Rogues Among Rebels: Entanglements between Irish Catholics and the Fishermen’s Protective Union of Newfoundland

by
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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between Newfoundland’s Irish Catholics and the largely English-Protestant backed Fishermen’s Protective Union (FPU) in the early twentieth century. The rise of the FPU ushered in a new era of class politics. But fishermen were divided in their support for the union; Irish-Catholic fishermen have long been seen as at the periphery—or entirely outside—of the FPU’s fold. Appeals to ethno-religious unity among Irish Catholics contributed to their ambivalence about or opposition to the union. Yet, many Irish Catholics chose to support the FPU. In fact, the historical record shows Irish Catholics demonstrating a range of attitudes towards the union: some joined and remained, some joined and then left, and others rejected the union altogether. Far from being beholden to the whims of clerics, political elites, or the structural dictates of the economy and of region, Irish-Catholic fishermen made their own decisions about membership. Nevertheless, the pressures of class and ethno-religious solidarities mediated their decisions to engage with the union. This thesis uses a combination of newspaper sources, church correspondence, oral histories, censuses, and election data to unearth the history of Irish Catholics’ complex relationship with the FPU, and argues that this relationship is an example of the entanglements of ethnicity and class in pre-Confederation Newfoundland.

Keywords: Newfoundland; ethnicity; religion; unions; class; fisheries; Fishermen’s Protective Union (FPU)
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<td>ARCA</td>
<td>Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St. John’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>Centre for Newfoundland Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CofE</td>
<td>Church of England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congreg.</td>
<td>Congregationalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAI</td>
<td>Digital Archives Initiative (Memorial University)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FPU</td>
<td>Fishermen’s Protective Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUTC</td>
<td>Fishermen’s Union Trading Company (see also UTC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meth.</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MHA</td>
<td>Member of the House of Assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MHArc.</td>
<td>Maritime History Archive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nfld.</td>
<td>Newfoundland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FPU</td>
<td>Fishermen’s Protective Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANL</td>
<td>Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>Parish priest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presb.</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
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<tr>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Salvation Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOS</td>
<td>Star of the Sea Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUF</td>
<td>Society of United Fishermen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTC</td>
<td>Union Trading Company (see also FUTC)</td>
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Chapter 1:
Introduction

On March 31, 1909, in St. John’s, Newfoundland, Roman Catholic Archbishop Michael Francis Howley penned a circular letter to his “flock” that contained strong, cautionary words. The letter was part of a flurry of correspondence passing to and from the Archbishop’s desk around this time, all having to do with the Fishermen’s Protective Union (FPU), which had formed on November 3, 1908, in the small town of Herring Neck on the northeast coast. Howley admonished Catholics not to join the FPU on the grounds that it was a secret society that required the taking of an “unlawful oath.” Further, he argued, the consequences of Catholic membership in this new organization would be the undermining of the “peace and harmony of Society” and the “temporal, social, and commercial welfare of our people.” The Archbishop, who had once praised Newfoundland’s preservation of an “old feudal and paternal system,” went on to take particular umbrage at the laity’s apparent second-guessing of the church’s official stance on the FPU. “It ought to have been enough,” the circular read, “for any faithful and loyal children of the Catholic Church to know that their Pastors have seriously spoken and pointed out the correct path to them to follow.”

Yet the Archbishop’s pastoral advice, including a previous circular letter of his two weeks earlier from March 16, 1909, had apparently not been enough to curtail the rising tide of unionism among the members of his archdiocese, as it seemed to spur negative responses from many fishermen. When William F. Coaker, the FPU’s

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2 The Archbishop was referring to lay opposition to his ban in Argentia, discussed further in Chapter Two. Circular letter from M.F. Howley, March 31, 1909, 106/19/1, also 106/9/6, ARCA/MHarc.
3 Circular letter from M.F. Howley to parish priests, March 16, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.
4 More in Chapter Two.
president, had founded the union just five months prior to Howley’s letter, neither he nor Howley could have predicted the haste with which Newfoundlanders rushed to join it. The FPU experienced a remarkably rapid rise: by 1911, the union had over 10,000 members, and by 1914, it had swept the northeast coast, the union’s heartland, and acquired over 20,000 members in 206 councils island-wide. One estimate put FPU membership at 21,060 members at its peak.

Most histories remember the FPU as an initiative primarily of Protestant fishermen; yet, as this thesis will show, a sizable minority of Howley’s own flock supported it. Although a majority of Irish Catholics, especially those in the southeast, did not join the FPU or vote for its political arm, the Union Party, the reasons for their intransigence are not adequately understood or explained in conventional histories of the union. In 1914, the union’s newspaper, the Fishermen’s Advocate, approximated the number of Catholic FPU members in “northern areas” to be 1,200, though this was Coaker’s own estimate, and precise numbers are difficult to ascertain. Whatever the tally, Irish-Catholic participation in the FPU was larger than many historians have assumed, and certainly more complex. Some Irish Catholics initially expressed support but then later dropped out. This tended to happen in the country’s most predominantly Catholic districts of Ferryland and Placentia—St. Mary’s, where several local FPU councils autonomously formed but most soon folded. Irish-Catholic fishermen on the northeast coast tended to be more supportive of the union than those in the southeast, though in both regions they made their own choices and accepted or rejected unionism for diverse reasons.

5 “Editor’s Notes,” Fishermen’s Advocate, April 1, 1911.
6 William F. Coaker, Twenty Years of the Fishermen’s Protective Union of Newfoundland (St. John’s: Advocate Publishing Company/Created Printers and Publishers, 1930/1984), 82, 95.
8 The most immediate and obvious—though also the most understated—reason for Catholic non-membership is that the FPU failed to organize local councils in the southern Avalon Peninsula and advanced no Union Party candidates there.
9 McDonald, To Each His Own, 41n40.
Furthermore, Irish Catholics’ responses to clerical directives were equally diverse: in both the northeast and the southeast, some Catholics heeded Howley’s condemnation, while others ignored him and embraced unionization. Catholics who opposed unionization were not necessarily genuflecting to the dictates of the Catholic hierarchy; some opposed the union on their own terms, regardless of the Archbishop’s or other political elites’ dictates. Others respected the opinions of elites but supported the FPU anyway.

The diversity of Irish Catholics’ collective responses to the FPU raises questions about the intersection of their ethno-religious identities with the new class politics brought on by the FPU in a political context in which Irish Catholicism and organized labour are often thought to have been at odds with each other. The findings in this thesis interrupt narratives about the sectarianism, uniformity, and conservatism of Newfoundland’s Irish Catholics as an ethnic group, as well as the perceived backwardness and passivity of fishermen as a class. This thesis also demonstrates the various ways in which people drew upon their ethno-religious identity as well as their class interests to make decisions about union and political participation.

Irish-Catholic fishermen are an inadequately understood constituency in the class and ethnic politics of pre-Confederation Newfoundland. I argue that Irish Catholics had a variety of motivations to either support or oppose the FPU, though the common use of and appeal to languages of ethnicity, religion, and class reflected the divided nature of Newfoundland society and the importance that people, including fishers, attributed to these markers of identity and interest. By identifying and analyzing ethno-religious and class-based motivations in fishermen’s responses to the FPU, we can better see how fishermen, far from being instructed what to do by elites, or compelled to do by social forces beyond their control, made their own social and political decisions.

**Background of the FPU and the “Catholic Question”**

The FPU started in 1908 as a mass membership organization open to those “employed the previous year at one of... Fishing, Farming, Coasting, Lobstering,” and
eventually included loggers and other manual labourers. Within four years, it launched a political arm, the Union Party, which called for social reform in its 1912 “Bonavista Platform” and contested elections in selected districts, successfully pursuing an agenda to hold the balance of power in the House of Assembly. In 1919, Coaker was appointed minister of fisheries, giving the union a chance at implementing some of its desired reforms, though political and mercantile intransigence caused them to be ineffectual and short-lived. The union also had a business wing, the Fishermen’s Union Trading Company (FUTC), which competed with merchant-run enterprises in the outports. It even spearheaded the construction of the town of Port Union, as well as establishing its own electricity, shipbuilding, and other industries. The union was a ubiquitous feature of life in much of rural, northeastern Newfoundland in the early twentieth century. Its very existence demonstrates a tradition of resistance and radicalism that counters narratives about the conservatism and backwardness of fishers and other working people in rural communities on the island.

The FPU was different from other unions in a number of ways. It required the payment of nominal dues, but many of its members tended not to be wage labourers. Rather, most were primary producers who were regularly indebted to fish merchants throughout the year in return for goods, gear, and bait—debts which were paid by selling fish and oil back to the merchant at prices over which fishers had little control. This paternalistic arrangement—the “truck” system—had dominated the fishery for centuries but was ripe for challenge in an era of rising trade unionism in the late nineteenth and

11 McDonald, To Each His Own, 86-130; Cadigan, Death on Two Fronts, 217-245.
13 At the first meeting of the Supreme Council in Change Islands from October 29 to November 3, 1909, dues were set at 50 cents a year. Coaker, Twenty Years, 3.
early twentieth centuries. Though the union organized rallies, protests, and petitions, it tended not to strike.\(^{14}\) It did however negotiate price agreements with merchants on behalf of its members.\(^{16}\) The union often encouraged fishermen to hold back their catch from merchants so as to secure better prices, and this strategy succeeded from time to time.\(^{17}\) The union established the FUTC in 1911 in response to merchants’ refusals to buy “union fish.”\(^{18}\) The FUTC’s purchases of everything from salt to coal for resale at union stores eased fishermen’s lives, undermined merchant monopolies, and relieved other supply difficulties.\(^{19}\) Phasing out merchants altogether, for a while, seemed on the horizon.\(^{20}\) The union also leveraged its close but often complicated connections with other organizations and traditions, such as the Society of United Fishermen and the Orange lodges, to effect change. As this thesis will show, it also attempted to forge connections with Catholics and their institutions as well.

The common understanding of the FPU is a romanticized narrative wherein rural fishermen, historically subject to the harsh whims of a mercantile elite based in St. John’s, successfully banded together and interrupted the status quo to achieve political and economic goals directly for their own benefit. But many of these successes were


\(^{15}\) One exception was a strike in Bonavista in 1948 over the exporting of salmon. File 100, box 192, GN 13/1/B, PANL.

\(^{16}\) This extended to the seal hunt as well, see “The Sealing Agreement,” Fishermen’s Advocate, January 20, 1912. Thank you to Melvin Baker for bringing this to my attention. See also, Mel Baker, “Challenging the ‘Merchants’ Domain’: William Coaker and the Price of Fish, 1908–1909,” Newfoundland and Labrador Studies 29, no. 2 (2014): 189-226.

\(^{17}\) “The Scare! Cutting Prices of Fish,” Fishermen’s Advocate, August 16, 1911, 2; “The Union’s Greatest Victory,” Fishermen’s Advocate, October 19, 1912; and “This fall the F.P.U. saved $750,000 for the toilers by boosting fish prices,” Fishermen’s Advocate, October 15, 1913.

\(^{18}\) “Coaker–Years ahead of his time,” Decks Asha, 8, no. 2 (April, 1979), 36.

\(^{19}\) “The F.P.U. solves the problem of cheaper coal,” Fishermen’s Advocate, May 17, 1913.

\(^{20}\) Eventually, the idea of the FUTC (also known as the UTC) being a cooperatively run enterprise run solely by and in the interests of fishermen was beset by problems. Fishermen did not invest as shareholders in the FUTC in the numbers Coaker had hoped for. This put pressure on the company to find capital elsewhere, and the company eventually began to extend credit rather than make use of cash. See McDonald, To Each His Own (1987), 134-135; and Baker, “Challenging” (2014).
short-lived. Although the vestiges of the FPU, particularly its commercial enterprises, lasted into the Confederation era,\(^{21}\) the FPU as a political force effectively died in 1934 with the Commission of Government.\(^{22}\) The legacy of the FPU is thus often framed as a classic “rise and fall” tale, whose tragic end mirrors the collapse of self-government in Newfoundland. The union’s epitaph has been written in many ways, but the most common diagnosis for its untimely death is that it faced hostility from the Roman Catholic Church and was therefore also unpopular with the Catholic laity.

This “Catholic Question” permeates virtually every history of the FPU. G. Mark Dolomount, for example, argues that the Catholic Church effectively killed the union by preventing its spread into key Catholic areas of Newfoundland.\(^{23}\) Kevin Major echoes this interpretation in the following passage:

> When Catholic fishermen along the Southern Shore set up branches of the FPU they were confronted with Howley’s indictment of the union. Rather than face the wrath of their clerics, the branches disbanded. Coaker’s efforts to expand from his base of power on the mainly Protestant northeast coast would prove futile. His union never grew to include all the fishermen of Newfoundland, a critical element in its ultimate demise.\(^{24}\)

James Hiller has added a further layer to this orthodoxy by arguing that the hostility of “a conservative Roman Catholic hierarchy, which saw the FPU as dangerously socialistic, blunted the strength of Coaker’s crusade.”\(^{25}\) Yet as Sean Cadigan’s recent monograph has demonstrated, the fear of socialism and the panning of Coaker and his “Bolshevik” union was quite pervasive among Newfoundland’s elites.\(^{26}\) Historians and other


\(^{22}\) For its part, the Union Party merged with the Liberal Party as early as 1919, the year of the first election in which the two parties ran common candidates under the “Liberal Reform” party banner.


\(^{26}\) Cadigan, *Death on Two Fronts*, 188-216.
observers have generally tended to accept the idea that the Catholic Church “invoked sectarianism” to prevent Catholic fishermen from uniting with Protestant fishermen to advance class interests.27 These interpretations assign blame to Catholics or the Catholic hierarchy for ethnic tensions that had existed among Catholics and Protestants in Newfoundland for centuries. They also rob Catholic fishermen of any agency in determining their own self-interests compared with a more assertive Protestant fishing population.

These explanations collectively form what I refer to as a “priest-led hypothesis.” The priest-led hypothesis intimates that lay Catholics in Newfoundland were heavily influenced by the Catholic clergy, who exercised extensive influence over their congregations in all areas of life, within and beyond the spiritual realm. Thus, when the Church took a stance on any issue, the guiding principle of the Catholic population was: where the shepherd goes, so goes the flock. Such explanations pit the Catholic clergy, politicians, and journalists and the FPU against each other as the primary actors in an ideological battle, vying for control over passive Irish-Catholic fishermen in early twentieth-century Newfoundland—one that the Catholic Church readily won.

The priest-led hypothesis is part of a larger, more general bias in favour of elite agency in histories of the FPU, and is based on a series of assumptions that require clarification and correction. It assumes the FPU’s ascendance to power was otherwise inevitable, even though the union pursued a balance of power strategy. It refuses to blame the FPU for its own failure to organize Catholic areas. It also treats the Catholic Church hierarchy as united in its orientation towards fishermen’s unionism, which was not the case. It exaggerates the degree to which fishermen listened to either the Catholic Church hierarchy or to Coaker and the FPU—an assumption that would benefit from further illumination from the evidence, since Catholics often ignored their priests and bishops, and fishermen formed FPU councils independently and without their Church’s or Coaker’s input. Fishermen were also divided along the basis of internal class divisions among them that made the union more amenable to some fishermen over others. In those cases where fishermen’s interests and the Catholic Church’s interests aligned, the

dominant scholarly discourse indicates that fishermen kowtowed to the Catholic hierarchy. Yet, fishermen were capable of making decisions of their own volition to serve their own best interests. As such, the priest-led hypothesis warrants further scrutiny due to its explicit dismissal of any role fishermen themselves played in their own destinies.

**Historiography**

This topic sits at the intersection of numerous historiographies. Historians of Canadian and international labour history have dealt with the interaction of class, unionism, or socialism, with ethnicity and religion, including Irish Catholicism. This thesis will discuss the more local and specific historiography of Catholic–FPU relationships. But the local historiography has a tendency to perpetuate the priest-led hypothesis. There are two such approaches: the first are the political histories, which stress the primacy of political elites, “sectarianism,” and high politics; the second are the historical materialist explanations, which tend to center actors’ behaviour on the fulcrum of mercantile capitalism, Newfoundland’s regionalized fisheries, and the class relations that originate therefrom.

**Political history approaches**

Most political history approaches to Catholic–FPU relationships reveal a scholarly perception of ignorance and passivity among rural fishermen more broadly and among Irish Catholic working communities particularly. While “Coaker’s FPU” features

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28 The fact that Catholic leaders all but begged fishermen to abandon the union after repeated failed attempts at doing so is often either ignored or wrongly construed to suggest that the Archbishop’s power was unquestioned. For more about this, see Chapter Two.

prominently in general histories of twentieth century Newfoundland, there is only one monograph dedicated to the history of the FPU: Ian McDonald’s political history of the movement. Though To Each His Own is not a biography per se, Coaker is centre-stage. Howley’s 1909 circular letter, which McDonald cites, and the subsequent closing of several of the southern Avalon Peninsula’s independently-formed FPU local councils seem to confirm the priest-led hypothesis common in the historiography. McDonald argues,

[Catholics’] tradition of obedience to ... clerical leadership in temporal matters ... tended to make the Catholic population view their Church as far more than a spiritual institution. Both clergy and laity had learned that by acting as a disciplined political unit they could best secure their own rights and interests. The struggle for denominational rights had left Catholics with an exaggerated respect for the leadership of the clergy in temporal affairs.

