and fishing for cod.⁶ Participation in the cod fishery was common at various locations around Cape Breton on a small scale, but it was exploited most systematically in the Acadian communities around Arichat on Isle Madame, on the southern coast, and around Chéticamp in the north. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, under British rule, entrepreneurial merchants from the Channel Islands began looking for opportunities to capitalize on the lucrative fishery in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and off the coast of Cape Breton. As they took over the traditional French fishing grounds, which had been established around Louisbourg in the early eighteenth century, they were able to lure some of the Acadians back to Cape Breton.⁷ Chief among the merchants was the Robin family of Jersey who, at least in name, were

3 See Magord, *The Quest*, pp. 173-176, for a discussion of the dates, locations, and accomplishments of the 17 conferences up to 2004.

4 Griffiths, "The Formation of a Community," p. 40.

5 See Anselme Chiasson, *Chéticamp: History and Acadian Traditions* (Wreck Cove: Breton Books, 1998), pp. 52, 60-61, 106, 124; and Ross and Deveau, *The Acadians*, p. 108. Father Fiset served the community from 1875 to 1909.

6 See Stephen J. Hornsby, *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).

7 Ross and Deveau, *The Acadians*, pp. 103-126.

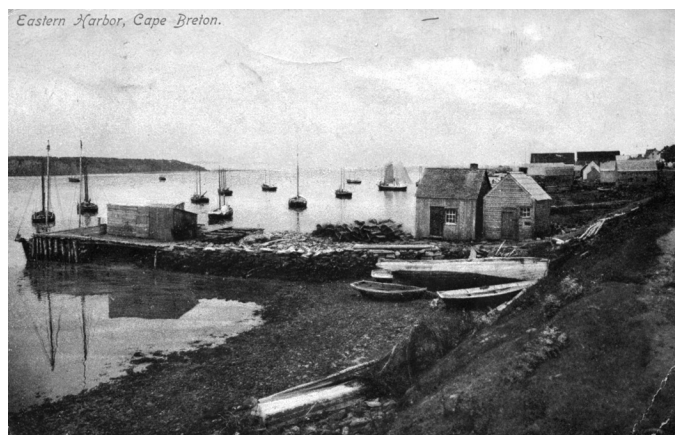


Figure 1 : Eastern Harbour, ca. 1900.

Source: The Eastern Postcard Company, Sydney NS. 84-756-14856. Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

associated with the economic life of Cape Bretoners until the Company store in Chéticamp finally closed in 2006.

David Lee and Rosemary Ommer have admirably told the story of CRC operations in the Gaspé region;⁸ however, the Company's involvement in Cape Breton has yet to attract sustained attention.⁹ From the mid-1760s, Charles Robin concentrated his efforts in the Baie des Chaleurs, with the operations at Arichat becoming known as Philip Robin and Company (PRC). The two companies operated as separate business interests, both reporting back to the parent company in Jersey. While CRC enjoyed a monopoly in the Baie des Chaleurs,¹⁰ several competitors existed on Isle Madame, leading PRC to expand quickly to the Chéticamp area.¹¹ In this latter area PRC would dominate, and here the final iteration of the Robin business in Canada (Robin, Jones and Whitman) would continue operating into the twenty-first century.

The business model employed by both CRC and PRC saw capital, management, and the goods required for both fishing and daily existence being supplied from England, while the fishing was left to local inhabitants with the appropriate knowledge and expertise. The Robin firms purchased fish, processed it for export, and then sold it to lucrative foreign markets, predominantly in Spain, Italy, and Brazil. All materials were shipped on vessels owned by the Robins, and the product was distributed through Robin family agents in major ports like Cadiz,

8 David Lee, *The Robins in Gaspé, 1766-1825* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1984); Rosemary E. Ommer, *From Outpost to Outport: A Structural Analysis of the Jersey-Gaspé Cod Fishery, 1767-1886* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

9 A recent exception is Erna MacLeod, "The Letterbooks of Charles Robin-Collas & Company: Changes and Challenges in Cape Breton Island's Cod Fishery, 1886-1895," *Acadiensis*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2013), pp. 27-50.

10 See Rosemary E. Ommer, "All the Fish of the Post": Resource Property Rights and Development in a Nineteenth-Century Inshore Fishery," *Acadiensis*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1981), pp. 107-123.

11 Hornsby reports that, by the 1870s, 21 merchants were operating on Isle Madame (*Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton*, p. 155).

Naples, and Rio. Cod was traded for credit at the Company store, which for the most part kept local fishermen in a state of indebtedness to the Company, while inhibiting the development of a sustainable local economy.¹² British merchants regularly employed the combined monopolistic and monopsonistic aspects of this practice,¹³ known as the truck system, using it at home and abroad, not just in the fishery, but also in mining, textiles, and other industries.¹⁴ The other major aspect of their practice, which Ommer calls the “merchant triangle,” reflected separate locations of the management, production, and marketing functions of the business, which were geographically very widespread.¹⁵

In the 1870s, PRC operations in Cape Breton were merged with those of CRC, and Paspébiac, which had been the administrative centre for CRC’s Canadian interests since 1767, took over all the combined Company’s administration. In January of 1886, the Jersey Banking Company failed, forcing the Robin family to liquidate the firm. By the end of March 1886, new Jersey-based owners had been found, and the family business became a limited liability corporation under the name Charles Robin-Collas and Company. The Canadian branches of the firm did not begin operating under this new name until the summer of 1891. Continued Jersey control of the Company was short-lived. In 1910, a group of Nova Scotia partners purchased the Cape Breton operation, becoming the Robin, Jones and Whitman Company (RJW), with its headquarters in Halifax.¹⁶

A series of local developments took place during the late 1800s that would have a significant impact on the Robin family’s Cape Breton interests. The dredging of Chéticamp Harbour occurred in 1874; construction of the Government Wharf followed a decade later, with regular maintenance of the navigation channel being carried out from that point on.¹⁷ The establishment of a regular steamer service between Pictou, on the Nova Scotia mainland, and Chéticamp in 1887 facilitated the transport of goods to and from the rest of Nova Scotia.¹⁸ Finally, the introduction of telegraph service in 1891 allowed for more rapid communication.¹⁹

This case study of the operation of Charles Robin and Company in Cape Breton during the 1891 fishing season is based primarily on the content of the letter books for that year,²⁰ with additional material being drawn from the ledgers

12 See Gerald M. Sider, “The Ties that Bind: Culture and Agriculture, Property and Propriety in the Newfoundland Fishing Village,” *Social History*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1980), pp. 1-39.

