

Fishery Failure 1832

The following account of famine by Rev William Wilson: (Newfoundland and its Missionaries, William Wilson, MUN CNS, BX 8356 N4 W5.)

At that time the seal-fishery was only very partially prosecuted in Bonavista, as three schooners, employing about seventy men, constituted their entire spring fleet. There were then no farms, no manufactories, no public works of any kind; the people had to depend upon the cod fishery as the only means of obtaining a subsistence. In that northern and exposed station the cod fishery does not commence until May, and closes early in October, so that, five months was all the time the men could be employed in earning a livelihood for themselves and family for the whole year. If, however, the fishery were good, the price of the fish at a medium rate, these five months' labor would supply ample means for this purpose. But the summers of 1830 and 1831 had been remarkable for the failure of the cod fishery in these parts, and particularly was this the case in the latter year, as, at the close of the season, the catch of fish was only one half of the average, and the price had fallen, at rates ranging from twenty to forty shillings per quintal, to twelve. The winter set in with unusual severity early in November, and for weeks together the temperature ranged from 15° to 18° below zero. Moreover, the great northern jam of ice did not leave the coast until the nineteenth day of June; so that the spring supplies, which are usually received in April, did not arrive until near the last of June. One of the severest snow storms during the season was on the fifth of May; and the ground continued frozen until near the month of June. A number of cattle died for want of food, and, during the night of the third of June, nine horses died from the same cause.

After the usual time for obtaining supplies had passed, the most appalling distress began to be felt among the inhabitants, and particularly was this the case during the latter part of the month of May and June. There were no provisions in the merchants' stores, and no amount of money could purchase a barrel of flour or a bag of bread. Men of wealth had to dole out food to their families with most parsimonious care, and the writer with his family was restricted to two meals a day for three weeks. The ice on the coast prevented the arrival of vessels; the seals had gone; and the heavy ice, large masses of which grounded in deep water, kept the cod fish from coming near the shore. A severe famine was felt among the inhabitants; several families subsisted on potatoes and salt. Early in June nearly all the flour and bread (sea biscuits) was exhausted, and the cry for bread ceased for it was not to be had; but the mournful cry, "For God's sake give me a few potatoes to save my children from starvation," continued to be uttered with the most heart rending vehemence, individuals have passed the whole day without tasting food, and strong men were seen staggering through the streets, as if inebriated, as the effect of starvation...

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Information Provided by Mr. Doug Cole