McDonald appropriately identifies the ethno-religious unity that Newfoundland’s Irish Catholics demonstrated from time to time. But here, too, the interpretation fails to account for moments when ordinary Catholics negotiated with or actually disobeyed their priests and bishops. Voting patterns in pre-Confederation Newfoundland illustrate that voters often did not prioritize ethno-religious interests, forged coalitions with members of

31 Coaker, to McDonald, was the personification of the union. In the manuscript on which the book is based, McDonald’s discussion of FPU ideology is solely limited to Coaker’s personal philosophy. See “W.F. Coaker,” (1971), 36-37, and 72-73. The other members of the union and later its political arm, the Union Party, and the FUTC were, the reader presumes, in agreement with their leader. Only occasionally did McDonald make note of exceptions, though in passing; see McDonald, To Each His Own, 45.
32 For the parts of To Each His Own that most directly address the central questions in this thesis, see McDonald’s discussion titled “Imperium in Imperio: Coaker and the Catholic Church,” 38-44.
other denominations, or acted as a bloc but in a manner counter to their Church’s wishes.\textsuperscript{34}

Political history accounts also center the roles of merchants and politicians, as well as clerical elites, in driving the history of the FPU. Coaker, as one such politician, often gets a hagiographic treatment, whose decisions and legacy outweigh those of the twenty thousand or more who joined him.\textsuperscript{35} Yet, the FPU, including Coaker himself, had built on a long tradition of independence and resistance among working communities in Newfoundland’s fishery. Strikes, manuses, and other forms of collective action, as well as cooperatively run enterprises were in evidence in the Newfoundland fishery, sealing, and related trades in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{36} Support for or resistance to the FPU on the part of tens of thousands of fishermen cannot be fully explained by Coaker’s recruitment efforts, Howley’s admonishments against joining, or the intervention of other political, mercantile, or ethno-religious elite actors.

**Historical materialist approaches**

Another set of arguments about Catholic–FPU relationships point to the conditions of life in the respective fisheries of northeastern and southeastern


\textsuperscript{35} Witness J.R. Smallwood’s observation that Coaker “will be regarded by all as the greatest Newfoundlander since John Cabot,” in *Coaker of Newfoundland* (Port Union: Advocate Press, 1927/1998), 101.

Newfoundland. Arguments rooted in historical materialism were a major departure from political histories, but they also showed elements of the priest-led hypothesis. Historical materialist approaches stressed the differences between the north and south in Newfoundland’s fishery, as well as relative differences in clerical power. The work of sociologist Barbara Neis best represents this framework.37

Figure 1: Coastal regions of Newfoundland


Class dynamics in rural Newfoundland revolved around the competing and overlapping interests of merchants and fishermen. However, fishermen in the northeast were increasingly participating in large-scale fisheries that were more conducive to unionization than those in the south. In the north, the fishery was well capitalized, and

merchants continually broke price agreements with each other, undercutting their bargaining power with fishermen. According to Neis and her co-author in a 1978 article, Robert Brym, the northeast thus witnessed “high solidary forms of labor organization,” particularly in the Labrador fishery where “floaters” worked as members of a crew aboard a schooner rather than as independent producers. Newer forms of fishing labour in the northeast fishery, as well as the seal harvest and logging, were increasingly being paid in cash wages or shares of catch rather than “truck” credit, giving fishermen a degree of autonomy and independence. Workers in the northeast worked together in large numbers, in close proximity to each other, and often for cash. By contrast, fishermen in the southeast conducted family-based fishing activities in household production. Fishermen there prosecuted an inshore fishery from smaller vessels with two or three other fishermen, often male relatives, and women tended to do the shore work of curing the fish. Furthermore, the southeastern fishery was undercapitalized. Merchants had less cause to compete with each other, allowing them more control over prices. It was fishermen, not merchants, who competed with each other in the southeast. This resulted in downward pressure on fishermen’s capacity to bargain with merchants, the theory suggests, and also dampened incentives for collective action.

But Neis attaches some significance to ethno-religious tensions as well. Although the southeast also witnessed some structural changes in the fishery, giving rise to anomalous, short-lived FPU councils, she attributes their disappearance in 1909 to the concentrated power of the Catholic Church in that era. Brym and Neis argue against the influence of Irish Catholics’ supposed “cultural conservatism,” instead focusing on

38 Brym and Neis, “Regional Factors,” 398.
39 Brym and Neis noted that floaters loaded their vessels, congregated their ships together to jointly ride out storms, mustered en route to the waters off Labrador, and “mingled indiscriminately” after arriving at the fishing grounds, where “the contagious union idea spread without hindrance”, in “Regional Factors,” 398; see also S.J.R. Noel, Politics of Newfoundland (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1971), 91-92.
40 Brym and Neis, “Regional Factors,” 398.
43 Brym and Neis, “Regional Factors,” 403.
relative strengths of clerical pressure according to region. The authors argue that smaller parishes in the northeast often went long periods without a local priest, or, had clerical leaders that were friendly to the FPU. In the southeast, the opposite was the case: priests were in residence year-round, anti-FPU, and held relatively more power over their congregants. In places where southeastern local councils survived the clerical onslaught, Neis argues that they were exceptional due to unique local economic circumstances that incentivized unionization and emboldened Catholics to resist their priests. This aspect of the interpretation is unsatisfactory, because it is yet another iteration of the priest-led hypothesis. Here, social forces or elites’ demands were the only or main factors that caused fishermen to make their decisions. This view tends to rob fishermen of their own agency. As Sean Cadigan has noted, “While power may be the preserve of the elites, historical agency is not.”

Nevertheless, it was Neis’s work on the FPU that began one of the first major evaluations of the union from the point of view of its members rather than of Coaker and high politics. Her scholarship identified fishermen’s work and labour, and differences in the material and structural conditions within which that labour was performed, as a reason for variations in the FPU’s support. This is a vital part of the story. Correspondence, newspaper materials, and oral histories that highlight the voices of fishermen can also be solicited to help expand on these explanations. The class relationships fishermen found themselves forging as a result of the material conditions of the fishery throughout Newfoundland helped shape the course of their lives and the choices they made. Their class interests bolstered, overlapped with, neutralized, or

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44 Brym and Neis, “Regional Factors,” 400.
45 In accounting for moments of exception in the Catholic southeast, Neis argues that the brief emergence of unionism there was owing to relatively large, inshore fishing crews of six or seven rather than two to four. Whaling and other large-scale fisheries in the southeast, where and when they were conducted, may also have spurred southeastern fishermen to join the union in places such as Riverhead (St. Mary’s Bay), one of only five FPU councils in the southeast in 1914. Fishermen there, she argues, were better able to overcome clerical pressure because “patterns of work… differed substantially from those in surrounding communities” and there were “as many as one hundred employees,” giving them power in numbers relative to the priests. Neis, “A Sociological Analysis”, 70, 72; Brym and Neis, “Regional Factors,” 398-403; Coaker, Twenty Years, 82.
46 Sean Cadigan, “Power and Agency in Newfoundland and Labrador’s History,” Labour/Le Travail 54 (Fall 2004), 243.
came into conflict with the influence of ethnicity and religion on their lives, depending on the context. This thesis will create a bridge between materialist and identity-centered frameworks by shedding light on the ways in which ethno-religious tensions also fuelled the debate about the FPU among Newfoundland’s Irish Catholics.

**Ethnicity and Catholic–FPU relationships**

The polarization between Newfoundland’s two biggest ethnic groups—West Country English Protestants and Catholics from southern Ireland—has often been characterized in older literature as being a conflict that was fundamentally “religious,” “sectarian,” or “denominational” in nature, suggesting that inter-communal tensions were inspired by doctrinal or theological differences. This thesis argues that the relationships between Irish Catholics and the FPU are best understood as a site of *ethnic entanglements*.

Ethnicity is a fluid, context-dependent, and “felt” boundary between two or more groups; differences between members of various ethnic groups are socially, historically, and ideologically constructed.\(^47\) While the meanings attached to these differences are rooted in ethnic actors’ memories about a shared past, they are also sites of political mobilization in the present.\(^48\) Ethnicity thus involves claims about access to—and the distribution of—power between rival groups. Ethnic politics can be observed in the disputes or resolutions that result from those rivalries. Willeen Keough has described this process as “intercultural dialogue.”\(^49\) The “dialogue” at the heart of this thesis, and pre-Confederation politics more generally, played out against a predominantly white, British imperial, and settler-colonial backdrop, where the politics of *ethnicity* is fraught

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with contested interpretations.\textsuperscript{50} Tensions between English Protestants and Irish Catholics long predated settlement, but were inflamed in the increasingly tense political atmosphere of early nineteenth-century Newfoundland. The English Protestant elite felt threatened by the growth of the Irish Catholic population, fearing that the Irish would soon overwhelm them.\textsuperscript{51} Likewise, a growing and ambitious Irish middle class, increasingly led by Catholic priests and bishops demanding political reform, came to resent the power of what they saw as an English Protestant oligarchy in the colony.\textsuperscript{52} Demands for reform helped contribute to the granting of crown colony status (1825), representative government (1832), and responsible government (1855). The framing of these events, or Newfoundland society as a whole, as “sectarian” and “denominational” took hold not only in contemporary discourse but in later historical interpretations that worked only from sources written by elites.\textsuperscript{53} But such explanations overlooked the fact


\textsuperscript{51} In 1832, Catholics comprised 52\% of the population. By 1857, that figure had fallen to 45.8\%, and by 1935 their portion sat at 32.5\%. Throughout the period between 1901 and 1921, the denominational breakdown of Newfoundland population was roughly 33-34\% Roman Catholic, 32-33\% Church of England, and 27-28\% Methodist, and 4-7\% Salvation Army, Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and other. See Jenny Higgins, “Liberals, Conservatives, and Sectarianism,” Heritage Newfoundland and Labrador, retrieved on February 3, 2017 from http://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/politics/sectarianism.php; and G.O. Rothney, “The Denominational Basis of Representation in the Newfoundland Assembly, 1919-1962,” Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science 28, no. 4 (1962), 557. See also Census (Newfoundland), 1911, and 1921; PANL. Figures for 1901 are contained in the 1911 census. See Table 1 for more.


\textsuperscript{53} The Governor of Newfoundland from 1909-1913, Ralph Champneys Williams, wrote, “Denominationalism reigns supreme in the colony,” in How I Became a Governor (London: John Murray, 1914), 416. Archbishop M.F. Howley described the granting of representative institutions as resulting in “denominational discord” in Ecclesiastical History of Newfoundland and Labrador (Boston: Doyle & Whittle, 1888), 231. Meanwhile, Judge D.W. Prowse’s Whiggish view held the opposite but with a twist, remarking, “There is no real bigotry or sectarian intolerance in Newfoundland,” but that where it had occurred, its participants had been “duped” by politicians. See Jerry Bannister, “Whigs and Nationalists: The Legacy of Judge Prowse’s ‘History of Newfoundland,’” Acadiensis 32, no. 1 (2002), 89-90, citing D.W. Prowse, A History of Newfoundland (St. John’s: Boulder, 1895/2007), 483-484.
that there were divisions within the Protestant community,\textsuperscript{54} as well as within the Catholic community,\textsuperscript{55} or the fact that there was sometimes unity between many English Protestants and Irish Catholics based on other interests and identities.

\textsuperscript{54} In the 1840s and 1850s for example, disagreement between Methodists and the Church of England over the Protestant education grant was an obstacle to unity between them. Patrick O'Flaherty, \textit{Lost Country: The Rise and Fall of Newfoundland, 1843-1933} (St. John's: Long Beach Press, 2005), 31.

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Source: 1911 data found in *Census of Newfoundland and Labrador*, 1921 (publ. 1923), 502-505.

Granted, electoral violence and political crises later gave way to a “denominational compromise” in 1861 that culminated in the divvying up of patronage, political appointments, and electoral districts along denominational lines.\(^{56}\) This gave the Catholic Church, the Church of England, and Methodists each a share proportional to their share of the population. Politicians and clerical leaders alike monitored this arrangement to ensure that the principle of proportionality was adhered to,\(^{57}\) and such


\(^{57}\) Letter from E.P. Roche to M.P. Cashin, November 26, 1915, E.P. Roche Papers, 107/23/4, ARCA.
principles were followed into the Confederation era.\textsuperscript{58} An additional compromise was struck with the establishment of denominational schooling.\textsuperscript{59} The high profile of clerical leaders in the political debates of the nineteenth century became entrenched with the denominational compromise. But it had the effect of encouraging the very divisions in Newfoundland society that it was meant to curtail.\textsuperscript{60} It also reinforced the language of religion and sectarianism to describe what were otherwise ethnic phenomena.

By 1908, the ethno-religious compact that had ordered Newfoundland politics and society for decades was threatened with the rise of the FPU. Building on the idea of ethnicity as both dialogue and a site of political mobilization between or among rival groups, I argue that Irish Catholics' relationships with the FPU represents a site of \textit{ethnic entanglement}.\textsuperscript{61} I use the term “entanglement” to describe the myriad ways in which members of a group find their actions constricted, enabled, or transformed, depending on the workings of other members of the ethnic group or external ethnic actors. Irish Catholics found themselves making decisions about fisheries unionism while embroiled in a complex and often intractable web of in-group politics, dialogue with an English-Protestant “Other,” media and electoral pressures, understandings of class and class identity, and collective historical memories. Ethno-religious tensions between Irish Catholics and English Protestants re-animated in light of the union’s ascendance as both groups took stock of how the union affected their power and standing in society. Those tensions played out \textit{within} the Irish-Catholic community too, when fishermen negotiated

\textsuperscript{58} Letter from J.R. Smallwood to P.J. Skinner, November 29, 1954, J.R. Smallwood Papers (COLL-075), 3.26.010, Box 277, CNS.


\textsuperscript{60} McDonald, “W.F. Coaker” (1971), 85.

\textsuperscript{61} Benjamin Bryce used the idea of “entangled history” to draw out the manifold links between religion, language, and migration patterns in shoring up German ethnic identity in Ontario in “Entangled Communities: Religion and Ethnicity in Ontario and North America, 1880-1930,” \textit{Journal of the Canadian Historical Association} 23, no. 1 (2012): 179-214. I instead use the term entanglement to describe a state in which ethnic actors find themselves in times of “mobilization,” when power or access to power are at stake.
a tense standoff with clerical elites over the FPU question and openly opposed conservative, anti-FPU elements of the Catholic middle-class in St. John’s, revealing the presence of *intra*-cultural dialogue and entanglement. These issues played out in the documentary record, and reverberate through time and are framed still to this day through the oral tradition in communities where the FPU was once a major feature of public life. The power of Irish-Catholic fishermen was sometimes mobilized using the language of ethnicity. Their access to power was intimately wrapped up in a matrix of relationships they had formed with their own clergy, English Protestants, and other actors in the mercantile capitalist economy that the FPU hoped to reform.

The fishermen at the heart of this study often expressed ethnic or ethno-religious attachments and rationales for their political behaviour either in favour of or in opposition to the union. Thus, while ethnicity manifested as a dialogue within and between communities, it is important to note that this dialogue varied for Newfoundland’s Irish-Catholic fishermen, and shifted with the ever-evolving and locally contingent parameters of ethnic politics. Moreover, while the FPU was an organization that pressed for *economic* reforms and for a particular brand of *class* politics, it also tailored such demands by suffusing its rhetoric not in the emergent democratic socialism of comparable unions and labour parties but in the politics of British Empire, populism, and loose affiliations with the various organs of Newfoundland Protestantism, including Orangeism. At times, such politics were advertised or downplayed, depending on the context. Irish-Catholic rationales for or against union membership were pitched accordingly. Ethnicity and economic power are often intimately connected; such connections were evermore apparent in the case of the FPU.

“Identity” is the subject of much debate for historians and sociologists of class and ethnicity; indeed, some have questioned whether or not the term has any analytical use at all.\(^6^2\) This thesis argues that identity, as one measure of ethnicity, is a suitable tool for understanding support for and resistance (or ambivalence) to fisheries unionism. While larger social forces are part of the story of the FPU’s rise and fall, this thesis argues that those forces, such as changes in the structure of the fishery, were not

causative without buy-in from the historical actors themselves—fishermen. Fishermen were political, and were aware of their multiple, overlapping identities. They were motivated to make decisions on the basis of their own understandings of their place in the world, shaped by their numerous, fluid, and entangled identities, interests, and experiences. They understood the connection between their ethno-religious identities and their politics and were frequently confronted by the issue of how to reconcile them with a political and economic environment that had been unsettled by the FPU’s ascendance. Fishermen are reliable sources for explaining this linkage. Identity, including self-reported identity, far from being a liberal distraction with the individual level of analysis, proves useful to those historians who seek to undermine the liberal order on which Canadian (and Newfoundland) history is said to rest. Explorations of inter-ethnic disagreement, for example, provide lessons to labour historians and activists about the sources of class disunity. Examples of cooperation help shed light on the possibilities of unity.

Sources and methods

Each of the following chapters of this thesis acts as a separate “snapshot” on the theme of Irish Catholic–FPU entanglements. Even though each snapshot is discrete and distinct, they collectively form a whole, which, it is hoped, represent a fundamental reimagining and retelling of the histories of Catholics in and outside of the FPU. While the chapters differ in terms of sources, regional emphases, and periods of time, they are broadly chronological. The main source bases for these chapters—archived church correspondence, newspaper records, and oral histories—all contain unique methodological advantages and problems that are specific to those sources and thus will be discussed in greater detail in the chapters in which each first appears. Chapters Two, Three, and Four follow along consecutively from roughly 1908 to 1914, but Chapter Five’s emphasis on memories of events whose precise dates are unknown, or which span various points throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, place it outside a neat chronology.

Chapter Two explores the available evidence about the councils on the southern Avalon Peninsula, mainly contained in church correspondence in the Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese in St. John’s. That archival file on the FPU contains documents that correspond to the formative years of the FPU, 1908-1909. Those sources show the direct interactions between the church hierarchy and fishermen that led to intra-ethnic entanglement. In the Irish-Catholic community on the southern Avalon at the time, fishermen “locked horns” with clerical leaders over the issue of membership in the FPU, while membership in the predominantly Protestant northeast increased rapidly.