13 Acting as sole supplier of goods and sole purchaser of fish.

14 For a general introduction to the nature and history of the truck system, see George W. Hilton, *The Truck System, Including a History of the British Truck Acts, 1465-1960* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1960). With particular reference to the Robin operation, see Rosemary E. Ommer, “The Truck System in Gaspé, 1822-77,” *Acadiensis*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1989), pp. 91-114. For operations of the merchant triangle at each apex, see Ommer, *Outpost to Outport*, especially chapters 2, 3, and 4.

15 See Rosemary E. Ommer, “‘A Peculiar and Immediate Dependence of the Crown’: The Basis of the Jersey Merchant Triangle,” *Business History*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1983), pp. 107-124.

16 Lee, *The Robins in Gaspé*, p. 98.

17 Chiasson, *Chéticamp*, pp. 51-52.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

19 See MacLeod, “Changes and Challenges,” pp. 35-38.

20 Beaton Institute [hereafter BI], Cape Breton University, MG 14, 55, vols. A3 and A4. With few exceptions, Philip Le Montais, the Company’s agent at Eastern Harbor, signed all the letters. The American rather than British spelling of harbor was used in all correspondence. I retain this spelling throughout.

for the surrounding period (1883-1897).²¹ The selection of the year 1891 reflects a number of considerations. First, 1891 represents a period of transition, during which the relationship between the local population and the Company in Chéticamp went from one of dependence to one of interdependence. Second, it stands at the beginning of rapid and significant changes in communication and transportation technologies. Third, it precedes and is the basis for a period of growing product innovation at Chéticamp that would see a shift away from primary reliance on cod and an increased emphasis on haddock, mackerel, herring, and lobster canning.²² Finally, it coincides with the adoption of the corporate name change, actually a systemic process that took five years to complete.

Production

The primary economic focus of CRC was supplying lucrative European and South American markets with dried cod. Table 1 records the output of the Company’s Cape Breton fishery, as measured in quintals.²³ The four distinct locations reflect the fact that the firm operated an inshore fishery, and therefore fishers would not likely travel more than a few miles away from their home stations.²⁴

Table 1: Cod Production in Quintals¹

Location	1890 Final Totals	1891 Estimated Totals
Eastern Harbor	2,508	2,500
Chéticamp	4,457	3,500
Big Pond	1,849	2,500
Arichat	4,336	4,000
Total	13,150	12,500

1. The 1890 totals are final numbers for that year’s fishing season, whereas the 1891 totals represent projected numbers based on production to date (September 18).

Source: To CRC Paspébiac, December 27, 1890, and September 18, 1891.

The total quantities of fish for the 1890 and 1891 fishing seasons were 13,150 and a projected 12,500 quintals, respectively. Letter books usually only contain records of quantities of fish of various qualities shipped on a specific date and reported to Paspébiac. For example, in a letter of May 22, 1890, Philip Le Montais, the Company’s local agent, reported that 107 tubs of top quality dried

21 BI MG 14, 55, vols. C45 through C81.

22 MacLeod, “Changes and Challenges,” pp. 40-44.

23 A quintal, or hundredweight, was equal to 112 pounds.

24 As an artifact of the history of postal service in the region, the name Eastern Harbor actually refers to the modern town of Chéticamp, while the name Chéticamp refers to a location on the southwest tip of Chéticamp Island, now known as La Pointe. In a case of substituting English names for French ones, the Robins used the name Big Pond to refer to the place known by the local Acadian population as Grand Étang, a community situated a few miles west along the coast from Chéticamp. See MacLeod, “Changes and Challenges,” pp. 29-30.

cod,²⁵ 10 tubs of lesser quality cod, 30 tubs of top quality dried haddock, and 12 tubs of lesser quality haddock were shipped on board *Ellen Mary*.²⁶ Hornsby, in his history of nineteenth-century Cape Breton, notes that the total amount of dried cod being produced in Cape Breton by the late 1880s was in the range of 160,000 to 180,000 quintals, almost triple what it had been at mid-century, with the traditional Acadian sites accounting for just over half that amount.²⁷ It would appear by this point that the Robin family's share of the industry had been reduced to less than 10 per cent of the provincial total and less than 25 per cent of what was being caught in the Acadian sites.

In her analysis of overall trends in the Newfoundland fishery, Ommer indicates that production of salt cod peaked in 1884 in Newfoundland.²⁸ Hornsby shows that the peak year in Cape Breton was 1889,²⁹ while government reports record that the 1891 fishing season in Cape Breton was a very poor one due to bad weather and scarcity of bait, with the bulk of the catch being landed in November and December.³⁰ This explains why, in the spring of 1891, Le Montais reported that fish had to be purchased from the firm of Lawrence, Aucoin and Doucet to meet the Company's quota.³¹ Chiasson suggests that this firm was a competitor of CRC – he relates that Sam Lawrence, from Margaree, Cape Breton, had set up a fishing business and store in the mid-1800s to compete against the Robins.³² The business was run by Sam's brother Walter, who apparently had a reputation for dealing more harshly with the local fishers than the Robins.³³

CRC did not only deal in fish; some letters indicate that small quantities of cattle were being sold to St. Pierre and Miquelon, as well as hay for the Gaspé.³⁴ However, the amounts involved were negligible with respect to the overall economic activity of the firm. Just before the opening of the fishing season, Le Montais related that the fishers were busy farming and getting their boats ready.³⁵ In contrast to what was happening in the Gaspé,³⁶ the Cape Breton letters do not suggest that the firm saw this agricultural activity as a threat. Rather, it appears that farming was viewed as bringing a level of stability to the local population, allowing them to survive rough periods in the fishery and providing the firm with

25 The word "tubs" was used to express shipments in terms of containers rather than weight of fish. A tub held a quintal of fish.

26 To CRC Paspébiac, May 22, 1890.

27 Hornsby, *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton*, p. 155.

28 Rosemary E. Ommer, "One Hundred Years of Fishery Crises in Newfoundland," *Acadiensis*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1994), p. 8.

29 Hornsby, *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton*, p. 155.

30 *Supplement No. 1 to the Annual Report of the Department of Fisheries: Fisheries Statements and Inspector's Reports for the Year 1891*, p. 259, Department of Fisheries and Oceans website, <http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/Library/199178-1891.pdf>.

31 To CRC Paspébiac, May 30, 1891.

32 Chiasson, *Chéticamp*, p. 50.

33 Walter Lawrence (age 60), born in Scotland, is listed in the 1891 *Census of Canada* as living in Chéticamp with his wife and two children, working as a merchant. Judging by the census listing, the Lawrences lived next door to the Robin establishment.