Chapters Three and Four take us forward to the chief organizing period in the union’s history (1910-1912) and then to the general election of 1913 respectively. In 1910, the union began publishing its newspaper, the *Fishermen’s Advocate*. In addition to providing news about the fishery, politics, and union affairs, it catalogued the early growth of the union. As such, Chapter Three mines the articles, editorials, and letters to the editor of the *Fishermen’s Advocate* and other papers for evidence of how the union’s Irish-Catholic and English-Protestant supporters and opponents articulated support and opposition to the union in understudied local councils of the union. Chapter Four focuses on the ethno-religious tensions that bubbled over in the 1913 election, revealed in the highly animated media war that played out between that newspaper and its rivals. The election is provocative because it shows how the union’s stressing of “Anglo-Celtic” unity was confronted by alternative ethnic readings.

Finally, Chapter Five moves the discussion to the world of oral tradition and collective historical memory, and explores how memories of ethno-religious tensions among Newfoundlanders resonate through the history of the union. Much of the first-hand accounts and popular memories which are at the heart of Chapter Five speak to a generalized past, or to events whose precise date or even year may be unknown or unrecoverable. These interviews tend to be set in the northeast, and so supplement Chapter Two’s heavy focus on the southeast.
Chapter 2: Intra-ethnic Entanglements among Irish Catholics on the Southern Avalon Peninsula, 1908–1909

Obey your Prelates, and be subject to them for they watch as being to render an account for your souls.

—Hebrews (13: 17), as cited by Archbishop M.F. Howley, March 31, 1909

Introduction

This chapter seeks to interrogate the “priest-led” hypothesis by reconsidering church correspondence in the Roman Catholic Church archives in St. John’s and responses to it. Although several historians have trod this ground, their interpretations do not reveal the full complexity of relationships between Catholics and the FPU. These records actually reveal that Catholics in the southern Avalon Peninsula were not passive towards the union: some joined, and some became members and then left, while others considered joining but decided against it. Even those that avoided the union tended to do so of their own volition, and not, as some histories suggest, because the Catholic Church or Catholic politicians exercised extensive power over their lives.

The actions of Catholic fishermen in the southeast reveal the shape of their ethno-religious identities and the entangled nature of ethnic politics. Fishermen made individual choices, but they also made them in a collective setting and in deliberation with each other. They consulted each other first and foremost on matters central to their lives, and sometimes defied their church leaders. They sought FPU membership apparently without the intervention of English-Protestant organizers or any direct involvement by the union’s first and most well-known president, William F. Coaker. They viewed their collective interests as Irish-Catholic fishermen as distinct from those of Protestant elites and Catholic elites alike. This is suggestive of a more complex intersection of identities than has previously been acknowledged, as well as a reminder of Irish-Catholic fishermen’s agency and power.
The Roman Catholic Church possessed power too, of course; indeed, the two Archbishops that reigned at ‘the Palace’ during the time when Coaker led the FPU—Michael Francis Howley until 1914 and Edward Patrick Roche afterward—exercised incredible influence in politics and society. But this is a moment when the Catholic Church also took stock of what it felt was a fundamental threat. The FPU was dangerous for various reasons: it was seen as a harbinger of socialism; it acted as a secret society with its rites, passwords, and oaths, and thus was effectively banned by almost two centuries of canonical law; and it was perceived as posing a threat to a socio-political order that governed Newfoundland and of which the Catholic Church was a cornerstone. The Church saw itself as being responsible for maintaining the unity of and control over the Irish-Catholic population in Newfoundland society. Irish-Catholic fishermen believed differently. As such, this chapter focuses on Irish-Catholic responses to the FPU with attention to the southeast. I emphasize the responses of fishermen, but I also examine the divisions within the Catholic hierarchy, widened as they were by the FPU’s ascendancy. This revealed an ethno-religious politics in which fishermen, and not the clergy, held sway.

**Anti-secret society sentiment in the Newfoundland Catholic Church**

Organizations that catered to the ethno-religious identities and imperial politics of Newfoundland’s Anglo-Celtic settlers were established even before the authorization of settlement. There is evidence for the presence of Masonic lodges in Newfoundland in the middle of the eighteenth century, and their numbers increased in the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Jessica Harland-Jacobs documents how agents of British colonialism brought Freemasonry to all corners of the empire to maintain fraternity among members and links with the metropole. The expansion of secret societies often ran into opposition. The Roman Catholic Church, which had a

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1 A term used to describe the seat of power in the episcopate of Newfoundland, at the Basilica in St. John’s.
complex but generally accommodative approach to British imperialism, but which had a long history of opposing secret societies in Ireland and elsewhere, opposed Masonic lodges, the Orange Order, and other predominantly Protestant, secretive organizations.

One such moment manifested itself on September 2, 1908, when, two months before the founding of the Fishermen’s Protective Union, Archbishop M.F. Howley of St. John’s wrote to a Mr. Wallace regarding a conversation that the two had had the previous morning. In the letter, Howley recounted that Wallace and a Mr. Mann—the “superintendent of the ICS [International Correspondence School] fraternity”—had discussed with Howley whether or not the Roman Catholic Church approved of Catholic membership in the said society. Howley, in summarizing the conversation, noted that Mann had denied that the ICS Society was secretive and, as such, Howley “did not see anything in it to be condemned by the Church.” He further cautioned that this not be construed as active support, but simply an indication that he did not oppose the society’s existence.

But when the Archbishop was given a copy of the society’s constitution, he had a change of heart, for he found in it proof that the ICS Society was indeed a secret society. Howley went on to “withdraw absolutely and unconditionally any expression of approval which under such misleading information I may have given.” A pamphlet from the ICS Society, kept at the Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese in St. John’s, set out what type of organization this society was under the subheading, “What is the I.C.S. Fraternity?” which begins,

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5 For more on the Roman Catholic Church’s opposition to freemasonry, see Charles H. Lyttle, “Historical Bases of Rome’s Conflict with Freemasonry,” Church History 9, no. 1 (1940), 3-23.

6 Letter to Mr. Wallace from Archbishop M.F. Howley, September 2, 1908, 106/19/2, ARCA/MHArc.

7 Letter to Mr. Wallace from Archbishop M.F. Howley, September 2, 1908, 106/19/2, ARCA/MHArc.
It is a Secret Society. It embodies all that is most effective in the well-known secret societies of this and other lands—rites, rituals, degrees, grip, password, and signs of identification.\textsuperscript{8}

While the pamphlet was limited in scope, it also outlined the purpose of the society, which was to inculcate among its members the principles of individualism, self-reliance, education, and industrial innovation.\textsuperscript{9}

The deeply conservative Archbishop Howley may have been as offended by the ICS Society’s jubilant Gilded Age liberalism as he was by the fact that Mann had apparently lied to him. More importantly, perhaps, this society would have come across as a Protestant association, and thus provoked Howley’s suspicions. The pamphlet welcomed “white male students and graduates of the ICS who are acceptable to the members.”\textsuperscript{10} The fraternity was billed as non-sectarian, and would not “hinder [a member] from being loyal to his church, his country, his political party, or to any other order or society to which he may belong,”\textsuperscript{11} though sex and race were apparently sufficient grounds for exclusion. The claim to non-sectarianism, although seemingly liberal and accommodative of religious difference, allowed largely Protestant secret societies like the ICS to remain predominantly Protestant and yet claim tolerance, knowing that the Catholic Church forbade its congregants from joining them. Such societies came to be associated with Protestantism over time, and while Irish Catholics had a long tradition of secretive organizing of their own,\textsuperscript{12} rival organizations led by Catholic elites, such as the Knights of Columbus, the Society of the Holy Name, the Star of the Sea Association, and the Benevolent Irish Society began to appear in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in response.

\textsuperscript{8} Bolded in the original. “The I.C.S. Fraternity,” pamphlet, 5; 106/19/4, ARCA/MHArC.
\textsuperscript{9} “The I.C.S. Fraternity,” pamphlet, 3; 106/19/4, ARCA/MHArC.
\textsuperscript{10} “The I.C.S. Fraternity,” pamphlet, 8; 106/19/4, ARCA/MHArC.
\textsuperscript{11} “The I.C.S. Fraternity,” pamphlet, 8; 106/19/4, ARCA/MHArC.
Howley’s opposition to societies like the ICS was rooted in long-standing interpretations of canonical law.13 But Howley was primarily compelled to ban Catholic membership in them because they threatened to channel the loyalties of Catholics away from their Church and the lay associations it launched. This would in turn fundamentally disrupt the Church’s sense of its place at the heart of Catholic political life, a threat made even more severe by the rise of the FPU when it was founded two months later in November 1908.

**Clerical and other elites begin to take notice of the FPU**

Even before the FPU was formed, its eventual leaders were already steeped in the messy world of Newfoundland’s ethno-religious and class politics. Coaker initially spelled out his ideas in the *Plaindealer* newspaper, which incidentally had been established by “liberal-minded Catholics” such as editor Patrick Kevin Devine in 1907.14 According to Devine, it was the *Plaindealer* that initially encouraged “fishermen to form a Union for their own protection and to have their own men in the House of Assembly,”15 suggesting that Coaker got his idea for the founding the FPU from the *Plaindealer*. Several pieces in the *Fishermen’s Advocate* seem to confirm this.16 The FPU’s ideological and political origin in the liberal Catholic press was the first of many entanglements between the union and Catholics.

When the FPU formed on November 3, 1908, Catholic Church figures were able to stay aware of the rapid growth of the union through reading the *Plaindealer* and through reports it was getting from priests in the outports. One priest who sent

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14 Baker, “Plaindealing,” 43.
16 As Devine remarked, “I have not put this question to Mr. Coaker, but I believe if asked where he got this information to form the F.P.U. he will not deny it was in the columns of the *Plaindealer*,” Coaker, *Twenty Years*, 142. The *Fishermen’s Advocate* later highlighted the *Plaindealer’s* about-face when it shifted its support from the union and the Liberals to the People’s Party government of Morris. One piece in the *Advocate* noted that the *Plaindealer* “barked long and loud in its early existence for the election of outport members to the House of Assembly, chosen by the Fishermen themselves, while it howls so loud now against the F.P.U. Party because it will not consent to be a machine in Morris’s hands,” in “The Mortgaged Plaindealer,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, April 13, 1912.
information to the Archbishop was Father John J. St. John (1848–1918) while he was stationed in the parish of Argentia. He spent forty-three years in the service of the Roman Catholic Church in Newfoundland, as curate, parish priest, and eventually “Domestic Prelate” (monsignor) throughout the Avalon Peninsula. He served the church in various capacities in St. Mary’s, St. Joseph’s, Argentia, and finally Torbay. Like the majority of men in training for the priesthood on Newfoundland’s east coast in the late nineteenth century, he did his course of studies in Ireland and eventually Italy. He was also a relative of Archbishop Howley, and, likely due to their familial relationship and shared conservatism, St. John wrote frequently and sometimes frankly to Howley about matters pertaining to everything from church administration to politics. Archival evidence of Catholic Church correspondence pertaining to the FPU begins with a letter dated February 9, 1909, from St. John to Howley. This set the stage for what would become the church’s controversial intervention into the political and associational choices of fishermen in its congregation.

In that letter, St. John noted his surprise that Howley had not heard of the “Fishermen’s Union movement,” which was then three months old. St. John surmised that the archbishop’s lack of familiarity with Howley’s disinclination to read “detestable” newspapers like the Plaindealer and the Trade Review. St. John described the new “League or union or whatever it is” as having been started by “some one northwards or westwards, I don’t know where.” St. John had only become aware of the union through Edward Houlihan, a Catholic Plaindealer subscriber from Argentia, where St. John was then stationed as the parish priest. Houlihan, along with Job McGrath, another Catholic, had helped organize fellow fishermen and had become the chair of the Argentia council of the FPU. Although short-lived and little-known, the Argentia council was purported to

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have had some high profile members in its ranks, including a Catholic former Liberal politician in the area.¹⁸

St. John continued that the time had come for Howley to turn this “counter current,” the FPU, to “the advantage of your club.” Notably, he was suggesting that the Church not ban the union but rather usurp it and take it in a direction more conducive to Catholic interests, to “turn the development into proper channels.” St. John opined that fishermen did not want a “mere chat house” but rather “a union that will protect and advocate their rights, their privileges, [and] their dealings with merchants and masters.”¹⁹ He was concerned that the FPU would be a competitor to the Roman Catholic Church’s “club movement”—the Star of the Sea Association, a mutual aid society set up by the Catholic hierarchy in 1871 with exclusive Roman Catholic male membership, intended to support fishermen and their families in the event of sickness or death.²⁰ Within the first six months of its existence, the Star of the Sea Association had attracted as many as 1,500 members to its St. John’s branch.²¹ But by 1909, St. John noted, the association’s “object [to expand] was not pursued and [it had] no branches over the country.” The Star of the Sea Association had, St. John argued, failed to provide fishermen with the sort of support they were now evidently seeking elsewhere.²²

Nevertheless, the possibility of a pan-denominational movement like the FPU was now a pressing concern. “It would no doubt be decidedly better to invite the Catholic fishermen in a league or society or union of their own,” St. John wrote, revealing that he viewed “a proletariat union” that was common to all denominations to be a “great danger.” In addition to his concern about Catholics belonging to associations that

¹⁸ Coaker had claimed that the Argentia local council “had within its ranks James Davis,” a Liberal MHA for the District of Placentia–St. Mary’s. Coaker “looked [forward to] the day ‘this popular planter will stand for Placentia District in the interests of the Union, which is defending the rights of his fellow fishermen workers’”; see Baker, Plaindealing, 46.

¹⁹ Letter to Archbishop M.F. Howley from John J. St. John, PP, Argentia, February 9, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.


²¹ “Star of the Sea Hall.”

²² Letter to Archbishop M.F. Howley from John J. St. John, PP, Argentia, February 9, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.
included Protestants, St. John worried that the union might enter formal politics. Whatever association Catholics endeavoured to join needed to be “guarded from the machinations of political adventures.” The potential for such misadventures would “put a stir in men’s minds.”

The Star of the Sea Association was not the only fishermen’s society to feel apprehensive about losing members to the FPU. The Society of United Fishermen (SUF), sponsored by the Church of England, also saw its interests threatened. One report by W. M. Pilot, Grand Master, and J.A. Clift, Grand Secretary, of the SUF’s Grand Lodge, noted, “We do not deem it our duty to ... offer any opinion relative to the proposed organization.” But they nevertheless went on to do exactly that, warning that by joining the union, an individual would relinquish “his right to exercise his own judgment in political and commercial matters” to the dictates of a Supreme Council. Further, they argued, “the price of fish is regulated by the unalterable law of supply and demand”; attempting to challenge this basic tenet of capitalism through unionizing would be futile.

The antagonism of the Church of England and the SUF toward the FPU in this letter is noteworthy. The FPU and SUF otherwise had a good relationship. The FPU’s newspaper, the Fishermen’s Advocate, is replete with examples of FPU–SUF interaction. Local councils of the FPU would sometimes hold their meetings at SUF halls, and reports poured into the editor of the Advocate about SUF meetings and events. Given the preponderance of support for the FPU among Church of England congregants as well as Methodists, it appears that there were organic connections between the FPU and the SUF, including overlapping membership, which resulted in an easing of tensions between the two over time.

23 Letter to Archbishop M.F. Howley from John J. St. John, PP, Argentia, February 9, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.
24 McDonald, To Each His Own (1987), 39.
25 Report of the Grand Lodge, Society of United Fishermen, March 1909, 106/19/1, ARCA. The idea that the FPU was unable to alter the price of fish was repeated years later by Board of Trade members and politicians; see Baker, “Challenging,” (2014), 199.
The grandmaster and grand secretary’s warnings instead reveal that the SUF was an organization whose members held varied or shifting political views, likely owing to political and class differences among the SUF membership. Pilot and Clift’s report about the FPU is also noteworthy for the staid language it uses in positioning itself as a sort of objective onlooker rather than an interested intervener in the matter of FPU membership. Oral histories invite us to consider a different impression by painting the concerns of the SUF executive in the matter of dual membership as outright opposition. Josiah Kearley, one of the nineteen founding members of the FPU in November of 1908 at Herring Neck, recalled that the SUF grandmaster was perhaps more hostile to the FPU than the documentary evidence suggests:

Oh well, when first the union started, I was in the fishermen’s hall... we got a letter from the Grand Master denouncing Coaker’s union and the fishermen and advising the society not to take in any members that was in sympathy with Coaker’s union—I take to mean members in the fishermen’s society. They wasn’t supposed to be members of the SUF and be members of the Fishermen’s Protective Union. They couldn’t be members of both parties.27

The SUF leadership is remembered as having taken an undeniably anti-FPU stance.

Meanwhile, Coaker’s stint at the Plaindealer was about to come to an end due his alleged writing of an anonymous piece in March 1909 that smeared a Torbay priest, Father Michael J. Clarke, for having campaigned for the Liberals. Clarke sued the newspaper and judgment was found in his favour, though the paper appealed the decision and the matter was later dropped. But the affair caused the newspaper to lose readership. The Plaindealer reportedly faced pressure from clergy, politicians, and businessmen to alter its editorial line and to get rid of Coaker.28 Later, when the Fishermen’s Advocate was up and running, Coaker claimed that it was Devine and a Mike Gibbs, a lawyer who supported People’s Party Prime Minister E.P. Morris, who crafted the libel against Father Clarke, and that Coaker and the country’s fishermen had

27 Josiah Kearley interview, September 1970.
been “disgusted” over the piece in question. Nevertheless, the Plaindealer sought to pull FPU-friendly content out of its pages, appeasing the paper’s financiers, after which the Plaindealer became a more St. John’s-oriented and adamantly pro-People’s Party paper. Catholic Church leaders would no doubt have looked upon these events as proof of the new union’s menacing attitude towards the Catholic Church.

**Archbishop M.F. Howley and the Salmonier council enter the fray**

If the Church of England and its agents within the fraternal orders were incensed by the FPU’s growth, members of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy were even more so. Archbishop Howley took Father St. John’s concerns about the union very seriously. On March 16, 1909, he sent a letter to parish priests that asked them to “stamp out this Society at once if it has appeared in your Parish.” Howley admitted in the letter that he had become aware that some Catholic fishermen had already joined the society, but he surmised that they must have been “unaware of the nature of this Society” and been “induced to join it.” He declared that the union was henceforth...condemned by the Church, and no Catholic can join it. If any have already done so they must leave it at once unless they mean to incur the Censures of the Church. If they have taken any oath in the Society let them understand that it is unlawful and not binding. There are secret signs and pass words and this immoral oath by which they bind themselves blindly to obey the will of the Superior or President. This was Howley’s first public condemnation of the FPU.

A week later on March 23, 1909, Peter J. Trimlett, chairman, Stephen Hawes, deputy chairman, and a P. Murphy, secretary of the Salmonier local of the FPU, wrote to the Archbishop about the “awkward situation” they had been put in as Catholic fishermen, “owing to your Grace’s disapproval of that movement.” Their letter noted that the FPU promised to be “a splendid thing for the labour classes of Newfoundland” and

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30 “Another of Harry’s Epistles,” Fishermen’s Advocate, May 18, 1912; Baker, Plaindealing, 49-50.

31 Letter to parish priests from Archbishop M.F. Howley March 16, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.
suggested that the Archbishop had not “sought sufficient information” regarding the FPU.\textsuperscript{32} The church had been mistaken, the three writers argued, for assuming that the FPU’s members were bound to secrecy regarding anything other than the business of the union. This point alone represents a philosophical gulf between Catholic laity and clergy regarding the importance of the Church’s policy towards secret societies. Trimlett, Hawes, and Murphy justified the secrecy provisions of the union on the basis that sharing union business was no different from “discussing our own private business with disinterested parties.” Just as a business had internal secrets, so too could a union. The letter noted that they would be negatively affected were they forced to divest themselves of the very real rights and material benefits of union membership should the Church persist in its anti-union stance. The men asked the Archbishop to reconsider.\textsuperscript{33}

These interventions by Irish-Catholic fishermen in the debate were significant for several reasons. First, by 1909, Irish-Catholic fishermen in the outports of the southern Avalon Peninsula were not unfamiliar with the union tradition. Inshore fishermen had long been unorganized, but some of them would have had experience in other unions. Inshore fishermen in this region may have been familiar with the union tradition after dockworkers in the overwhelmingly Catholic town of Placentia struck in 1904 but returned to work after Howley’s urging.\textsuperscript{34} But, many of the fishermen in the Salmonier local and other newly formed FPU locals in the region would have been joining a union for the first time. So the fact that Catholic fishermen were making sense of their union’s policies, and doing so in a way that was both creative and autonomous of the church, reveals that Catholic fishermen felt they had significant freedom to assess not only the union’s constitution but also Catholic Church dictates. Second, Trimlett, Hawes, and Murphy’s letter represents a sophisticated critique that essentially accused the Church of taking a hypocritical stand. Secrets were kept in numerous circumstances for justifiable reasons, they argued; what made the secrets of this new union organization any different? This critique is quite significant: far from being docile, lay Catholics were

\textsuperscript{32} Letter to Archbishop MF Howley from Peter Trimlett and others, Salmonier, March 23, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.

\textsuperscript{33} Letter to Archbishop MF Howley from Peter Trimlett and others, Salmonier, March 23, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA. For an analysis of the intellectual and ideological origins of Howley’s opposition to the FPU, see Burt, “Archbishop Howley,” 56-68.

\textsuperscript{34} Burt, “Archbishop Howley,” 10-11.
capable of openly and directly calling into question the judgment of the Church. The laity did not perceive the Catholic hierarchy’s leadership in secular matters as infallible.

This letter also shows that Catholic members of the FPU on the Southern Avalon responded quickly to the Archbishop’s ban on Catholic membership in the FPU. A traditional reading of this text might suggest passivity on the part of these Catholic fishermen, who could have been simply pleading with their Archbishop to permit them to continue their memberships in the union. However, another reading of this document reveals something altogether different. The source shows that lay Catholics in rural Newfoundland could go over their priest’s head and write the Archbishop directly, and even to question his judgment. Lay Catholics asserted that they too had a place at the table in determining their associational proclivities, and that matters of politics were not solely the determination of the Catholic hierarchy. We see confirmation here of Keough’s idea of ethnicity as a continual “process of negotiation,” but in this case not only between ethnic groups but rather within a particular ethnic group as ethnic and ethno-religious identity is deployed, adapted, used, and re-shaped in a dialogue between the group’s elites and non-elites.35 Class was clearly at issue here, but so too was the question of how the interests of the ethnic group were to be shaped and by whom they could be articulated.

Once Coaker became aware of the Archbishop’s condemnation, he too penned a letter to the Archbishop, coincidentally on the same day as did Trimlett, Hawes, and Murphy. Coaker raised the fact that Howley had advised the Benevolent Irish Society that he opposed the FPU. Questioning the wisdom of the Archbishop’s disapproval, Coaker reminded Howley of the unfortunate effects “of having such a Union composed alone of Protestants especially in a Colony such as this when the Protestants number a majority of the population.” That line would have appealed to Howley’s endorsement of the denominational compromise from the 1860s between the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, and Methodists, whose claimed purpose was to end sectarianism in Newfoundland. But it was also a veiled threat: exclude Catholics at your peril, not ours, Coaker was saying. Anglicans and Methodists combined outnumbered

Catholics, and Coaker had high hopes for this union. “I have put my hand to the plough and intend to keep it there,” Coaker wrote. The union’s intent was not to “harass” anyone, but simply to “endeavour to secure fair play for the thousands of poor creatures who are only existing in this land of ours.” The letter ended on a conciliatory note, however, when Coaker wrote that he was “willing to take any suggestions your grace may offer into immediate consideration.”

On March 26, three days after the Coaker and the Salmonier executive had penned their letters to Howley, St. John returned to the subject of the FPU in a follow-up letter. St. John updated Howley with more information, having now become aware of the name of the organization, and having received a copy of its constitution and rules. St. John reported that Edward Houlihan—by then the chairman of the Argentia council of the FPU and a Catholic—had inquired about why Howley had condemned the union and had, like the three letter-writers from Salmonier, advised that the FPU was not a secret society. “Most of them are for upholding the Union,” St. John wrote. It is in this letter that St. John gave the most detailed survey of FPU activity on the Southern Avalon. In addition to Argentia, local councils had been formed in Salmonier, Riverhead, and Trepassey, “and soon others [would be established] on the Southern Shore.”

36 Letter to Archbishop M.F. Howley from W.F. Coaker, Herring Neck, March 23, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.
37 Letter to Archbishop MF Howley from Father John St. John, Argentia, March 26, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.
38 The document reads “River Head, St. Mary’s.” It is my interpretation that this refers only to the town of Riverhead in St. Mary’s Bay (as opposed to Riverhead and the town of St. Mary’s).
39 There is confusion about the number of councils that existed on the Southern Avalon Peninsula. Father St. John’s letter of March 26, 1909 is repeatedly cited as having identified eleven FPU councils in Ferryland District; see McDonald, “W.F. Coaker,” (1971), 89 and 89n1, and in To Each His Own, 40, and 40n35. The number is also cited to be eleven in Ferryland and Placentia—St. Mary’s, according to Brym and Neis, “Regional Factors,” 400 and 401, citing an unpublished paper of McDonald’s, “Coaker the reformer: a brief biographical introduction,” unpublished paper (1975), on deposit, CNS, 25. However, St. John’s letter does not mention the specific number of councils in the area at all; he identifies councils in Argentia, Salmonier, Riverhead (St. Mary’s Bay), and Trepassey. The much reported figure of eleven councils in the Southern Avalon is not borne out by the evidence. See, Letter to Archbishop M.F. Howley from Father John St. John, Argentia, March 26, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.
Figure 2: FPU councils on the Southern Avalon Peninsula relative to St. John’s, 1909


St. John was painting a picture of a union that was quickly sweeping across the island. It had even crept through the Church’s backdoor and had entered the heavily Catholic districts of Placentia–St. Mary’s and Ferryland. His letter described the momentum of a union that already had five thousand members in the Twillingate district and seven hundred in the district of Fogo. “Mr. Coaker,” St. John warned his Archbishop, “expects to have the largest and most influential membership in the Districts of Placentia & St. Mary’s, Ferryland, and Burin,” all Catholic strongholds.40

Though multiple Catholics in the FPU told St. John that the oath of secrecy was for officers only and not all members, St. John came to his own conclusion when he

40 Letter to Archbishop MF Howley from Father John St. John, Argentia, March 26, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.
obtained a copy of the new FPU constitution. His interpretation of the rule about the taking of an oath of secrecy was that all members were required to swear it. The constitution however had several sections that heightened the Church’s concerns. The “oath” that provoked so much anxiety in the Catholic Church leadership was contained in section 65 (“Membership Obligation”) of the constitution, which read:

Every applicant on admission to the Union shall have the following obligation administered by the Chairman:—

I ——— do solemnly and voluntarily promise that I will to the utmost of my power support and maintain the Fishermen’s Protective Union of Newfoundland; attend all meetings regularly; obey all lawful commands; pay all just taxes and assessments, obey and observe the Constitution and Rules of the Union. I further promise not to reveal the business of the Union to non-members when officially requested not to do so or to permit non-members to share or partake of the commercial benefits derived through the Union. I further swear that I am not a suspended or expelled member of the Union. So help me God and keep me true to this obligation.  

The various officers of the FPU’s local, district, and supreme councils also had to swear a fairly standard oath of office that contained no additional requirement of secrecy.

A copy of the FPU constitution and by-laws is held at the Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese in St. John’s and has been digitized by the Maritime History Archive at Memorial University of Newfoundland for public availability. That copy contains the marginalia of either Father St. John or Archbishop Howley, though the handwriting seems to be Howley’s. Here, Howley provides insight into what he deemed especially egregious. In one case he wrote “illegal?” adjacent to the section of the constitution stipulating that the President of the union had the power to “decide all disputes and be the arbiter in construing the meaning and sense of the Constitution.” Howley also underlined or marked with an “X” sections in his copy of the FPU constitution that called for an “annual pass” (a password), and the requirement of a door

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41 FPU Constitution, 48-49, 106/19/4, ARCA.
42 The “Oath of Office” for officeholders in the FPU’s local, district and supreme councils read, “I solemnly promise that I will truly and faithfully observe and perform the duties that pertain to the office ——— to which I have been elected, that are prescribed in the Constitution and Rules of the Fishermen’s Protective Union of Newfoundland. So help me God.” FPU Constitution, 51.
43 FPU Constitution, 8.
guard at FPU meetings, tasked with keeping non-members out. The constitution’s calls for “free, compulsory education,” the “formation of a Union Party in the Legislature,” and the requirements that Union Party candidates and legislators obey the Supreme Council’s wishes and have their election expenses paid by the union were also underlined or otherwise identified in pencil, giving us a sense of what was of particular concern to Howley.

Howley’s ire must have been stoked upon reading the constitution, realizing that it required a secretive “membership obligation” or oath, even though fishermen such as Edward Houlihan insisted to Father St. John that no such obligation existed. Howley, by this point, was also in receipt of various competing and contradictory information about whether or not the FPU was a “secret society,” notably: (a) whether or not the union’s activities were protected by an oath of secrecy; (b) if there was such an oath, whether the secrecy regarded all internal affairs of the union or just certain business; and (c) whether or not all members had to swear the oath, or just executive officers. For their part, Trimlett, Hawes, and Murphy did not dispute that the union required the swearing of an oath of secrecy; rather, they stressed that the matters about which the union was secretive were temporal in nature and part of the ordinary business of the union, and thus, they argued, should have been of no concern to the Catholic Church.

The matter of secrecy was not the only issue Father St. John raised in his letter of March 26. The union’s political ambitions had piqued his curiosity. The Union Party, as noted, started as an idea that was advanced in the constitution in 1908, but no serious effort had been made to organize it in time to contest the 1908 or 1909 elections. The Supreme Council of the FPU decided to move forward with establishing the party at its annual meeting in 1910, and, by 1911, district councils such as that in Trinity had

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44 FPU Constitution, 7, 14, 23-23, 27, 28, 42.
45 FPU Constitution, 44, 45, 46, and 47.
46 It is possible that, having started local councils of their own volition, figures like Edward Houlihan in Argentia and Peter Tremlett et al. in Salmonier simply did not interpret the “secrecy clause” as strongly as did Howley, nor in the same way as did other FPU local councils. Examples in Chapter Three and Chapter Five indicate that local councils ran their meetings quite differently, depending on place and time.
already begun nominating candidates to run on a Union Party ticket.\textsuperscript{47} This indicates a high degree of enthusiasm for the union. The party’s manifesto, the Bonavista Platform, would not be finalized until 1912, a year before the general election of 1913.

Coaker had said in a speech to the 1909 FPU convention in November of that year, “[N]o change is possible until politicians are brought to book in the Assembly by a few sturdy practical members of the Fishermen’s Protective Union.”\textsuperscript{48} This growing discussion of the union’s political ambitions over time worried the Catholic hierarchy. The union threatened to become “a political organization usurping all the functions of a Government, an \textit{imperium in imperio}\textsuperscript{49} or state within a state. The Catholic Church at this time regularly intervened in Newfoundland politics and endorsed certain candidates or parties. More commonly, Church figures corresponded with political leaders, advising them how they felt about matters of public importance. It is also important to note, however, that, as discussed in Chapter One, Catholics did not always vote in blocs, and often the political support of Church leaders was not uniformly endorsed by the Catholic laity.

Coaker had been clear from the start that the FPU would seek not merely to represent fishermen’ interests to the merchants, but also to influence government decision-making.\textsuperscript{50} The union sought to hold the balance of power in the legislature in order to pressure any sitting government to enact legislation on issues facing fishermen, such as the regulation of fish prices, the grading of fish, the establishment of benefits for fishermen, and so on. For his part, St. John worried that the union was seeking “class legislation” on behalf of fishermen, which, by virtue of their being the majority of the working population, was “altogether selfish” and harboured the potential for “tyranny and injustice” on the part of the lower orders.\textsuperscript{51} Here, again, we see class intersecting with

\textsuperscript{47} Coaker, \textit{Twenty Years}, 29.
\textsuperscript{48} Coaker, \textit{Twenty Years}, 2-3.
\textsuperscript{49} Letter to Archbishop MF Howley from Father John St. John, Argentia, March 26, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.
\textsuperscript{50} Editor’s Notes,” \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, October 29, 1910.
\textsuperscript{51} Letter to Archbishop MF Howley from Father John St. John, Argentia, March 26, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.
ethnicity as Church leaders endeavoured to create a united Catholic front against the union.

In addition to spelling out his concerns, the March 26 letter of Father St. John provides rare evidence of the FPU local councils of the southern Avalon. By March 26, and likely as a result of Howley’s letter to parish priests ten days earlier, the FPU local council in Argentia had, according to St. John, “ceased” enrolment of new members. The number of FPU members had reached 67 but then decreased—presumably following Howley’s condemnation on March 16—which in turn caused others to delay joining. Fishermen there were, according to St. John, waiting to see what fishermen in nearby St. Mary’s Bay would do. If he was correct, potential members were not solely relying on clerical interventions to inform their decisions. Irish-Catholic fishermen consulted primarily with other Irish-Catholic fishermen on significant issues and based their decisions on how they were going to proceed as a group. This informal grouping was defined by regional proximity, shared Irish-Catholic identity, and shared class interests as (largely) inshore fishermen, creating an ethno-cultural cohort over which even the Catholic Church hierarchy, though influential, had far more limited influence than traditional historical interpretations have indicated.

The closing section of the March 26 letter provides further insight into the ethno-religious dimension of Catholic–FPU relationships in the southern Avalon Peninsula. First, the connections between Roman Catholicism in Newfoundland and Ireland were stressed. St. John suggested that Howley discourage Catholic involvement in secret societies in Newfoundland by learning from the experience of the Irish Bishops, who, on February 27, 1909, had strongly censured such groups in pastoral letters to every Catholic parish (an action that had quite mixed results, as the events of the next fifteen years would demonstrate). Howley took this advice, and adapted Irish Catholic Church directives to the FPU situation at home in Newfoundland, embracing an ultramontanist worldview that was fortified by transatlantic connections with the Catholic Church in
Ireland and with Rome.\textsuperscript{52} The views of the Irish-Catholic clergy of Newfoundland were thus animated by ethno-religious discourses in the old world.\textsuperscript{53} Just as Irish-Catholic fishermen’s responses to the FPU were motivated and informed by the politics of ethnicity, so too were the responses of the local Catholic hierarchy.