34 To CRC Paspébiac, August 19, 1891.

35 To CRC Paspébiac, May 5, 1891.

36 Ommer, *From Outpost to Outport*, p. 88.

a permanent pool of available workers, rather than the transitory workforce that was often the case in Newfoundland.

By all accounts, 1891 was a bad year for the Robin operation, and we now know that it occurred at the start of a period of steady decline in the Atlantic fishery overall. In the years prior to 1891, it does not appear that the firm had significant competition in the Chéticamp area, but clearly many more operations were doing business in the rest of Cape Breton. About two-thirds of the firm's production came from the Chéticamp area, with the final third coming from Arichat, even though that location was highly competitive.

Human Resources

Behind the quintals of fish were the people whose lives were closely linked to the ebbs and flows of production. The workforce supporting the Robin operation comprised administrative personnel and skilled tradesmen from Jersey, fish processing staff from Jersey, the Gaspé, Quebec City, and sometimes from the local population, local fish dealers who supplied dried cod, and local fishers who supplied uncured, cleaned fish to the Robin processing facility.³⁷ The exact configuration evolved as a function both of demand and also of local population growth, shifting as individuals took advantage of other employment opportunities. Beyond these employees were the masters and crews of the Company ships.

Part of the administrative complement of the firm is identified in Le Montais' roster of clerks for the summer stations (see Table 2).³⁸ The personnel at Arichat were not included in his roster, and this omission may indicate that staff remained at the Arichat base throughout the year. However, some of the twelve named in the roster appear to have taken up permanent residency in Cape Breton, while others came from Jersey or the Gaspé for the fishing season.

In a letter to Arichat at the end of 1890, Le Montais indicated that he would be returning to Jersey on January 10 with the account books.³⁹ Philip Fiott appears to have been left in charge, as letters and orders to suppliers during the winter months were all sent under his signature. The precise date that Le Montais returned to Cape Breton is not known, but the first letter of 1891 under his name is dated April 6.⁴⁰ In early May, Le Montais reported that the Company would have about the same number of barges as last year, and that crews should be sent.⁴¹ This request would appear to suggest that the personnel needed to operate the barges were long-term employees of the Company who spent the winter in the Gaspé region and came to Cape Breton during the fishing season.

In addition to the clerks listed on the roster, Le Montais reported that he had hired eleven men to work in the Company's rooms (processing fish) and two more to tend salmon nets for the season.⁴² The entire Robin operation in Cape Breton, outside of Arichat, thus appears to have directly employed about 20 men. This

³⁷ See Hornsby, *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton*, pp. 11-14, 89-90, 154-155.

³⁸ To CRC Paspébiac, September 14, 1891.

³⁹ To CRC Arichat, December 30, 1890.

⁴⁰ To CRC Paspébiac, April 6, 1891.

⁴¹ To CRC Paspébiac, May 8, 1891.

⁴² To CRC Paspébiac, June 24, 1891.

Table 2: Company Personnel – Permanent and Seasonal

Eastern Harbor	
Philip Le Montais ¹	Agent
Philip John Fiott	Book Keeper
John Camiot	Clerk
Chéticamp	
George Le Brun ²	Agent
Percy Huelin	Book Keeper
Alfred Briard ³	Clerk
Edward Le Brocq	Foreman
Walter de La Cour	Carpenter
Philip Le Gros	Blacksmith
Adolphus Henry	Cook
John Tanquier	Invalid
Big Pond	
Thomas Le Brun ⁴	Agent

- 1 Philip Le Montais (age 55) is listed in the 1891 *Census of Canada* as living in Chéticamp, working as a manager. Philip John Fiott (age 25) and John Camiot (age 18) are listed as living in the same dwelling as Le Montais. All were born in Jersey.
- 2 George Le Brun (age 33) is listing in the 1891 *Census of Canada* as living with his wife and two young daughters in Chéticamp, working as a commercial agent. All were born in Jersey.
- 3 Alfred Briard (age 16), born in Jersey, is listed in the 1891 *Census of Canada* as living in Chéticamp, working as a clerk.
- 4 Thomas Le Brun (age 33), born in Jersey, is listed in the 1891 *Census of Canada* as living in Chéticamp as a lodger in a property owned by Charles Robin and Company, working as a commercial agent.

Source: Roster of clerks for summer season, Philip Le Montais to CRC Paspébiac, September 14, 1891.

staff represents a very small fraction of the estimated 8,200 people working in the Cape Breton fishing industry at the time,⁴³ but it is important to remember that the number of individuals supplying fish to the Company would be much greater. The ledgers indicate that about 550 individuals in Eastern Harbor and Chéticamp had accounts with the Company in 1891.

Irrespective of its make-up, the most critical aspect of managing the workforce was ensuring that the firm had adequate access to fish. In a letter to Jersey at the start of the 1891 season,⁴⁴ Le Montais related the following:

All the crews for our barges both here and at Chéticamp have agreed to comply with our arrangements for the coming season. They deliver us the fish at \$1.00 per hundred pounds off the knife. Last week have called a meeting of our dealers outside of those who are in our barges. This hard crowd formed a combination and

⁴³ Hornsby, *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton*, p. 152.

⁴⁴ To CRC Jersey, April 20, 1891.

not a single one put in an appearance. We consider this an insult as the majority of them will have to utilize our property later on. We are determined to be very severe on them, consequently we tell them one and all daily our views and in delivering advances we impress on their minds that the price of fish is \$1.00 per hundred pounds fresh the whole of the season for the payment of their accounts. In the meantime I am of the opinion that the majority of this crowd will come to our terms, as these do, there is a better feeling among them.

This letter suggests that the local dealers formed an economic class distinct from the individual fishers employed by the Company. It also stresses the fact that, despite whatever relative independence the dealers thought they possessed, they would eventually have to rely on CRC to remain viable. On a visit to Eastern Harbor in May 1889, George Romeril,⁴⁵ the Company's principal agent in Paspébiac, observed that the business showed signs of being neither profitable nor safe, as the fishermen wanted to set prices.⁴⁶ Hornsby reports that the Company responded by pressing charges against debtors.⁴⁷ The apparent tension between the Company and the local inhabitants suggests that the fundamental mechanism of the truck system was being threatened.