St. John advised in his letter that it was not in the interest of the Church to “turn the fishermen against us”\textsuperscript{54} by intervening too excessively in the debate over the FPU. St. John was acknowledging the Catholic Church’s inclination to interfere in politics, but also warning that the Catholic Church should be more sensitive to public perceptions of it—that too obvious a public intervention during an election would have been unwelcome and perhaps the source of a lay Catholic backlash. The Church, although in a position of power, was still vulnerable to pushback from the flock—something that lay Catholics such as Trimlett, Hawes, and Murphy demonstrated in their own correspondence with the Archbishop. The Church’s response was still being negotiated at this point. St. John asked Howley whether other priests in the region had expressed opinions on the matter. All advice at this point was welcome, he concluded, and he urged Howley to come to a decision about the way forward.

Meanwhile, other conversations were taking place. There is no indication that Howley responded to Coaker’s original letter dated March 23, 1909, but Coaker followed up with a telegram a week later on March 30, noting simply, “Have withdrawn secret clause obligation objected to kindly rescind ban.”\textsuperscript{55} The lack of a formal letter and the


\textsuperscript{53} Keough uses this concept of transatlantic discourse in her analysis of the Harbour Grace Affray; see, “Contested Terrains,” 37, 55.

\textsuperscript{54} Letter to Archbishop MF Howley from Father John St. John, Argentia, March 26, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.

\textsuperscript{55} Telegram to Archbishop M.F. Howley from W.F. Coaker, Beaverton, March 30, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.
simplicity of the message indicate the urgency with which Coaker, then writing from Beaverton, viewed the Church’s ban. The next day, on March 31, 1909, J.M. Kent sent a letter to Howley advising him on the legalities of secret societies and their oaths. Kent was president of the Benevolent Irish Society and a Catholic politician in the Liberal Party who would become the party leader and opposition leader when Robert Bond resigned from politics in 1913. For his part, St. John had urged Howley to write “an exhaustive discourse on Secret Societies … [and have it] printed and published so that we all may read and learn from it.”\(^{56}\) Such a document would be aimed at clergy and parishioners alike, not just the parish priests. Armed with that advice as well as Kent’s legal opinion, and bearing in mind queries directly from the FPU president and Catholic fishermen alike, Archbishop Howley wrote an exhaustive circular letter to deal with this issue once and for all.

**Howley’s circular letter of March 31, 1909**

In his circular letter dated March 31, 1909, Archbishop Howley categorically banned Catholic participation in the FPU. Ian McDonald has referred to this document as the “single most important and revealing expression of the social and political philosophy of the Catholic Church in Newfoundland during the early 20th century.”\(^{57}\) Howley was particularly dismayed by the brazenness with which many of the members of his own flock took issue with his orders. As noted in Chapter One, he complained that Catholics had been openly questioning pastoral dictates on the matter.\(^{58}\) Quoting from Acts 20:28-29, he compared the FPU to those “ravening wolves” among the Ephesians, causing the flock (Catholics) to “speak perverse things,” perhaps a belaboured metaphor for the new language of class consciousness that the FPU stood accused of fostering among Catholics and Protestants alike. Howley went on:

> Surely then, my dear people, when your Priests and Bishop speak to you in such solemn and responsible words, you ought at once to listen to them, to acknowledge them as your best and truest friends who have no

\(^{56}\) Letter to Archbishop MF Howley from Father John St. John, Argentia, March 26, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.

\(^{57}\) McDonald, “W.F. Coaker,” (1971), 89n3.

\(^{58}\) Circular letter from Archbishop M.F. Howley, St. John’s, March 31, 1909, 106/19/1, also 106/9/6, ARCA/MHArc.
object in view but your welfare spiritual and temporal, and not allow yourselves to be drawn away by the false and foolish words and promises of persons whom you know not, and who are only your worst enemies in disguise.  

The circular letter began, then, on a paternalistic and cautionary note. Howley saw it as necessary to remind parishioners of the seriousness of his intervention and to admonish Catholics not to question the authority of their Church.

Yet the circular also provides a glimpse into the frailty of clerical power at the time. Howley’s admission of his flock’s resistance exposes the weaknesses of existing explanations about Catholic attitudes toward the FPU—that they were simply “priest-led” and steered away from the union by their clergy. The Archbishop was openly acknowledging and publicizing Catholic opposition to his own orders. This circular is not, therefore, proof of Catholic fishermen’s subservience. Instead, there is another, more compelling explanation of the dynamics involved: Catholic fishermen and the highest echelons of the local Catholic Church were entangled in an intra-ethnic debate over who was paramount in deciding Irish-Catholic political behaviour.

The circular specifies the three main reasons why the Church took issue with the new organization that was spreading into coastal communities: first, it constituted a secret society, which, by definition, was banned for Catholics; second, it required the swearing of an oath, which was seen as an affront to Catholic liberty; and third, its objectives were perceived as disruptive to the harmonious social order of Newfoundland and expected to have “grave consequences” for the welfare of its Catholic population. Howley explained the differences between “natural” secrets, such as those between family members, and the sorts of secrets that one is beholden to keep in secret societies. Secretiveness within organizations, Howley suggested, validated suspicions “that some obligation, morally wrong and sinful, is going to be imposed” on its members.

59 Circular letter from Archbishop M.F. Howley, St. John’s, March 31, 1909, 106/19/1, also 106/9/6, ARCA/MHArc.

60 Circular letter from Archbishop M.F. Howley, St. John’s, March 31, 1909, 106/19/1, also 106/9/6, ARCA/MHArc.
The circular letter went on to suggest that there were differences between those organizations that were *ipso facto* excommunicated by the church, and those that were simply forbidden. The document implied that the FPU belonged in the latter category. The objective of the original freemason societies, which the FPU seemed to be modelled on, was their purported desire to “overturn… lawful authority” and “introduce universal atheism and anarchy.” The more serious threats to Catholicism were those secret societies that declared “Satan as their God.” Although the FPU did not fall into that category, there was in Howley’s typology of banned organizations guilt-by-association. The FPU, due to its secretiveness and its oath requirement, was “prohibited and … to be avoided under pain of mortal sin.” The circular letter further critiqued the FPU constitution, the union’s structure and organization, and the power of the president. It also attacked the secretiveness with which the constitution was published, under murky and, according to Howley, “illegal” circumstances, which Howley further suggested revealed how “stupid” the union was.61

But the remainder of Howley’s denunciation of the FPU was based on the union’s “objects”—its purported goals and the negative consequences on society, if it were to succeed in its ambitions. According to Howley, one of the nefarious effects that was already in evidence was the fomentation of class-consciousness among Newfoundlanders and its tendency “to instill into the minds of simple persons a sense of unrest and discontent.” Howley claimed that it was not the specific goals of the union—getting the best price for fish, the establishment of ship-building and agriculture, and so on—that made it objectionable. Rather, it was the general “immorality” of a union that planned to

...set class against class; the fishermen against the merchant; the labourer against the employer; the outport man against the St John’s man, all of which things are fraught with mischief to our peace and prosperity.62

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61 Circular letter from Archbishop M.F. Howley, St. John’s, March 31, 1909, 106/19/1, also 106/9/6, ARCA/MHAr.; see also Burt, “Archbishop Howley,” 62.

62 Circular letter from Archbishop M.F. Howley, St. John’s, March 31, 1909, 106/19/1, also 106/9/6, ARCA/MHAr.
For Howley, this was not just a matter of the FPU’s incompatibility with canonical law. The union, he felt, was deleterious to the Catholic hierarchy’s temporal interests as well, though Howley was careful to frame the FPU as a threat to Newfoundland as a whole.

Though Earl Burt has pointed out that Howley was not just reacting in isolation but rather was applying specific church teachings about freemasonry and secret societies to his response to the FPU, Howley had his own stakes in doing so. He perceived his position as “Chief Pastor of our people” to have been put at risk by the rise of the FPU. Specifically, the introduction of class-based, mass politics and a rejuvenated class identity among fishermen of all denominations were concepts that alarmed Howley. He assumed that fishermen’s unity across denominations would imperil what he felt was his position as the main arbiter of the Irish-Catholic interest in Newfoundland politics. In one of several sermons on socialism in early 1908, Howley reminisced about “the old feudal and paternal system of our merchants,” which had treated fishermen “tenderly.” Howley figured that the way to maintain dominion over his congregants was to ensure ethno-religious unity among them and obedience to his wishes.

But the FPU was seen as menacing to Catholic Church interests in other ways too. Coaker had previously espoused non-denominational education in the outports. He later simplified this demand to non-denominational night school for adults and advocated “free” education. Either way, the Catholic hierarchy saw Coaker’s proposal as endangering one of the primary ways in which the Roman Catholic Church held power over and inculcated Catholicism among its adherents. Denominational education had been a right won not only by the Catholic Church but also the Church of England.

64 Circular letter from Archbishop M.F. Howley, St. John’s, March 31, 1909, 106/19/1, also 106/9/6, ARCA/MHarc.; and Burt, “Archbishop Howley,” 63.
66 Burt, “Archbishop Howley,” 49, citing “Socialism II” sermon, April 1, 1908, 106/31/9, ARCA.
67 O’Flaherty, Lost Country, 262-263.
68 Coaker drew a distinction between “free” and “compulsory”, and laid blame for resistance to such policies on the Church of England rather than the Roman Catholic Church, in “What’s What!” Fishermen’s Advocate, August 17, 1912.
and the other Protestant churches after the tumult of the 1860s, at which time the denominational compromises had been reached.

It is noteworthy that towards the end of the circular letter, Howley was keen to impress upon the reader that his circular letter was not a sectarian screed. He acknowledged that this new union was on the rise in “the Northern Districts,” whose population tended to be Protestant rather than Catholic. Howley admitted, “With these of course I have nothing to do.” But, citing the example of the Irish bishops’ condemnation of Daniel O’Connell’s “Catholic Association” and the anti-landlord “National Organization” of the nineteenth century, Howley reminded readers that the Catholic Church was quick to condemn organizations emanating out of its own ranks, and not just politically radical and/or Protestant organizations.

Although Howley stressed non-sectarian reasons for opposing the FPU, his transatlantic glance is a reminder of the social, political, and intellectual influences that Irish affairs still had on the activities of Irish Catholics in Newfoundland roughly a century after most of their ancestors had migrated. This lasting connection between the Irish diaspora in Newfoundland and Ireland existed before and well after the rise of the FPU. This sense of shared identity was not just limited to middle-class elites or the Catholic hierarchy, either; working-class Catholics also felt it. Examples can be found in Keough’s analysis of the resilient Irishness of Riverhead’s Catholic community during the Harbour Grace Affray of 1883, and Patrick Mannion’s examination of responses to the Easter Rising and the Irish War of Independence among Newfoundland’s Irish-Catholic population.69

Ironically, Howley’s admission that he would have been just as quick to condemn the FPU had it been primarily a union of Catholic fishermen is also an acknowledgement of the agency of ordinary Irish Catholics. In Ireland, Catholics were forming organizations, including even self-styled Catholic organizations, outside the

management, guidance, and scope of the Catholic Church establishment itself. Likewise, even as Howley was penning his circular letter on March 31, 1909, he was contending with letters from Catholics who dared question his judgment regarding his condemnation of the FPU. It is impossible to test Howley’s theory that he would likewise have condemned a hypothetically Catholic-driven FPU as much as the actual Protestant-dominated union that existed. But it is within this acknowledgement of Catholic fishermen’s independence that we see the weakness of the “priest-led hypothesis.” For the Catholic Church hierarchy, the possibility of an even more defiant laity in Newfoundland remained an open prospect.

Intriguingly, Howley attempted to confront the stock image of the priest-led Catholic fisherman toward the end of his circular letter. He wrote, “I beg of you to have confidence in your priests” and ignore the arguments of FPU promoters:

The agents of these new societies … begin by trying to undermine your respect and faith in your clergy. They try to teach you to keep aloof from them, to shake off their influence; to withhold your confidence from them. They use the insinuating and flattering argument that you are allowing yourselves to be “Priest ridden,” that you are being deprived of your independence of judgment and manliness and treated as children. That you ought to throw aside this yoke and act as men! That while in matters of religion you are prepared to listen to your clergy, yet in all other matters you will judge for yourselves! They end by entirely alienating your affections and sympathies from your clergy and your Church, and so pave the way to absolute irreligion and atheism.

Here, at the intersection of ethnicity, class, and gender, Howley attempted to counter apparent Protestant stereotypes of Catholic passivity by arguing that it was manly and righteous for Newfoundland’s Irish Catholics to act in concert and eschew the FPU. Howley judged that the only way a Catholic could have strayed from the flock so severely as to have joined the FPU was if he had been misled or duped into doing so by a Protestant “agent” of this secret society—an abomination to Irish-Catholic manhood.

70 It is noteworthy that little to no effort was made to created a Catholic equivalent of the union, or to revitalize the Star of the Sea association, ideas first mooted in St. John’s first correspondence to Howley on the matter.
71 Circular letter from Archbishop M.F. Howley, St. John’s, March 31, 1909, 106/19/1, also 106/9/6, ARCA/MHArc.
Howley’s concerns about wayward Catholics were likely amplified by the intelligence he received from Father St. John. It was Father St. John who told Howley—although after Howley had penned the circular letter—of an incident in which a “free and independent” Catholic fisherman in Argentia had said to him, “I'm not a member of any union. I don’t approve Unionism, but if I were a member I would ask what has the Archbishop got to do with it?” St. John remarked in his letter to Howley, “There’s liberalism for you!” Even some Catholic opponents of the FPU showed resistance to the Archbishop.

Howley inadvertently acknowledged a very crucial element of Catholic agency in this context: Catholics were questioning not only the church’s position on the matter but the Church’s very right to dictate fishermen’s positions. Howley’s response was characteristically condescending, but it also attempted to assuage the concerns fishermen had voiced. He stressed that the priesthood was not comprised of petty dictators over a whimpering Catholic population, but men who devoted “all their lives and energies to their flocks.” The purpose of these passages in the circular letter was to remind Catholics of the vital role that priests held in their day-to-day lives and of priests’ crucial positions as guardians of Irish-Catholic cohesion. Howley was trying to impress upon his adherents that their priests were part of the Irish-Catholic ethnie, or perhaps even Benedict Anderson's “imagined community” —the same wider ethnic, spiritual, and cultural family, who, “from cradle to grave... were ever with them.” While Irish-Catholic fishermen may have seen their Church as part of their community, they were unwilling to relinquish complete control over their lives to it. The March 31, 1909, circular letter should be read for what it reveals about Howley’s motivations for writing: Catholics were pursuing courses of action independent of his wishes, and taking issue with his judgment. If this were not the case, Howley would have had little reason to pen the

72 Letter to Archbishop M.F. Howley from John J. St. John, PP, Argentia, April 9, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.
75 Circular letter from Archbishop M.F. Howley, St. John’s, March 31, 1909, 106/19/1, also 106/9/6, ARCA/MHarc.
circular letter. The interrelationship between clergy and Catholic fishermen was much more complex than a conventional reading of this document would suggest.

The aftermath of Howley’s circular letter

Archbishop Howley’s circular letter of March 31, 1909, was a watershed moment in the early years of the FPU. Its condemnation of the union was sweeping and severe. It is unclear whether or not the circular letter was distributed to all Catholic parishes. Nevertheless, after its publication, many Catholics began to turn away from the FPU. On May 3, 1909, Alex Howley, a Catholic from St. Joseph’s in St. Mary’s Bay who had been involved with the FPU, sent a telegram to the Archbishop noting that there had been some discussion among officers of the union about whether the Archbishop had “withdrawn condemnation” of the FPU. The writer advised the rest of his fellow fishermen that the ban was still in effect, causing the officers of the local, all “Excellent Catholics,” to abandon the union. To fishermen there, the Catholic Church’s condemnation was one vector in their decision-making process about joining the union, and an influential one. But so too would have been their suspicions about the English-Protestant characteristics of the union, or rumours about Coaker’s anti-Catholicism being bandied about in the media, which would have given Catholic unionists pause. But it is also important to note that Catholic fishermen in Argentia paid attention to events in nearby St. Mary’s Bay, where the resultant collapse of the Salmonier council likely influenced the Argentia council to fold as well.

Still, conversations between priests and parishioners were a site of negotiation and sometimes dissidence within the Catholic community of Newfoundland. Here, the laity was, regardless of their orientation to the FPU or unionism, an audience that required persuasion and convincing rather than simple manipulation. Father St. John’s

76 It is likely that Alex Howley is referring to the closing of the Salmonier local council, though it is not clear from the telegram. Telegram from Alex Howley to Archbishop M.F. Howley, St. Joseph’s, NF, May 3, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.

77 As noted, the main evidence for short-lived local councils on the Southern Avalon Peninsula are Father John J. St. John’s reporting of local councils at Argentia, Salmonier, Riverhead (St. Mary’s Bay), and Trepassey in the winter of 1909. On November 16, 1914, Coaker reported to the Supreme Council meeting at Catalina that there were councils in Branch, Riverhead (St. Mary’s Bay), North Harbour, and Witless Bay, all on the southern Avalon, and Petty Harbour near St. John’s; see Coaker, Twenty Years, 82. See also Figures 2 and 3.
diagnosis of there being a problem of “liberalism” in the minds of Catholics indicates that the Catholic Church’s supposed dominion over its worshippers was more tenuous than conventional histories have previously suggested, especially in this new era of ideological competition for the loyalty of the working class.

Coaker made use of alternative avenues to get around Howley’s intransigence. In September, Coaker informed union members about the upcoming first annual session of the Supreme Council at Change Islands on October 29 and 30, 1909. He stated that the Supreme Council would revise the constitution and that he would propose to amend it by removing the obligation to swear an oath of secrecy and replacing it with a declaration of membership. Notably, his proposed amendment as of September still held a requirement that members “obey all lawful commands of the Chairman of my local Council at meetings, and the decisions of the Supreme Council,” wording that the Church still felt was an affront to Catholic liberties.

Archbishop Howley received a copy of this letter, and, to his chagrin, it contained some details that seemed to suggest cracks in the unity of his Church toward the FPU. The document revealed that this new, revised declaration of membership had been “submitted to His Lordship Bishop McNeil, of St. George’s [on the west coast of Newfoundland] and has been approved by His Lordship.” In Howley’s copy of the letter, he had underlined that portion of the document and included a note that read, “After I had disapproved it. +M.F.H.” No correspondence between Bishop McNeil and Archbishop Howley about this matter exists in the Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese, so it is unclear whether or not McNeil had communicated with Howley about it at all. It is likely, however, that McNeil did not consult with Howley before approving the change and had thus circumvented the Church’s chain of command, arriving at an opinion that contradicted that of his pastoral superior. It is quite clear that Howley was none too impressed with McNeil’s defiance. Not only was Howley finding

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78 Circular letter to Chairmen of FPU Local Council from W.F. Coaker, President, Herring Neck, September 14, 1909, 106/19/1, ARCA.
79 Circular letter to Chairmen of FPU Local Council from W.F. Coaker, President, Herring Neck, September 14, 1909, 106/19/1, ARCA.
rebellion within his flock, some of which had been staved off in parts of the Avalon Peninsula, but even some fellow bishops were disagreeing with his fierce anti-unionism.

Father St. John’s reaction to the evidently contradictory messages coming from Howley and McNeil was predictable. St. John recommended, in a letter dated October 4, 1909, that Howley address McNeil’s disobedience directly during Howley’s then forthcoming trip to Grand Falls, where a meeting of church leaders was apparently set to take place. “If the leaders in Israel are of different opinion on this matter,” St. John opined, “it will be hard to get the poor simple fishermen to abandon the association.” St. John further suggested that if any bishop of the church should be charged with matters involving clerical endorsement or condemnation of the FPU, that it be Bishop John March of Grand Falls—then part of the Diocese of Harbour Grace—since it was in his diocese that the union was strongest. The St. John’s archives do not contain evidence about Bishop March’s own views about the FPU.

Nevertheless, it is within these dioceses of Harbour Grace and St. George’s, shepherded by Bishops March and McNeil respectively, that we see more of a range of Irish-Catholic political activity, including sustained and committed involvement with the FPU, as described in the next chapter. These dioceses together took in an area covering the vast swath of territory outside of the Avalon Peninsula, its then sparsely populated West Coast, and the more populated and predominantly Protestant outports of the northeast coast where the FPU had become extremely popular.

Yet, far from abandoning the union entirely, southeastern unionists also clung on to the FPU, and councils continued to form and reform well after 1909. A letter to the editor was published in the Fishermen’s Advocate on October 28, 1911. The chairman of the Salmonier council, writing from St. Joseph’s, was the anonymous author. The letter quoted Captain Thomas Fitzpatrick who was rumoured to have accused Coaker of buying fish from fishermen at $5 per quintal and selling it at $5.50 to make a profit. Captain Fitzpatrick denied the accusations, and wrote the Fishermen’s Advocate that he “never made any statement to anyone in St. Joseph’s or anywhere else about your fish

80 Letter to Archbishop M.F. Howley from John J. St. John, PP, Argentia, October 4, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA.
or other private business,” to which Coaker replied, “We have every confidence in Captain Fitzpatrick’s word.” This letter reveals that the Salmonier branch apparently remained in effect, suggesting that some fishermen joined the union, left, and perhaps reconstituted it at a later date when the tumult from the Archbishop’s intervention had died down. Glimpses of these unknown or understudied local councils, including re-emergent ones in the southeast, are revealed in the pages of the Fishermen’s Advocate, as the next two chapters will demonstrate. And as Chapter Four will show, Archbishop Howley, some time in late 1909, quietly dropped his ban on FPU membership.

Conclusion

This chapter offers alternative readings to several of the most important sources on the early history of the Fishermen’s Protective Union. It reveals that on the southern Avalon, the supposedly anti-FPU region, the union indeed had a presence, albeit reduced after 1909. The union’s pledge to regulate the price of fish and ameliorate the working conditions of fishermen caught people’s attention, and membership rose suddenly in the understudied, predominantly Irish-Catholic fishing towns in the districts of Ferryland and Placentia–St. Mary’s. The FPU’s rise there was halted as a result of fishermen’s evolving attitudes towards it, attitudes that shifted partly, though by no means exclusively, from clerical intervention. In fact, the FPU acted as a site wherein intra-ethnic politics played out between Catholic fishermen and Church leaders.

As this chapter has argued, ethno-religious politics around the FPU involved more than just top-down pressures from the Catholic Church against the union: there were also bottom-up pressures from Catholic fishermen in favour of it or resentment of Church interference in secular affairs. A better way to look at the intra-ethnic dialogue that took place between Catholic Church leaders and laity in the southeast is that their interests were entangled; that is, they were bound up with each other, and neither side was able to move forward without a response from the other. How Irish Catholics chose

81 “Another Slander Nailed,” Fishermen’s Advocate, October 28, 1911.
82 Peter J. Tremlett was identified as the agent for the Fishermen’s Advocate on the Southern Avalon in the fall of 1912 and perhaps was the unidentified chairman of the local council at Salmonier who wrote a year earlier; see, “The Union’s Greatest Victory,” Fishermen’s Advocate, October 19, 1912.
to respond to the union was mitigated through an ideological dance wherein the Archbishop and fishermen on the southern Avalon Peninsula pushed each other on the matter of FPU membership. Yet even here, fishermen were divided on the issue of membership, as were Church leaders. The principle of class unity, though also individual self-interest, drove some Catholic fishermen to support the FPU. Ethno-religious unity caused some Catholic opposition to the union, though so did individual self-interest, as evinced by Father St. John’s “free and independent” parishioner in Argentia. Motivations were complex, and the fracturing of the FPU’s early support in the southeast speak to a reality where fishermen were themselves “fractured” due to the multifarious ways in which they interpreted their ethno-religious and class interests.
Chapter 3:
Inter-ethnic Entanglements in the Building of the Union

Introduction

The press in early twentieth-century Newfoundland was—like religion (see Chapter Two), electoral politics (Chapter Four), and memory (Chapter Five)—a medium through which ethnic politics played out. The union’s own newspaper, the *Fishermen’s Advocate*, is well placed to give historians a sense of how the FPU itself navigated the terrain of Newfoundland’s ethno-religious political environment. Having published its first issue on February 5, 1910, the paper increased its subscriptions to 6,000 by 1912 and then to 11,000 by 1913, helping “spread the union word all over Newfoundland.”¹ President William F. Coaker was himself the editor from 1910 until at least 1913, though perhaps longer.² In addition to his many duties running the union, touring around and organizing local councils, setting up the Union Party, establishing the various commercial enterprises of the union, and laying the foundations for the settlement of Port Union, Coaker also found time to write and edit large swathes of early editions of his union’s weekly newspaper. The *Fishermen’s Advocate* should thus be understood as having been a voice for the union and of its leadership.³ But this chapter’s purpose is not

² “Historical Directory of Newfoundland and Labrador Newspapers: D-F,” *Memorial University Libraries: Centre for Newfoundland Studies*, retrieved on March 14, 2017 at http://www.library.mun.ca/cns/nlnews/title/df. Also, notices in sporadic 1913 editions of the paper indicate that Dr. Harvey Mosdell was also an editor at that time; see for example, “The Fishermen’s Advocate,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, November 15, 1913. The *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador* reported that Arthur English, a journalist and FPU supporter in St. John’s, was also asked to help run the newspaper in Coaker’s absence; see “Fishermen’s Advocate,” *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, 178, and “English, Arthur Stanislaus,” *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, 779.
³ In one editorial in the *Fishermen’s Advocate*, it read, “Our readers know full well that when we are in town every line in our editorial columns is written by Coaker.” See “Another Deliberate Lie,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, April 23, 1912.
intended to give voice to Coaker or even the FPU per se, but instead to look at the ways in which union supporters, including Catholics, navigated ethnic politics, as filtered through the pages of the *Advocate*.

As such, this chapter has a dual purpose. First, I trace how the union was formed in the fires of ethnic politics as it played out in the press—a theme I return to in Chapter Four. Secondly, the pages of the *Fishermen’s Advocate* act as a rich catalogue of evidence of Irish-Catholic membership in the FPU and of interethnic cooperation on the ground level in the hundreds of local councils that popped up from the newspaper’s founding onwards. Chapter Two showed how a careful reading of correspondence between Irish Catholics could unveil previously obscure histories of pro-union, Irish-Catholic fishermen on the southern Avalon Peninsula. Likewise, this chapter analyzes the editorial content, articles, announcements, and letters to the editor of the *Fishermen’s Advocate* to uncover other hidden histories of long forgotten local councils throughout Newfoundland. This discussion will demonstrate that, contrary to being resistant to the FPU, Irish Catholics directly engaged with it, often actively supporting it. Irish Catholics, like English Protestants, sometimes marshalled the language of ethnicity in diverse ways to rationalize their positions regarding unionism.

It is not always easy to detect articulations of ethnicity in the press. The *Fishermen’s Advocate*, having been the voice of an organization whose *raison d’être* was economic in nature, seldom stressed ethno-religious divisions.\(^4\) Trade, the fishery, and the conditions of “toilers” of the land and sea dominated its pages. The newspaper made casual mention of the union’s Catholic members. It neither celebrated their specific and exceptional presence in the union’s membership rolls, nor lamented the “Catholic question,” instead viewing Catholics as fundamentally no different from other members. Despite the Protestantism of the majority of the FPU’s backers, as well as its

\(^4\) Certainly, appeals to Protestant interests, such as announcements about Methodist, Church of England, or Orange Order affairs proliferated, and the union itself was deeply loyal to Newfoundland’s place in the British Empire. But the newspaper did not tend to stress these points in the period between 1910 and 1913. The beginning of World War One changes the tone of the paper dramatically, when patriotism was regularly emphasized, though as early as 1912, the paper made clear its loyalties to Britain and sounded the “alarm” about Germany; see “England’s Peril,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, April 13, 1912.
“imperial tone,” the *Fishermen’s Advocate* was not a self-consciously “sectarian rag”: when the union stood accused by others of having fostered sectarianism, the *Fishermen’s Advocate* vociferously protested. Overtly anti-Catholic rhetoric did not appear in the newspaper in its early years, the union press preferring to advance a message of “Anglo-Celtic” unity—an agenda that was racialized and will be discussed below, but not anti-Catholic in its early intent. As Chapter Four will show, cracks in this brotherly message appeared in the wake of the 1913 election. But for the period roughly between 1910 and the election, Irish Catholics and English Protestants found themselves in interesting entanglements within the FPU’s fold.

Locating the ethno-religious background of an author in a newspaper source was a thorny problem for other reasons as well: surnames and towns of origin are loose indications, but religious conversions, mixed-denominational towns, and the common reliance on anonymity or pseudonyms in this time period complicate matters. Still, a careful consideration of context and cross-referencing of names that appear in the *Fishermen’s Advocate* with information from census records, oral testimony, ethnographies, and other sources shows that Irish Catholics were quite active in the union. Far from standing outside the FPU’s field of vision or opposing the union and hindering its growth as conventional histories have tended to suggest, Irish Catholics instead were a constitutive part of the FPU’s base. This suggests either that Irish Catholics tossed their ethno-religious allegiances to one side in the cause of unionism and class unity, or, more likely, viewed them as mutually compatible in certain contexts.

**The formative years**

**The inaugural edition of the *Fishermen’s Advocate***

The editorial line of the *Plaindealer* having shifted in 1909 (see Chapter Two), effectively muzzling Coaker, he started to look elsewhere for opportunities to spread the union message. The first annual convention of the Supreme Council of the FPU was held at the Society of United Fishermen hall at Change Islands between October 29,

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5 “Editor’s Notes,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, October 29, 1910.
6 Coaker, *Twenty Years*, 142.
1909, and November 3, 1909. It was there that Coaker first announced his idea of the union’s establishing its own newspaper to report on matters of concern to fishermen. Coaker approached a number of publishing companies before forming the Union Publishing Company to publish the paper. Coaker was also ready to repair the initial, tumultuous relationship the union had with the Catholic Church and to move on from both the Clarke affair as well as the wrath of Archbishop Howley. On the first day of the meeting of the Supreme Council, Coaker declared that the matters raised by Archbishop Howley in March 1909 had been settled and that Catholics could now join the union, given that it had abandoned the controversial requirement that members swear an oath of secrecy. Having consulted Bishop Neil McNeil of St. George’s, Coaker drafted instead a “declaration of membership.” The FPU, claimed Coaker, “desired the co-operation of North and South, of Protestant and Catholic, in this almighty fight for Country and Fishermen.” To Coaker, the ethno-religious wedge that had been driven between supporters of the FPU with the fracas over the Plaindealer and the condemnations of Archbishop Howley had become old news. The conflict was, seemingly, over.

Despite Coaker’s conciliatory words at the Supreme Council on October 29, 1909, he was alleged to have denounced the clergy of the major denominations in the very first edition of the Fishermen’s Advocate, published on February 5, 1910. No extant copy of that edition is available in the archives, the first available edition being the February 12 edition. However, a later reproduction of the inaugural editorial reads (emphasis in original):

**Coaker in the Advocate, February 5, 1910:** “This country has been maintained by you. You pay the salaries of the hosts of employees at St. John’s and in the outports. From your earnings bishops, priests, ministers, doctors, lawyers, politicians, book-keepers, store-keepers,

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7 Coaker, *Twenty Years*, 1.
9 Coaker, *Twenty Years*, 1. More about these events are in Chapter Two.
11 A reproduction of the first page of the February 5 edition was reproduced in the newspaper some years later; “Fac Simile of the Original Fishermen’s Advocate, First Page,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, July 12, 1913.
clerks, tradesmen of all descriptions derive their incomes. You are five to one, yet you have always permitted the one to do with you as it would. Out of 50,000 voters in the Colony, you number 40,000. Why ... do you permit the 10,000 to handle you as though you were something or nothing? Be men, you have been fools long enough. Take the power lying dormant in you and shake these rascals who now control you as you would a dog if discovered killing a sheep.”12

In 1911, Western Star editor William M. Dooley, a fierce opponent of the FPU, provided and commented on a heavily modified extract, which Dooley labelled, “Bishops, Priests, etc.” It was designed to give the impression that Coaker had targeted religious officials specifically, when in fact Coaker’s vitriol seems to have been reserved for everyone who was not a rural producer. Dooley’s transcription read:

    From your earnings, Bishops, Priests, Ministers, etc., derive their incomes. You are five to one yet you have always permitted the one to do with you as it would. Take the power lying dormant in you and shake those rascals, (meaning Bishops, Priests, Ministers, etc.) who now control you as you would a dog, if discovered killing a sheep. They are all your enemies, etc.13

Dooley went on to incite “God-fearing” Newfoundlanders not to “submit to this dreadful insult” from an “unscrupulous ranter.”14 Coaker denied Dooley’s attack and responded by highlighting the blessings the union had received from an archdeacon in the Church of England,15 an odd endorsement to emphasize, given that the union also had the quiet support of at least one of the three Catholic bishops in Newfoundland.16

    Few doubt that Coaker was a modernist and reformer who, early on, espoused the benefits of non-denominational schooling and other reforms that caused unease

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12 “Employ Sectarianism to Discredit Coaker and Fool the Voters,” Fishermen’s Advocate, August 30, 1913.
13 “Coaker’s Carrion Sheet Again Pollutes Atmosphere,” Western Star, October 11, 1911.
14 “Coaker’s Carrion Sheet Again Pollutes Atmosphere,” Western Star, October 11, 1911.
15 “The Languid Man,” Fishermen’s Advocate, October 23, 1911.
16 The FPU had received the blessing of Bishop Neil McNeil of the Diocese of St. George’s, who had been replaced as Bishop there by Michael Fintan Power in 1911. The other two bishops were Bishop John March in the Diocese of Harbour Grace and Archbishop Howley, who also acted as Bishop of the Diocese of St. John’s.
among the main churches in Newfoundland. The Fishermen’s Advocate, which he helped edit, was replete with examples of liberal Protestant critiques of “denominationalism.” He viewed merchants as usurpers whose wealth came at the expense of poor fishermen. He likely also viewed church leaders who enabled mercantile exploitation of fishermen with the same level of opprobrium. But Coaker was also a member of the Church of England, a point he did not hide, as well as a “pragmatist” who was sensitive to denominational concerns. Coaker certainly did not view himself as an enemy of Catholicism. The FPU constitution, for example, was drafted with the input and help of John Clair, a Green Bay Catholic and lifelong friend of Coaker.

One Placentia fisherman responded to Dooley’s critique in a letter to the editor of the Fishermen’s Advocate, noting that fishermen throughout Newfoundland all “believe that Coaker is doing a good thing.” The letter acted as a reminder to the FPU’s critics that there was still support for the FPU even in the Catholic south, despite the apparent dissipation of the union’s handful of councils in the southeast two years earlier. “Don’t think, Mr. Editor, I am a member of the Socialist Club or an Anarchist,” the letter writer stated, reminding readers that he was instead a “fisherman looking for a hundred cents for my dollar.” Dooley had accused Coaker of being a follower of W.U. Cotton, a socialist lawyer whose Quebec-based newspaper, Cotton’s Weekly, Coaker was said to have “eagerly devour[ed].” The Placentia writer’s refutation of the FPU’s “socialism” certainly would have been aimed at anxieties that Catholic Church leaders had raised in 1909 about socialism creeping into Newfoundland politics. At the same time, it signalled

22 “The Languid Man,” Fishermen’s Advocate, October 23, 1911.
that unionism itself was still palatable to Irish-Catholic fishermen, including in places with defunct local councils of the FPU. In fact, the union reportedly had five councils in the Southern Avalon Peninsula by 1914, up from the four that had been established in 1909 (see Figure 3).  