As Ommer demonstrates, the truck system "was the means by which a merchant minimized the risk of having his control over access to fish challenged by independent, indigenous fishermen."⁴⁸ This mechanism is seen in action toward the end of the summer of 1891, when Le Montais wrote to Paspébiac that he had just wired that office requesting that some action be taken to prevent fish dealers at Big Pond from shipping their catches directly to Halifax.⁴⁹ A week later, he wrote back, expressing his appreciation for a price increase and suggesting that he would now be able to re-establish good relations with the dealers.⁵⁰ A couple of weeks earlier he had reported that the price of goods at Big Pond, Cape Breton, had been increased to match the higher price of fish.⁵¹

Unlike the Newfoundland fishery – where, by 1890, "the merchant was tied to the fisher rather than vice versa"⁵² as a result of fishers holding accounts with more than one merchant and of a squeeze on merchants' liquidity (their suppliers, responding to the end-of-century recession, were demanding payment on outstanding accounts)⁵³ – Chéticamp-area company operations still reflected the traditional method of sending management personnel from Jersey and hiring local

45 George Romeril appears to have been the Company's principal agent in the Gaspé. He is recorded as testifying on the economic potential of the cod fishery in 1877. See *Record of the Proceedings of the Halifax Fisheries Commission* (1877), p. 274. George Romeril (age 45) is listed in the 1891 *Census of Canada* as living in Paspébiac West, working as a *gérant maison commerciale principale*.

46 MacLeod, "Changes and Challenges," p. 46.

47 Stephen J. Hornsby, "Staple Trades, Subsistence Agriculture, and Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton Island," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 66, no. 2 (1989), p. 415.

48 Ommer, "All the Fish," p. 111.

49 To CRC Paspébiac, August 18, 1891.

50 To CRC Paspébiac, August 26, 1891.

51 To CRC Paspébiac, July 25, 1891.

52 Ommer, "One Hundred Years," p. 8.

53 See James Murray, *The Commercial Crisis in Newfoundland: Cause, Consequences and Cure* (St. John's: Queen's Printer, 1895).

fishers. Keeping the price of fish low and retaining a level of indebtedness through supplying goods and renting out barges and boats was still the primary operational logic of the firm. Curiously, the fact that fishers had access to other local buyers does not appear to have posed much of a threat to the firm, even though it is clear that opportunities for fishers to sell directly to other merchants were increasing. Further research needs to be done to explain why this was the case. However, it does suggest that the people of Chéticamp viewed their survival as directly linked to the survival of CRC.

Financial and Legal Matters

At the beginning of each season, a letter would be sent from Jersey to the Bank of Montreal in Halifax, renewing the assignment of power of attorney for the agent and providing capital for the start-up of the year's operations. The ledgers show that capital was sent from Jersey in monthly instalments, and Table 3 shows the total funding for the Cape Breton operation, including the value of British goods sent (expressed in dollars and as a percentage of the annual total). While we do not know the extent to which Le Montais would have been aware of the level of funding being made available to him during the season, we do know that, in his initial correspondence with the bank, he asked to be informed of the amount deposited and the current interest rate.⁵⁴

Table 3: Operating Advances from Jersey¹

Year	Capital	Value of Goods (% of annual total)	Total
1890	62,533.28	4,372.12 (6.5%)	66,905.40
1891	70,722.16	3,823.05 (5.2%)	74,545.21

1 The table shows the amounts for the only two years for which the amounts were reported with this level of detail.

Source: CRC Ledgers, 1890 and 1891.

The amount of total advances for 1891 represents an increase of 11.5 per cent over the previous year, but there are no records indicating whether this figure was based on the previous year's performance, or whether it reflected a move on the part of the new owners to bolster the operation. Contrary to what might be expected within the context of a Jersey-based truck system, the value of British goods is minimal. While the figures for these two years cannot in themselves represent sufficient evidence to show that this aspect of the merchant triangle had broken down, it does raise the question of where goods were coming from, if they were not being supplied from England, a point discussed later in reference to local suppliers.

54 To Bank of Montreal, April 21, 1891.

How was the money spent? Table 4 provides details of the costs of running the operation. The two components of this table (itemized expenses and transfers) represent the detailed costs associated with the head office operation at Eastern Harbor and the amounts allocated to stations and other Company locations. The amounts transferred to Jersey and Paspébiac likely reflect payment for goods received from those locations. Itemized breakdowns of the amounts transferred to Arichat, Big Pond, and Chéticamp are not included in the head office ledgers, but the amounts are roughly proportional to the percentage of the annual catch from these stations.

The itemized list from Eastern Harbor provides significant insights into the daily operations of the Company. The amount for livestock represents the station's portion of what the ledgers indicate was a total of \$925.05 spent on beef, mutton, pork, milk, and butter purchased from local farms to support the Company's staff. There is no indication that any of these provisions were sold to the clientele. The amount of potatoes and other foodstuffs grown by the local population and sold to the Company, as payment against debt, only shows up in small quantities on individual accounts.

Table 4: Summary of Expenses 1891

Item	Amount
Livestock	153.99
Travel	121.33
Subscriptions	57.45
Legal	10.29
Telegrams/Postage	142.39
Office	86.16
Shop	44.82
Ellen Mary	1,502.00
Swallow	1,280.86
Barges and Boats	262.69
Cook Room	928.84
House	552.27
Establishment	1,907.75
Subtotal (EH)	7,050.84
Transfers:	
Jersey	2,049.00
Paspébiac	769.50
Arichat	26,765.62
Big Pond	12,284.18
Cheticamp	27,251.20
Subtotal (Transfers)	69,119.50
Total	76,170.34

Source: CRC Ledger, 1891.

The major travel expense was passage for Le Montais to Jersey, the subscriptions were to local newspapers, magazines, and trade journals, and the legal fees were for deeds and filing of corporate documents. The fact that *Ellen Mary* and *Swallow* appear on the list indicates that the cost of operating and maintaining these Company vessels was allocated to the Cape Breton operation. The barges and boats were rented to clients for the season, but keeping them in working order was the responsibility of the Company. Expenses for the house represent the living quarters for the staff from Jersey, and the “establishment” is the fish processing facility. Given the relatively large cost of running the cook room, it is logical to suggest that all staff and employees ate their meals there.

Figures for the years 1884, 1886, 1889, 1892, and 1893 (see Table 5) appear to be significantly lower than those for the surrounding years. This inconsistency may reflect actual amounts spent or, more likely, missing data. What is significant is that, given that annual capitalization was in the range of \$70,000, fully 17 to 20 per cent of the Company’s transactions were taking place in cash. Further, neither the bank crisis nor the transfer of ownership appears to have had any impact on the flow of cash. Explaining the large jump in cash in the mid-1890s is beyond the scope of the current study.

Table 5: Annual Cash Totals, 1883-1897

Year	Amount (\$)
1883	12,116.01
1884	6,177.90
1885	11,244.45
1886	6,246.43
1887	11,354.70
1888	11,874.36
1889	5,579.41
1890	12,686.99
1891	11,332.77
1892	7,259.60
1893	6,083.24
1894	13,569.55
1895	23,659.66
1896	22,599.17
1897	27,378.44

Source: CRC Ledgers, 1883-1897.