![Figure 3: FPU councils on the Southern Avalon Peninsula relative to St. John’s, 1914](image)


On August 30, 1913, two months before the election of that year, the FPU responded to another misrepresentation of the February 5, 1910, edition, noting that the Evening Herald had also “mangled” the original text, virtually verbatim from Dooley’s misquoting, to suggest that “Coaker is a godless wretch, who would abolish churches, root out religious institutions and encourage infidelity.” It read:

24 Coaker, Twenty Years, 82.
Coaker misquoted by the Herald: “From your earning, bishops, priests and ministers derive their income. You are five to one, yet you have always permitted the one to do with you as it liked. Take the power lying dormant in you and shake off those rascals as you would a dog found killing a sheep. They are all your enemies.”

The *Evening Herald* had, like the *Western Star* two years prior, selectively quoted from the *Fishermen’s Advocate* to stoke the fires of sectarianism and paint the FPU as an anticlerical, Protestant outfit. The *Fishermen’s Advocate* responded by reminding readers that it did not want to ban denominational schools, pointing its finger back at the *Evening Herald*, which had itself endorsed non-denominational schooling some years earlier. The union also raised the fact that J.M. Kent, a St. John’s Catholic, was a known figure within the Liberal Party and that he would not have been in an electoral alliance with the unionists if they had supported an end to denominational schools. The seemingly ongoing controversy over the February 5, 1910 edition foreshadowed what was to come (see Chapter Four).

**Spelling out the FPU’s electoral strategy**

The *Fishermen’s Advocate* wasted no time in establishing its electoral strategy, and as early as October 1910, it published pieces about the planned launch of a Union Party, an idea that had actually been first mooted in the union’s constitution. The October 29 editorial from that year read, “No effort will be made to control public affairs… The Union [members] don’t want to rule, but they want those who do rule, to

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25 “Employ Sectarianism to Discredit Coaker and Fool the Voters,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, August 30, 1913.

26 “Employ Sectarianism to Discredit Coaker and Fool the Voters,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, August 30, 1913.

27 See Section 63 “The Union Political Party,” in ARCA, “Constitution and Bye-Laws: Fishermen’s Protective Union,” page 47, 106/19/4, where it states “The Party shall not hold more than sufficient seats to secure the balance of power between the Government and Opposition Parties, and no Union member of the Assembly shall be permitted to hold his seat if he sit on the side of the Government and Opposition, or receive any position from the Government, or any payment in any way except the sessional grant and any indemnity that the Supreme Council may grant him.” For more on the balance of power strategy, see Ian McDonald, “W.F. Coaker and the Balance of Power Strategy: The Fishermen’s Protective Union in Newfoundland Politics,” in *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Essays in Interpretation* edited by James Hiller and Peter Neary (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 148-180.
rule without being bent by graft and boodle.”28 The Union Party’s very modest purpose, therefore, would be to win a limited number of seats and support whichever of the two larger parties was the least corrupt and most favourable to the fishermen’s interests. The editorial did not delineate the party’s specific electoral strategy, but clearly, as early as 1910, the union intended to run only enough candidates to influence government as part of a balance-of-power strategy rather than compete for a majority of seats on its own. The Union Party was seen as a “channel” through which fishermen could hold “a close watch” over the affairs of lawmakers, rather than becoming lawmakers in their own right.29

The expansion of local councils, 1910–1912

The Fishermen’s Advocate serves as a useful catalogue of the birth of the FPU’s local councils throughout Newfoundland in the union’s formative years. When a new branch formed, the newspaper happily announced it by publishing a news item or a letter to the editor from the chairman of the new branch. These announcements provide rare details about sparsely understood local councils. Some indicate the number of members in the branch at the time of writing. They often list the full names of the executive officers of the local councils. This is vital to understanding who comprised the FPU’s membership. Some of this data is also contained in documentary evidence from the proceedings of the annual meetings of the Supreme Council of the FPU.30 Extant minute books from district and supreme council meetings are rare, with those from local councils exceedingly so. As a result, the Fishermen’s Advocate is an essential source that can be mined in order to unearth significant detail about who exactly comprised the otherwise invisible membership of the union.

Ian McDonald noted that the opposition of the Catholic Church “limited the pool of politicians upon which the union could draw,” particularly on the south coast, west coast, and Conception Bay.31 Yet, he appears to have heavily understated the degree of Catholic involvement in the union. There are numerous instances of Irish Catholics who

28 “Editor’s Notes,” Fishermen’s Advocate, October 29, 1910.
29 “Editor’s Notes,” Fishermen’s Advocate, October 29, 1910.
30 Compiled in Coaker’s Twenty Years of the Fishermen’s Protective Union (1930/1984).
31 McDonald, To Each His Own, 140.
thoroughly participated in the union, and these are reflected in the pages of the union’s own newspaper. A careful reading of the identities of fishermen named in various announcements, letters, and articles in the *Fishermen’s Advocate* provides insights into the diverse ethno-religious profile of the FPU’s membership. In the denominationally mixed region of Conception Bay, there were many instances where the union not only relied on Irish Catholics for support, but also benefitted from their leadership in local councils.

**Conception Bay**

The region of Conception Bay\(^{\text{32}}\) is by many accounts a complicated region in Newfoundland. It contained sparsely populated rural fishing settlements as well as some of the biggest towns in Newfoundland at the time, such as Harbour Grace and Carbonear. Though Conception Bay had a Protestant majority, Irish Catholic communities dotted the coast, formed sizable minorities or “Irishtowns” within Protestant communities,\(^{\text{33}}\) and formed a majority in Harbour Main. Though the district of Port de Grave formed a southern outpost of FPU support, neighbouring districts witnessed fierce opposition to the union, so the FPU opted to let the Liberals hold the party banner in Harbour Grace, Carbonear, and Harbour Main.\(^{\text{34}}\) Bay de Verde, though still on the Avalon Peninsula, was the northernmost district in Conception Bay, and northern in outlook. It was at once part of Newfoundland’s “north” and in its “south.”\(^{\text{35}}\) Despite Ron Loder’s contention that Conception Bay was impenetrable for the FPU due to “Church structures [that] were more firmly established than those further north,” and apparently

\(^{\text{32}}\) Conception Bay, as used here, includes the electoral districts of Bay de Verde, Carbonear, Harbour Grace, Harbour Main, and Port de Grave.

\(^{\text{33}}\) Keough, “Ethnicity,” 18.

\(^{\text{34}}\) The Union Party ran the sole opposition candidate for the one seat in Port de Grave. The Liberals fielded the opposition candidates in Carbonear, Harbour Grace, and Harbour Main. In Bay de Verde, the Union Party and Liberal Party ran one candidate each for the two seats. The reasons for support and resistance to the union in the region are manifold and complex, and are touched on by Barbara Neis in her investigations into the region. Neis, “A Sociological Analysis,” 118-123.

\(^{\text{35}}\) Bay de Verde was described as the “most demoralized district in the North” in one editorial in the union’s newspaper; see “Deputy acted the whole hog,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, November 29, 1913. However it was also referred to as a “Southern District” elsewhere; see “Some undesirable features of the sectarian situation as created by grab-allism,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, November 15, 1913.
"little mixing of denominations," Conception Bay was actually quite diverse, and the FPU’s support there was just as diverse.

The FPU had acquired a broad base of support in Conception Bay by the spring of 1911. This was reflected in the pluralistic make-up of the executives of local councils. In the Protestant-majority town of Western Bay, L. Fahey, a Catholic, was elected chairman of the local branch. In the denominationally mixed town of Northern Bay, J.T. Jacobs, a Protestant, was elected chairman, and a Catholic organizer, Patrick Howell, accompanied Jacobs and Coaker during Coaker’s visit through the area. Northern Bay had a Catholic-majority “South Side,” a Protestant enclave in the centre of the town, and a mixed neighbourhood called Long Beach on the north end towards the town of Gull Island. Support for the union was said to have been particularly strong in Long Beach according to one writer from the area, “T.B.,” who claimed that people in that neighbourhood had wished the Northern Bay meeting of Coaker’s tour had been held at the Catholic school there instead of at the Methodist church further south in the centre of town. In Protestant-majority Ochre Pit Cove, a branch was established after Coaker gave a speech at the Roman Catholic school in nearby Western Bay. As Coaker’s tour continued southward down the coast, he made a pitch at the Orange Hall in Blackhead. His 1911 tour of the region took him to Catholic and Protestant halls, and brought him to the attention of interdenominational audiences.

37 “Western Bay’s Contingent to Ranks of F.P.U.,” Fishermen’s Advocate, April 29, 1911.
38 “Northern Bay, And Other Settlements Establish Branches of F.P.U.,” Fishermen’s Advocate, April 29, 1911; and “The President’s Tour of Bay de Verde District,” Fishermen’s Advocate, May 6, 1911.
40 “Northern Bay Starts a Branch,” Fishermen’s Advocate, May 6, 1911.
41 “Ochre Pit Cove Branch,” and “The President’s Tour of Bay de Verde District,” Fishermen’s Advocate, May 6, 1911.
42 “Blackhead Intensely Enthusiastic and Approves of the Movement,” Fishermen’s Advocate, April 29, 1911.
Figure 4: Select towns in Conception Bay


In 1912, Coaker revisited Conception Bay in his efforts to raise the profile of the union and increase membership. Interestingly, a joint local council was formed for the Protestant town of Burnt Point and the largely Catholic town of Job’s Cove: Eldon Tucker, a Methodist, became local chairman, and Patrick Murphy, a Catholic and “popular young man strongly attached to the F.P.U.,” became deputy chairman. Again, Coaker enlisted the support of these and other local FPU activists, relying on their ethno-religious ties within their communities. The joint council that existed in Burnt Point and Job’s Cove is especially interesting, given events years later when, in 1947, Job’s Cove Catholics assembled to block a parade of Orangemen from Burnt Point en route to
Lower Island Cove, resulting in a fistfight and gunfire. Evidently, ethnic tensions were muted by class solidarity during Coaker’s visit through Conception Bay. Tucker, Murphy, and the Catholic chairman of the local branch in the multidenominational town of Bay de Verde, Andrew Broaders, also accompanied Coaker on his tour of the area. Letter writers from the area suggested after the tour that the “Sons of Toil” were “Coaker’s friends and intend to be Tories or Liberals no more,” a sentiment that appeared to have been shared across ethno-religious lines.

The establishment of everything from joint councils to mixed executives on those councils reveals more than just unwilling proximity and elite accommodation. There was also a shared use of spaces, including ethno-religious spaces. The FPU relied on the support of ethnically diverse local fishermen and their ties to their communities in order to host and stage events for Coaker. Roman Catholic parishes offered the union space to hold meetings, indicating a greater liberality towards the FPU among local parishes compared to that of the Catholic Church hierarchy in St. John’s. During the 1912 tour through the north shore of Conception Bay, the people of Long Beach in Northern Bay apparently got their wish from the previous year prior, as the Rev. Father John Lynch “very kindly allowed the people the use of the splendid [Catholic] school building at Long Beach, as Northern Bay school building was too small to accommodate the crowd.” Afterwards, Arthur Doyle, a Catholic, and “young and esteemed toiler, was chosen as the first chairman” of the new council in the predominantly Catholic town of Gull Island, founded as a result of Coaker’s tour through the area. Father Lynch’s apparently lax attitude toward hosting the FPU was not exceptional: some priests in the outports seem to have allowed union gatherings on church property, contrary to what seems to have happened in the Southern Avalon some years earlier. However, Lynch’s replacement at the parish in Northern Bay two years later in 1914, Msgr. E.J. O’Brien, was reported to have “opposed [the FPU] in accordance with his superiors’ views.”

43 “History,” Decks Awash 9, no. 6 (December, 1980), 4-5.
44 Broaders also served as the Vice-President of the union.
45 “Bay-de-Verde Gives the President A Royal Welcome,” “Burnt Point and Job’s Cove Again Receive the President,” and “Address of Welcome,” Fishermen’s Advocate, February 10, 1912.
46 “The President at Northern Bay,” Fishermen’s Advocate, February 10, 1912, 6.
These examples of local, evolving, cross-denominational cooperation in the cause of the union were not without difficulties. In one 1913 letter to the editor of the rival *Evening Telegram*, the writer—writing under the pseudonym “Salvage”—regaled readers with an account of Catholic–Protestant differences over where to hold union meetings in Northern Bay. Salvage was responding to a letter to the editor in the *Daily News* that claimed that the custodians of the Catholic schoolhouse at Northern Bay refused to allow union meetings there anymore because afterwards it would be found covered in “foul spittle.” Salvage objected to this account, noting instead that it was Catholics who, in wanting to hold meetings at the Protestant schoolroom in the centre of town, were “encroaching on Methodist property.”

Salvage was, presumably, a Northern Bay Methodist who saw the Catholic accusation that Methodists had been disrespecting Catholic spaces as an undue slight against Methodist union members, though this, in turn, may very well have been an attempt at instigating anti-Catholic sentiment among Methodists. This sensitivity around Catholics and Protestants being in each others’ neighbourhoods and communal spaces is a reminder of the ways in which the FPU forged cross-denominational linkages, but also how delicate the situation was in Conception Bay, where people had long memories of Catholic–Protestant conflict, including the deadly Harbour Grace Affray three decades earlier. As the episode at Northern Bay shows, the co-participation of Catholics and Protestants in the union sometimes resulted in tensions at the local level, and proves the presence of ethno-religious rivalries within the bosom of the FPU, even as members pursued class interests.

**The Bonavista Peninsula**

In December of 1910, the union held its second Supreme Council over a three-day period at the Orange Hall in Catalina. On the third day of the Council, Coaker travelled to the nearby Catholic town of Melrose to speak to a group of fishermen about joining the union. He had hoped to establish a local council there, but the fishermen “desired to have a visit from the Catalina Union officers.” The *Fishermen’s Advocate* notes that Coaker sought out William Little, the deputy chairman of the Trinity District Council, to organize Melrose at a future date, Coaker’s own visit there having apparently

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been insufficient to set up the branch. The newspaper’s coverage of the December 14, 1910, meeting at Melrose was repeated over the course of several editions. Owing to the paper’s understandable desire to portray the FPU in the best light possible, one gets a limited glimpse of the events that happened at Melrose, and little indication of whether or not the Catholic fishermen assembled to hear Coaker speak there were actually receptive to his message beyond the reported “cheers for the President, the F.P.U. and Melrose” at the end of Coaker’s speech.49

![Map of Bonavista Peninsula with locations of Melrose, Port Union, Catalina, and Little Catalina](http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=23419&lang=en)

**Figure 5:** Locations of Melrose, Port Union, Catalina, and Little Catalina on the Bonavista Peninsula


After the meeting, Coaker and other officials from the union left Melrose by sleigh. En route back to Catalina, they unexpectedly met up with a procession of 300 of the men from the area and others who had attended the Supreme Council meeting, half a mile outside of Melrose. The procession included the band of the Catalina lodge of the Orange Order. The group headed back to Catalina in unison. It was a clear December night as they returned, the “moon shone in all its glory,” and the band played some “very fine” marching songs that “made everyone feel jubilant and lively.” The procession finally arrived back at the hall around midnight. Coaker thanked everyone for attending and the Supreme Council’s three-day soiree came to a close, after which Coaker and some of his entourage embarked to Wesleyville.50

The people of Melrose apparently were either not aware of, or were not antagonized by, the approach of a demonstrably Protestant marching band organized by the Orange Lodge in conjunction with the FPU. Some of the men in the procession were themselves Catholic, such as the union’s vice-president in 1910, Thomas E. Dower.51 On the Bonavista Peninsula, the hostilities often associated with Protestant marches through or near Catholic communities in Newfoundland seem not to have been evident in this moment.52 Yet Melrose does not appear to have had sustained involvement in the union despite Coaker’s visit, and notwithstanding the hasty creation of a seemingly short-lived council there by the Catalina branch chairman in May 1913.53 Unlike Melrose, other Catholic communities on the Bonavista Peninsula and elsewhere in the northeast were evidently more enthusiastic.54

The combination of mixed denominational executives and other forms of cooperation across the ethno-religious divide was evident throughout northeastern Newfoundland. According to one letter to the editor from “Pogie Fisherman,” reporting from the branch in King’s Cove, a number of officers were elected that reflected the

53 “Fishermen Falling Into Line!” Fishermen’s Advocate, May 17, 1913.
54 See Chapter Five for oral histories of Melrose and its residents’ interactions with the FPU.
town’s mixed Catholic and Anglican denominational profile. The acting chair, Thomas Devine, a Catholic, oversaw the meeting, which elected Protestants as chairman, treasurer, secretary, and door guard, and a Catholic, John Aylward, as deputy chairman.\textsuperscript{55} The letter gave no indication whether other candidates were in contention, but noted that at the time the branch had ninety-four members, with “many others” applying for admission. In King’s Cove, as in other parts of the Bonavista Peninsula, Irish-Catholic fishermen were actively involved in the union, openly supported it, took leadership positions, and mingled with Protestant union brothers.

King’s Cove unionists held their first parade in 1911 and marched around town, hoisting the “F.P.U. Flag” and the “Royal Ensign,” while also visiting the residences of local religious officials. In one instance, the parading fishermen arrived at the temporary residence of the Reverend S.A. Dawson of the Church of England, after which Dawson “came out on the balcony and deliver[ed] a short address teeming with words of encouragement for the success of the Fishermen’s Protective Union.” The assembled men cheered, moving on to the home of the Catholic Priest, the Rev. Father John Scully, who was not at home on the day, though the men cheered him anyway before proceeding to a celebratory banquet.\textsuperscript{56} This movement of the procession to the residences of various religious figures in King’s Cove is interesting in that it reveals that both Catholic and Protestant support was being actively solicited by the union, and that union members in divided towns recognized the importance of doing this outreach. More generally, the King’s Cove case shows that union members were attentive to ethno-religious considerations as well as economic ones.