Following Hilton, Ommer indicates that the truck system is generally seen to represent a strategy adopted by small businesses with restricted access to liquid capital.⁵⁵ Further, with reference to the Company’s operations in the Gaspé in the mid-1800s, she states that “cash transactions for any substantial amount were almost never with fishermen, but with other firms or people with whom the firm

⁵⁵ Ommer, “The Truck System,” p. 92.

did not deal on a regular basis.”⁵⁶ David MacDonald points out that, by the mid-1850s, Newman and Company, operating on the south coast of Newfoundland, would allow its clients to take cash for positive balances on their accounts.⁵⁷ By the end of the century, at least in Cape Breton, the situation was quite different. Cash appears to have played a more prominent role in regular commerce. MacLeod notes that, due to the competitive environment in Arichat, by 1889 the majority of fish was being paid for in cash.⁵⁸

Table 6 provides a summary of the amounts of cash received and paid out for the year. The credit side of this account begins with the amount brought forward (B/F) from the previous year. During this period, the bank amount is the result of requests issued by the agent almost weekly for cash to be sent in amounts of \$200 to \$400, in denominations of tens and twenties, demonstrating that, while individual cash transactions may not have been very large, they were frequent.⁵⁹ The dealer amount reflects cash payments against outstanding balances on accounts, and the goods amount represents cash payments for goods at the Company store, rather than purchases on credit. Ommer indicates that clients paying cash for goods in the Company store enjoyed lower prices than those who purchased goods on credit.⁶⁰

Table 6: Cash Transaction Summary, 1891

Item	Amount
Credit	
B/F	373.01
Bank	7,500.00
Dealers	1,906.10
Goods	1,553.66
Total	11,332.77
Debit	
Dealers	9,501.03
Big Pond	1,439.18
Arichat	109.37
C/F	283.19
Total	11,332.77

Source: CRC Ledger, 1891.

On the debit side of the account, the vast majority of cash was paid out to dealers at Eastern Harbor and Chéticamp. While the exact allocation of the amounts transferred to Big Pond and Arichat cannot be determined, it is likely

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵⁷ David A. MacDonald, “They Cannot Pay Us with Money: Newman and Company and the Supplying System in the Newfoundland Fishery, 1850-1884,” *Acadiensis*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1989), p. 147.

⁵⁸ MacLeod, “Changes and Challenges,” p. 47.

⁵⁹ To Bank of Montreal, for example, May 1, 11, and 19, 1891.

⁶⁰ Ommer, *From Outpost to Outport*, p. 124.

that the bulk of these funds were also distributed to local dealers. Perhaps the most interesting finding is that the dealers took far more cash out of the firm than they put back in, suggesting the existence of a nascent cash economy outside the primary economic relationship between the Acadians and CRC. The final figure represents the amount carried forward (C/F) into the next year.

Lee indicates that it took about five pounds of fresh fish to produce one pound of dried cod.⁶¹ About half of the difference would be lost in cleaning the fish and the other half through the drying process. Given that fishers were receiving \$1.00 per hundredweight of cleaned fish and 13,150 quintals of dried fish were produced in 1890, the firm must have received about 30,000 hundredweight of fish, representing an outlay of \$30,000. Even though this dollar figure is an estimate, it allows us to make two important observations about the nature of the business. First, about one-third of this amount was being paid out in cash. Second, the cost of raw materials represented just less than 50 per cent of the total cost of operations. One implication of the first point is that, even in the presence of long-term relationships with clients aimed at ameliorating risk, the day-to-day transactions were taking on a more short-term, over-the-counter character. The second observation suggests that the dried cod business was still sufficiently lucrative to justify operating with an overhead of 50 per cent.

Suppliers and Types of Goods

An essential part of the business model employed by the Robins involved importing the bulk of the goods required to carry on fishing and provide for daily existence at the stations. Part of the transition in the late 1800s involved an increased reliance on local suppliers, as well as an increase in the variety of goods made available to the clientele.

At the end of the 1890 season, Le Montais wrote to Paspébiac, indicating amounts owing to English suppliers that were to be carried forward to the balance sheet for 1891.⁶² While the names of the individual firms are given (fourteen in total), there is no indication of the types of goods supplied by these firms. Given the absence of correspondence with any of these companies over the 1891 season, it is reasonable to suggest that goods from these firms were forwarded to Cape Breton through Paspébiac on account. The impression that goods from English suppliers were treated differently than those from local suppliers is supported by a letter indicating that, as a consequence of poor fishing, prices in the store had been dropped, but that an effort would be made to keep the price of the English goods high.⁶³ However, the ledgers indicate that the total dollar value of English goods was quite small.

Table 7 provides a list of the local firms to which orders were placed during the season. The sheer number of firms listed here presents a stark contrast to what was taking place during this period in the Newfoundland fisheries, where outport merchant firms often appear to have been tied to a single supplier in St. John's, if

⁶¹ Lee, *The Robins in Gaspé*, p. 5.

⁶² To CRC Paspébiac, January 3, 1891.

⁶³ To CRC Paspébiac, May 30, 1891.

Table 7: Local Suppliers

Name	Location	Goods
A. & W. Smith	Halifax, N.S.	tobacco
Allen and Company	Halifax, N.S.	stationery
A. McKenna	Pictou, N.S.	tobacco
Bauld Gibson and Company	Halifax, N.S.	groceries
Brown and Webb	Halifax, N.S.	medicine, matches
Cochrane, Cassils & Co.	Montreal, P.Q.	fishing boots
Consumer Cordage Co. Ltd.	Halifax, N.S.	cordage
DeLong and Seaman	Boston, Mass.	flour, meal
Frank A. Wilson	Yarmouth, N.S.	stoves, coal
George F. Horton	Arichat, N.S.	augers, shoe thread
G. J. Hamilton and Sons	Pictou, N.S.	biscuits, confections
Hogg, Craig and Company	Pictou, N.S.	groceries
Imperial Oil Company	St. John, N.B.	oil, kerosene
James O'Brien & Co.	Montreal, P.Q.	ready-made clothing
J. & A. McMillan	St. John, N.B.	stationery
J. E. Morse	Halifax, N.S.	tea
John Glass	Quebec, P.Q.	biscuit
J. P. Cox	Halifax, N.S.	flour
J. W. Gorham	Halifax, N.S.	groceries
Logan Tanning	Pictou, N.S.	sole leather
Mark Wright and Company	Charlottetown, P.E.I.	furnishings
Shatford Brothers	Halifax, N.S.	kerosene
Thompson & Sutherland	New Glasgow, N.S.	hardware
William Parks & Son	St. John, N.B.	cotton fabric
William Stairs Sons & Morrow	Halifax, N.S.	hardware, cordage
W. L. Temple	Halifax, N.S.	tea
Wyatt Fraser	Pictou, N.S.	kerosene

Source: CRC Ledger and Letter Book, 1891.

the case of James Ryan being tied to C. T. Bowring and Company is typical.⁶⁴ It is worth noting, with respect to the relative isolation of Chéticamp, that only one of the firms listed operated in Cape Breton (George F. Horton, in Arichat). The list also demonstrates the variety of goods required to support the fishing stations, as well as the fact that in most cases the Company had access to more than one supplier for any one type of good. Some goods were staple items, necessary for daily existence and work, while other items were discretionary.

Among the staple items required to meet the basic dietary needs of the community, flour and sugar were the most commonly ordered. Flour was

⁶⁴ Robert C. H. Sweeny, "Accounting for Change: Understanding Merchant Credit Strategies in Outport Newfoundland" in James E. Candow and Carol Corbin, eds., *How Deep is the Ocean?* (Sydney: Cape Breton University Press, 1997), p. 128.

requested by specific brand name (such as Dove, Kent, and Kentucky), with a clear preference for the latter two – two different suppliers, one Canadian and one American, were asked to ship a quantity of each, if possible, as they were “especially wanted for our trade.”⁶⁵ Similarly, clients expressed a preference for Rosebud cornmeal.⁶⁶ Regular orders were also placed for ship biscuit, also known as pilot bread, which served as a dietary staple for the fishers when they were out in their boats.⁶⁷

Sugar was requested in various forms (molasses, brown sugar, yellow sugar, granulated white sugar, and loaf sugar).⁶⁸ It was not, then, a single generic commodity; rather, some kinds were probably for the more well-to-do clients, while others were cheaper products. Commercial candy mixes also appear to have been quite popular. On one occasion, a five-pound box of each of rock candy, Royal mixture, Premium mixture, Scotch mixture, white peppermint, and assorted sticks were ordered for each of the Big Pond, Chéticamp, and Eastern Harbor stations.⁶⁹ One order to G. J. Hamilton & Sons requested a five-pound box of conversation lozenges⁷⁰ – candies inscribed with messages – that were well known in France and Italy by the early 1800s. Though these were usually inscribed with romantic phrases, towards the end of the century, British confectioners were using the candies as a way to spread Victorian morals, especially regarding temperance.⁷¹ Clearly a certain degree of personal preference among different staples and simple luxury goods seems to have prevailed, perhaps according to the financial means of the various clients. At the same time, in the interest of maintaining positive relations with the local community, the Company may have felt the need to respond to the desires of its clients.

Among other staples, tea⁷² and ground coffee⁷³ appear to have been consumed in substantial quantities; in the non-food category, so were twist tobacco⁷⁴ and matches.⁷⁵ Among the miscellaneous “luxury” items ordered during the year were raspberry vinegar, fruit syrup, and lime juice,⁷⁶ Sillian chewing gum⁷⁷ and packs of playing cards,⁷⁸ tins of ox tongues and jars of assorted pickles,⁷⁹ and bottles of Worcestershire sauce.⁸⁰ Some of these items were probably being imported for members of the Company staff. In what looks like a special luxury order for the holiday season, Bauld Gibson and Company of Halifax was asked to supply

65 To J. P. Cox, Halifax, and DeLong and Seaman, Boston, July 4, 1891.

66 To DeLong and Seaman, August 10, 1891.

67 To G. J. Hamilton and Sons, May 2, 1891.

68 To J. W. Gorham, April 20, 1891.

69 To G. J. Hamilton and Sons, August 8, 1891.

70 To G. J. Hamilton and Sons, October 24, 1891.

71 Tim Richardson, *Sweets: A History of Candy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p. 210.

72 To J. E. Morse, May 16, 1891.

73 To J. W. Gorham, October 29, 1891.

74 To A. & W. Smith, May 16, 1891.

75 To Brown and Webb, September 22, 1891.

76 To Brown and Webb, June 24, 1891.

77 To Brown and Webb, November 21, 1891.

78 To Allen and Company, September 21, 1891.

79 To G. J. Hamilton and Sons, August 8, 1891.

80 To G. J. Hamilton and Sons, October 24, 1891.

Sayer's raisins, figs, filberts, almonds, walnuts, sardines, lobsters (good quality), onions, smoked bloaters,⁸¹ smoked herring, lemons, oranges, and cocoa nuts.⁸² The quantities ordered were significant (for example, fifteen pounds of walnuts and ten dozen oranges), so the demand for these items must have been substantial. Perhaps making these items available reflects an effort to purchase good will.

Clearly, coupled with its existing ties in the merchant triangle, CRC was becoming part of an elaborate economic network centred on the east coast of Canada. No longer dependent solely, or even largely, on British suppliers, the Company had access to multiple local suppliers. As a result, it could seek out best pricing and delivery, was better able to manage its cash flow, and could respond to local demand in a timely manner. While it is logical to suggest that clients retained accounts with the Company based on the price they received for raw fish, it is also reasonable to assume that they wanted access to a greater variety of goods, as well as specific name-brand goods. These circumstances demonstrate shifting administrative responsibilities for the Company's representatives and foreshadow the fact that, by the mid-twentieth century, RJW (Robin, Jones and Whitman) was primarily a department store, no longer dependent on the supply of cod from local fishers.

Communication and Transportation

Given the international nature of the Robin family's business, ships played a key role in the Company's operation and success. John Jean lists more than 1,500 Jersey-owned vessels operating in the nineteenth century, of which the Robins owned 97.⁸³ As a general rule, it appears that materials were shuttled between the Company's stations by a fleet of smaller vessels, while larger ships carried dried fish from Canada to ports in Europe and Brazil, as well as bringing supplies from England. Some of the Company's ships were built in the Gaspé and in Cape Breton during earlier years of operation, but, by about 1840, most of the shipbuilding activity had moved back to Jersey, as the Company became involved in the broader international carrying trade.⁸⁴

Swallow appears to have been the primary courier vessel for moving goods around Cape Breton. At the beginning of the fishing season, Le Montais requested that the vessel be insured for the value of \$1,000 for the period from May 5 to December 20, 1891,⁸⁵ noting that Archibald McKinnon⁸⁶ was the master of the ship and that it was used for coasting in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and Bay of Chaleur, to Arichat, Halifax, Sydney, and Quebec City. Jean lists five different vessels with this name in his inventory, two of which were owned by Charles Robin and

81 Bloaters are herring that are cold-smoked whole, without being gutted first; the process gives the fish a gamey taste and a bloated appearance.

82 To Bauld Gibson and Company, November 21, 1891.

83 John Jean, *Jersey Sailing Ships* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1982), p. 118.

84 See Ommer, "All the Fish," p. 117.

85 To J. W. Gorham, May 2, 1891.

86 Archy McKinnon (age 53) is listed in the 1891 *Census of Canada* as living in Margaree East, working as a ship captain.

Company and predated a 62-ton schooner owned by Philip Le Montais.⁸⁷ The ownership of this latter vessel might explain its prominent role in the Cape Breton operation.

The *Dolphin*⁸⁸ is mentioned as being docked at Big Pond at the end of May, loading cargo, but leaking.⁸⁹ Rather than being repaired, the vessel was sold for \$300, which Le Montais considered to be a fair price, given its decayed condition.⁹⁰ Despite its condition and the decision to sell the vessel, towards the end of June, it was loaded with salt, potash, and other supplies and sent to Arichat. Not until the end of the first week of July was the vessel finally handed over to its new owner, Murdock Boudrot.⁹¹

At the end of 1890, the *Ellen Mary*⁹² is described as needing major repairs.⁹³ While the specifics of the required work are not given, in one of his winter reports to Jersey, Philip Fiott related that the carpenters were in the woods cutting timbers for the repairs.⁹⁴ In the spring, Le Montais indicated that three feet were to be added to each end of the vessel.⁹⁵ A letter of June 13 reported that the rebuilt ship had been launched the previous day.⁹⁶ The dimensions of the finished ship are given as: length – 62 feet, 6 inches; beam – 18 feet, 5 inches; depth of hold at mid-ship – 6 feet, 9 inches.⁹⁷ On the same day, an order was placed with a Halifax company for shrouds and wire rigging.⁹⁸ On its first voyage after the rebuild, it was sent to Arichat loaded with 25 tons of stone ballast, one puncheon of molasses, 10 barrels of butter, one passenger with luggage, one parcel, and one umbrella for Mr. de Gruchy.⁹⁹

References to larger vessels are less frequent, but still informative. In a letter to Jersey, Philip Fiott stated that he was glad to hear that *Patruus*¹⁰⁰ had arrived safely.¹⁰¹ On another occasion that provides insight into the demand placed on the Company's ships, Le Montais wrote to Paspébiac about the *Dit-On*,¹⁰² saying, "Hope you will send 'Dit-On' to Arichat for a load of tubs as 'Swallow' & 'Ellen

87 Jean, *Jersey Sailing Ships*, p. 110.

88 Jean lists a 36-ton schooner by the name *Dolphin*, owned by the Robins, having been built in Cape Breton in 1861 (*Jersey Sailing Ships*, p. 85).

89 To CRC Arichat, May 30, 1891.

90 To CRC Paspébiac, June 24, 1891.

91 To CRC Arichat, July 9, 1891.

92 Jean lists a 65-ton schooner by the name *Ellen Mary*, owned by the Robins, having been built in Cape Breton in 1878 (*Jersey Sailing Ships*, p. 87).

93 To CRC Arichat, December 30, 1890.

94 To CRC Jersey, January 14, 1891.

95 To CRC Paspébiac, May 22, 1891.

96 To CRC Paspébiac, June 13, 1891.

97 To CRC Paspébiac, July 6, 1891.

98 To William Stairs Sons & Morrow, July 6, 1891.

99 To CRC Arichat, July 15, 1891.

100 Jean lists a 206-ton brig with the name *Patruus*, owned by the Robins, having been built in Vincent in 1839 (*Jersey Sailing Ships*, p. 103). Ommer lists the contents of *Patruus* when it arrived at New Carlisle, Quebec, on May 16, 1844 (*From Outpost to Outport*, p. 74).

101 To CRC Jersey, January 12, 1891.

102 Jean lists a 95-ton schooner with the name *Dit-On*, owned by the Robins, having been built in Paspébiac in 1831 (*Jersey Sailing Ships*, p. 85). Ommer relates that in 1875 *Dit-On* made stops in Percé, Jersey, and Italy (*From Outpost to Outport*, p. 84).

Mary' cannot do all the work.'¹⁰³ The *Oliver Blanchard*¹⁰⁴ was said to be waiting in Arichat for the *Swallow* to arrive from Eastern Harbor carrying a quantity of fish to be loaded on board.¹⁰⁵ Several weeks later, Le Montais reported that the ship had departed for Rio.¹⁰⁶ The *Century*¹⁰⁷ was referred to as bringing a load of salt from Halifax, so that the firm could compare it with the Liverpool salt normally used to cure fish.¹⁰⁸

Rarely, vessels not owned by the Robins were used. For example, goods were shipped via the steamboat *St. Olaf*,¹⁰⁹ which served as a weekly ferry service between Pictou, Inverness, Port Hood, Margaree, Grand Étang, Chéticamp, and occasionally the Magdalen Islands.¹¹⁰ In one instance, Le Montais reported that the *St. Olaf* was sitting outside Chéticamp Harbour waiting for dredging operations to be completed so that it could pull up to the Government Wharf.¹¹¹ There is also reference to a cargo of fish being loaded on the *Kezia*.¹¹²

As trading increased with local non-Jersey third parties, the potential for errors also increased. In one instance, Le Montais wrote to Davis & Lawrence, of Montreal, indicating that a package of patent medicines received at Eastern Harbor had not been ordered by CRC.¹¹³ In another instance, a clearly frustrated Le Montais wrote to Mr. McLeod at Mulgrave.¹¹⁴

Dear Sir,

Please let us know at your earliest convenience who gave you instructions to forward our goods (5 large boxes) to Port Hood. Captain McKinnon reported to us that you told him the boxes had been forwarded to Arichat when on the contrary they had been sent to Port Hood. As two of our craft had called at your station for them, you will please understand that we have been sadly disappointed in not getting these goods and a serious loss. They are still in Port Hood and I wonder are they going to remain there? We beg to call your attention to it at once and let us know if you will pay the charges, as we don't intend paying them beyond your station. In future

¹⁰³ To CRC Paspébiac, October 10, 1891.

¹⁰⁴ Jean lists three different vessels with the name *Oliver Blanchard*, all owned by the Robins during the nineteenth century (*Jersey Sailing Ships*, p. 102). Each vessel is of a slightly different tonnage, all were built in Paspébiac, and each new vessel appears to have replaced its predecessor or perhaps represented a rebuild. The last of the three is a 257-ton barque from 1868.

¹⁰⁵ To CRC Jersey, October 20, 1891.

¹⁰⁶ To CRC Paspébiac, December 12, 1891.

¹⁰⁷ Jean lists a 186-ton brigantine with the name *Century*, owned by the Robins, having been built in Jersey in 1866 (*Jersey Sailing Ships*, p. 80). Ommer indicates that, following a delivery of cod to Brazil for the Robins in 1871, *Century* was chartered out of Rio to carry goods to Europe (*From Outpost to Outport*, p. 85).

¹⁰⁸ To CRC Jersey, May 25, 1891.

¹⁰⁹ A cover story in the *Syracuse Sunday Herald* of November 25, 1900 indicates that the *St. Olaf* was a 305-ton iron steamer built in Port Glasgow on the Clyde, Scotland, in 1882. After a few years of service on the Pictou run, it was moved to Quebec City. The day before the news story appeared, the ship was lost off Seven Islands in the St. Lawrence River in rough weather. All passengers and crew perished.

¹¹⁰ Chiasson, *Chéticamp*, p. 71.

¹¹¹ To CRC Paspébiac, September 18, 1891.

¹¹² The *Kezia* was a 136-ton schooner of unknown ownership, registered in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. It ran aground off Isle Madame on November 1, 1894, on a trip from New York to Charlottetown (<http://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?34852>).

¹¹³ To Davis & Lawrence, July 16, 1891.

¹¹⁴ To Mr. McLeod, May 25, 1891.

please keep our goods in a safe place at your station, until you hear from us or are called for.

Any record of how this matter was resolved could not be found. However, it does demonstrate the problems inherent in no longer dealing with the firm's own vessels and crews.

In some correspondence with Paspébiac, Le Montais acknowledged receipt of telegraph messages, which he initially designated with the symbol "T/M" and later simply as telegrams.¹¹⁵ According to Chiasson, telegraph service to Chéticamp began in 1891. Telephone service did not commence until 1906.¹¹⁶ Le Montais wrote to Arichat that he was

enclosing a letter from the President of the Union Telephone Company offering to erect the poles from the road leading from Petit de Grat to our establishment at Arichat, the company to furnish the instrument and to keep the line in thorough order and to put us in direct communication whenever a connection is now or may yet be made in any part of the Isle Madame for a yearly rental of \$30. This would no doubt be a great convenience and the yearly charge is, I consider, reasonable.¹¹⁷

It is unclear from this letter whether Le Montais was implying that construction of this line would allow for direct telephone contact with the station in Chéticamp, or whether the scope of service was restricted to Isle Madame.

The volume of letters devoted to discussions of Company ships, including the detailed descriptions of maintenance and improvements, demonstrate just how reliant the firm was on ocean-going vessels. In fact, the whole existence of the merchant triangle was dependent on sail. The late 1800s were a time of significant global economic change and increasing rates of adoption of new technologies related to communication and transportation, such as the transition from sail to steam and the introduction of the telegraph and telephone.¹¹⁸ It is clear that, in 1891, developments in communications technology were just beginning to have an impact on the way of doing business in Cape Breton, but their potential was already being exploited with the introduction of a regular ferry service that provided a previously unavailable level of convenience. For the kind of trading in which the firm was involved, however, even though steam-powered ships were rapidly replacing sail on some routes and with some cargoes, sailing ships would remain competitive until the end of the century.¹¹⁹

Conclusions

The Robin business had always operated what Ommer calls a "merchant triangle," characterized by geographic separation of the management, production, and

¹¹⁵ For example, to CRC Paspébiac, May 8 and August 15, 1891.

¹¹⁶ Chiasson, *Chéticamp*, p. 72.

¹¹⁷ To CRC Arichat, April 20, 1891.

¹¹⁸ See A. G. Kenwood and A. L. Lougheed, *The Growth of the International Economy, 1820-1990* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 12-15.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

marketing operations of the firm. By 1891, CRC had access to a number of local suppliers, providing greater flexibility in terms of quantities and types of goods purchased, but allowing cash flow to be managed directly in the local stations instead of back in Jersey, to which the agents still reported. Not having to rely on British suppliers meant that CRC could respond to the demands of their clients in a timely manner, thereby contributing to the maintenance of positive relations with their fishing workforce. The increasing importance of the Atlantic seaboard meant that the scope of tasks and direct responsibility for decisions for the Company's representatives were greatly increased. Despite evidence that ultimate control was still centred in Jersey, the operation was taking on the characteristics of the principal-agent model,¹²⁰ in which ownership is separate from management. In that sense, the year 1891 points to the beginning of CRC's slow evolution away from a concentration on the merchant triangle, seen in the heyday of merchant capital in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and towards the role that the firm, under new ownership, would play in the twentieth century – that of a retail business with no fishing interests at all. This shift was driven in part by changes with respect to financial relations with the fishers and increased access to local suppliers of goods. Almost all the capital funding from Jersey had begun to be in the form of bank transfers, rather than predominantly in the form of goods, with some cash. Dealers were receiving cash payments for a significant portion of their catch; not all of the money was flowing back into the Company as payment against debt. While the administrative elements of the truck system were reflected in the correspondence and the accounting system employed in the ledgers, the details illustrate that the relationship between the Company and its clients was on the way to becoming more one of interdependence, rather than dependence.

Robert Sweeney and his colleagues suggest that a more comprehensive view of a fishery must reflect “the dialectical relationship between the social relations of production and the forces of production.”¹²¹ The people of Chéticamp, like members of other Acadian communities, were determined to maintain their cultural identity, but they could not do so without also tending to their economic viability. The relative isolation of this community and its long-term relationship with the Robins meant that, despite whatever changes were taking place elsewhere, the future of both parties was inextricably linked. As Naomi Griffiths indicates, at the end of the nineteenth century, “The dominant Acadian tradition was that of vanquishing victim, the conquest of the unjustly treated, beaten but undefeated. This concept contains no festering anger against the perpetrators of the Deportation, just a sense of Acadian righteousness. It is not a myth of Conquest, but a myth of survival.”¹²² Perhaps this mythos pertained equally to the Robin Company. A combination of business history with social history clearly illustrates the Company's changing role.

¹²⁰ Jean-Jacques Laffont and David Martimort, *The Theory of Incentives: The Principal-Agent Model* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹²¹ Robert C. H. Sweeney, David Bradley, and Robert Hong, “Movement, Options and Costs: Indexes as Historical Evidence, a Newfoundland Example,” *Acadiensis*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1992), p. 121.

¹²² Griffiths, “The Formation of a Community,” p. 40.