The northeast

Between 1910 and 1913, Catholic towns in northeastern Newfoundland developed branches of the FPU. Irish Catholics also wrote letters to the editor praising the union and assumed leadership positions in the union at the local, district, and supreme council levels. In the Catholic town of Tilting on Fogo Island,\textsuperscript{57} a report from an

\textsuperscript{55} “King’s Cove Branch a Success,” \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, January 28, 1911.

\textsuperscript{56} “King’s Cove,” \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, June 3, 1911.

\textsuperscript{57} Discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.
unnamed FPU activist who went by the pseudonym “One With Backbone” recounted how the local branch there had conducted an annual meeting on December 15, 1911. Tilting had one of the earliest and most active local branches of the FPU—it established a union trading store in 1912—and its entire executive, reflecting the denominational homogeneity of the town at the time, was composed of Catholics.58 Interestingly, Tilting’s FPU members sent frequent contributions to the *Fishermen’s Advocate* for publication. A correspondent from Tilting put the union’s material benefits in clear terms. Coaker, the letter noted, “took 20 cents off the price of salt here this fall, and provisions were sold 20 per cent cheaper than ever before.”59 More than just praising the union for its material benefits, Tilting’s FPU members also spelled out a desire for further change, and some of their opinions sounded militant. One letter to the editor from a Tilting fisherman referred to merchants as fishermen’s “greatest enemies financially,” observing that “Fogo Island business men must be feeling uneasy about our Union, and … before long they will have reason to feel so.”60 In the summer of 1912, “A Sink Or Swim Unionist” wrote of Coaker’s visit, held at the local Catholic parish hall, that Coaker’s speech had been “repeatedly applauded in good old Celtic fashion.”61

58 Patrick Greene, chairman; John Foley, deputy chairman; Daniel Foley, secretary; Martin Keough, treasurer; see “Tilting Strong Endorses the F.P.U.,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, February 17, 1912, 3.

59 “Notes from Tilting,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, February 3, 1912, 3.

60 “Tilting Sounds a Note of Warning!” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, September 23, 1911, 4.

61 “Another Stirring Meetings,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, August 3, 1912.
Figure 6: Locations of Conche and Tilting relative to nearby towns


In some contexts in the north, ethnicity and nationality were drawn upon in other ways. Conche, a Catholic town on the Great Northern Peninsula, was a fishing outport that established a branch of the FPU. One letter writer lamented the Morris government’s providing so little to the district of St. Barbe, in which Conche was located: “Nothing but promises. Only a fortnightly mail, which is altogether too little; no lighthouse or fog alarm, and only a few miles of telegraph a year.” The writer drew upon Conche’s location on the former French Shore, and its relative proximity to Canada, to goad the Morris government into providing services, asking, “Must we wait for Canadians to build
lighthouses to protect our people?"  

For Conche unionists, support for the FPU made sense in light of the government’s general neglect of the town’s needs.

Conche also gives us a glimpse as to what it was like for Catholics who wrestled with their personal desire to support the union against the antipathy of fellow Catholics. Signed by “One who is watching,” a letter to the editor regaled readers with the tale of how the local chairman in Conche, Thomas Dower—a one-time vice-president of the FPU—initially tried establishing the branch in 1909 to little effect. “Like [Coaker], at first he was scoffed and laughed at,” the piece read. “He, however, defied his enemies, and he kept at it with such success that today… we have 70 members on the roll.” By the summer of 1913, Coaker had visited the town three times. For many Irish-Catholic FPU councils in the north, like Tilting’s, unionism was popular. But in places like Conche, indifference to unionism had to be met by persistent efforts of Irish-Catholic organizers.

Languages of and appeals to ethnicity, race, and empire

One of the more revealing ways in which ethnicity inspired and motivated fishermen’s responses to the union can be found in the language used in the Fishermen’s Advocate to unite fishermen across Newfoundland society by appealing to their shared British heritages. The FPU and its proponents drew upon or alluded to Englishness and Irishness; sometimes Newfoundlanders were framed as Anglo-Saxons and Celts. This is striking because the denominational compromises of the 1860s resulted in the apportionment of patronage, jobs, schools, and political representation along the lines of denomination—Roman Catholic, Church of England, and Methodist. Some scholars thus have characterized the social order of late nineteenth- and early

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62 “Conche to the Front,” Fishermen’s Advocate, October 23, 1911, 3. This alludes to the Canadian government’s provision of lighthouses in Newfoundland as a result of a British imperial regulation from the nineteenth century. See “Lighthouses,” Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador, 300-301.


64 “Conche Backs Vice-President,” Fishermen’s Advocate, May 13, 1911.

65 “Conche en fete,” Fishermen’s Advocate, August 2, 1913.
twentieth-century Newfoundland as one of “denominationalism.”\textsuperscript{66} Appeals to Anglo-Saxons, Celts, and to Anglo-Celtic unity signified a departure from denominational languages. My examination of the \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate} shows that FPU supporters and the union’s leadership employed non-denominational languages of ethnicity to appeal to a sense of unity they believed Newfoundlanders had. Doing so also gave the FPU the ability to buttress its own claims to being non-denominational and non-sectarian.

Religious and even biblical imagery was also often drawn upon to mediate, explain, or incite support for the FPU; but this was an invocation of the shared Judeo-Christian heritage of the Anglo-Celtic “race” that was common in the British empire at the time. In 1911, the chairman of the FPU local council in the Catholic Bonavista Bay community of Keels wrote a letter to the editor that used Old Testament imagery to describe the FPU’s rise in Newfoundland politics. Henry Hobbs wrote that Coaker’s leadership over fishermen was akin to the Israelites being delivered from Egypt. “For every good work,” the letter declared, “God finds his man.”\textsuperscript{67} This letter mirrored others that compared Coaker to Moses leading Newfoundlanders to the Promised Land, or even “convert[ing] Newfoundland into the promised land.”\textsuperscript{68} Hobbs’ letter went on: “So now in Newfoundland, [G]od has work to be done, and there is no man able to perform that work but a man born and [cradled] in a fisher cot. Such, and such alone, among all the men of this country we will follow as a leader.” Such appeals to the apparently divine nature of Coaker’s work were common in the pages of the \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, but the real intended message of such letters was to rally support for the FPU across ethno-religious lines.


\textsuperscript{67} “Friend Hobbs Bids All Arise,” \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, February 18, 1911.

\textsuperscript{68} “Liberty is Sure After the Next Fight,” \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, November 11, 1911.
To aid in this heroic battle to do God’s work, all fishermen—“Anglo-Saxons and Celts” alike—of “Terra Nova” were called upon to unite under the FPU’s aegis. Hobbs’ appeal thus tapped into the language of ethno-religious unity between Newfoundland’s two major ethnic communities. This call was perhaps also a reflection of Hobbs’ own reality having resided in Keels, which was almost equally Catholic and Anglican. But Hobbs’ letter also marshalled a pan-Christian, cross-ethnic unity that reflected racialized notions of a chosen people. Hobbs evoked class unity as well. He described the merchants in unfriendly terms and employed a class analysis to describe merchant capitalism: “There is a section in this country working against our interests whose suction is like the tentacles of an octopus, that would draw us to destruction.” He concluded by reiterating that it was only Coaker who could unite fishermen. This was a plea for cross-ethnic unity in the cause of class solidarity.

Predicting the outcome of the election two years hence, a 1911 editorial also marshalled the language of “Anglo-Saxons and Celts” in anticipation of successes at the polls. Fishermen were “not particularly worried over the situation,” the editorial noted, expressing confidence that Union Party candidates would win in the seats in which they intended to compete. The editorial assertively announced the popularity of the union, which it reported to have grown to 17,000 members, and implored its readers to remember their status as workingmen by appealing to their shared ethnic and racial identities. “You are fired by the best blood of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic forbears, always prepared to strike a blow for home and country,” the editorial read. “Let your independence and manhood assert itself now in this great fight for victory, for make no mistake about it, you are near the parting of the ways—the lopping off forever of the tentacles of tyranny which have encircled you for centuries.” Such language was meant to appeal to the shared sense of exploitation that Catholic and Protestant fishermen felt as workers and producers, though, like the editorial from the inaugural edition of the paper, it may also have appealed to anti-clerical sensibilities that fishermen of any denomination may also have felt. Speaking to Anglo-Saxon and Celtic unity was a way of trying to win over Irish-Catholic support where it had been lacking and, in the case of

69 “Friend Hobbs Bids All Arise,” Fishermen’s Advocate, February 18, 1911.
70 “Friend Hobbs Bids All Arise,” Fishermen’s Advocate, February 18, 1911.
the southern Avalon Peninsula, bruised from the closing of several southeastern councils of the FPU.

While ethnic and racial solidarity was advanced in the *Fishermen’s Advocate*, the editorial staff was more reluctant to advance unity across the working-class or across regional lines. Despite occasional messages of unity between fishermen and other members of the working class, usually as letters from readers, the *Fishermen’s Advocate* featured editorial content that showcased its ambivalences about Newfoundland’s urban regions as well as the lack of potential for unity of the entire working class. The main editorial line of the paper was one that endorsed the cause of unionism across sectors and all over the Western world. But an editorial from December 23, 1911, compared the experiences of Newfoundland’s fishermen to that of the urban worker, a “blood sucker” who “held a government job for three or four years, with little else to do but to kill time” and who gets “a retiring allowance, and is called a gentleman.” This was characteristic of the negative attitude that the FPU—or, perhaps specifically Coaker—held toward other segments of the population, including public servants, railway workers, teachers, unionized craftsmen and labourers, the urban

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72 In one letter, a member of the Laborers Union wrote to the editor of the *Fishermen’s Advocate* that the “laborers and other union men of this city are hand in hand with fishermen in their effort to improve their condition,” noting that strong fishermen mean less strikebreakers in St. John’s: “It will be no use for Piccott or Crosbie to go monitoring around the outports trying to get strikebreakers to take the places of the city laborers; see “The laborers are hand in hand with the fishermen,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, November 4, 1913.

73 “Unionism,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, August 17, 1912. The union praised the electoral successes of labour and socialist parties in Western Australia, Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland in “Freedom in Sight,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, February 3, 1912, 4. It praised the eight hour work day and other workplace and social welfare measures that had been brought about in Australia, New Zealand, and various U.S. states, in “The Workingman,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, July 20, 1912. Cooperative movements that were being established around the world were also welcomed, as in Denmark, where it was remarked, “millionaires and mendicants are as common in Denmark as honest politicians are in Nfld”; see “Merits of the Co-operative System as seen by ‘Working Man’,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, July 6, 1912. See also Feltham, “The Development of the FPU,” 21n14.

74 “Appeal to Non-Union Toilers,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, December 23, 1911.


76 “Catalina Afire with The Union Spirit,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, November 12, 1910.

77 “The Teachers Union,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, November 18, 1911.

78 “Another Deliberate lie,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, April 23, 1912.
poor and middle classes of bigger centers, especially St. John’s, and others seen as having gotten easy jobs through corruption or vote-buying. Outport fishermen’s hostility toward the St. John’s working-class was reciprocated, however: Jessie Chisholm has identified unionized St. John’s labourers’ resentments of “strolling outport men” who travelled to St. John’s looking for temporary work and stood accused of driving down wages for the urban working-class. Nevertheless, in the FPU’s populist outlook, fishermen were united by their station in life against those that profited from their labour or “toil,” including not just merchants but also members of the working class whose livelihoods derived from a system that exploited rural producers.

Nevertheless, despite this class-divisive and regionally antagonistic language, the union also stressed north-south unity. Indeed, in Coaker’s very first speech to the Supreme Council of the FPU, he expressed the union’s desire for “the co-operation of North and South, of Protestant and Catholic.” The December 23, 1911, editorial reiterated this sentiment: “Never again, says the North, and let the South reply, Right, fellow-fishermen of the North, and we too will join hand in hand.” This signalled the union’s interest in 1911 in trying to again win over the support of fishermen on the Avalon Peninsula after the closing of several early branches in 1909. But it was an appeal that rested on language that was divisive to the unity of the working class. This paralleled the union’s ambivalences about place: north and south should be united, it argued, but rural and urban were worlds apart. St. John’s, the home of much of Newfoundland’s industry, was the target of much of the paper’s derision. This certainly

79 “Editor’s Notes,” Fishermen’s Advocate, September 23, 1911; “Editor’s Notes,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 5, 1910; “The Limit,” Fishermen’s Advocate, October 23, 1911.
81 “Appeal to Non-Union Toilers,” Fishermen’s Advocate, December 23, 1911.
82 Coaker, Twenty Years, 1.
83 “Appeal to Non-Union Toilers,” Fishermen’s Advocate, December 23, 1911.
would have stoked ethno-religious divisions as well, given that St. John's was the home of much of the country’s Catholic population.85

But fishermen, the editorial argued, were explicitly united by their racial heritage as well. In fact, the editorial emphasized the shared race of the majority of Newfoundland’s settler population to marshal class unity. The editorial cast Newfoundland’s dual “Anglo-Celtic” heritage in racialized terms, using international events to drive home the necessity of supporting the FPU:

Come you descendants of the men who won on the field of Waterloo… you Anglo-Celtic Sons of Toil—and say with your whole heart that you will never again be serfs, and that you never will again allow your oppressors to place their foot across your necks. China is free. Not by consent of her tyrant rulers and boodlers, but by the action of her ill-used sons of toil. If they can assert themselves and secure freedom, surely the sons of an Anglo-Celtic race would be forever disgraced if they failed to be as free. The Chinese won freedom by the sword; you must win it by the ballot.86

The editorial thus sought to situate the contemporaneous events in China in such a way as to goad Newfoundland fishermen, members of a supposedly superior race, into realizing their political potential. Such appeals also reveal the ways in which race was used to help forge a collective identity for Newfoundlanders across lines of class, region, and ethnicity in this time period.

The Fishermen’s Advocate deployed race in uglier, more nefarious ways. An unattributed warning appeared adjacent to the advertisements on June 16, 1912, cautioning fishermen not to buy from Maronite and Jewish peddlers. Such peddlers stood accused of “boast[ing] that fishermen are softies” and of supplying “shoddy” goods to them. Curiously, the warning asked fishermen to “resent this insult by purchasing your goods from honest firms and particularly from the man who gave you credit when you were down and out.”87 Given that the union was set against the system of truck credit, it is odd that the announcement would have featured in the pages of its newspaper at all,

85 The press frequently attacked the FPU for its leader’s unfavourable attitudes towards St. John’s and its working class. See for example “Coaker on St. John’s Workingmen,” *Daily News*, October 27, 1919.
86 “Appeal to Non-Union Toilers,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, December 23, 1911.
87 “Warning!” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, June 16, 1912.
but the notice speaks to an underlying racial ideology that fuelled the racial and imperial ideology of unionists.

To the FPU, and particularly its English-Protestant members, fishermen’s subjugation under Newfoundland’s unforgiving political and mercantile system was unbecoming of their stead as members of the British race. Coaker in particular believed that fishermen’s racial and imperial status was a marker of their eminence, and should be leveraged accordingly. As Sean Cadigan has pointed out, after a Norwegian shipper refused to compensate an injured worker in Botwood, Coaker implored workers to refuse work for “the Norwegian” lest they rank no higher than “Chinamen.” Fishermen’s status as “Britons” was underlined so as to emphasize the injustices that fishermen faced not just as unprotected workers and “toilers” but also as white, British descendants. In another editorial, an unnamed writer, perhaps Coaker himself, noted in haughty, gendered language, “Coaker inspires manly courage,” and “Morris and all his cowardly band [should] know that we are Britons and have the blood of British men in our veins.” This was provocative language, especially given that Morris and many of his supporters were Catholics. But allusions to fishermen’s connections to Britishness were commonplace and often mixed with messaging that was meant to appeal to Irishness as well.

Popular historical figures from British and Irish history were painted as heroic and deployed to bolster the links between the FPU and Newfoundland’s English Protestants as well as its Irish Catholics, though this was sometimes done in a ham-fisted way. On one occasion, the *Fishermen’s Advocate* attempted to embarrass People’s Party MHAs for having personally profited from their positions in the government of Prime Minister Morris. In so doing, the editorial justified this name-and-shame strategy by saying that all principled men had “bitter enemies,” and that doing the right thing by identifying graft and naming its beneficiaries put the editors in the same stead as several of the “great men” of history. Oliver Cromwell and Martin Luther, the editorial argued, were both hated by royalists and the Catholic Church in their time. But, having persisted in their struggles

88 Cadigan, *Death on Two Fronts*, 24.
89 “Hear the Voice of 20,000!” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, May 21, 1913.
against their respective enemies, “the Anglo-Saxon race today enjoy liberties” due to Cromwell’s actions, and “millions” had found “material and spiritual” salvation from the work of Luther. The positioning of Cromwell and Luther as familiar heroes to Newfoundlanders’ collective past was a curious choice indeed, given Cromwell’s mixed and divisive legacies to both English and Irish audiences, and Luther’s formative role in the Protestant reformation. The citing of these historical episodes parallel assumptions behind earlier allusions to Newfoundlanders’ “ancestors upon the field of Waterloo.”

The editorial went on to suggest that, like Cromwell and Luther, Charles Stuart Parnell was also a great man whose bravery could be compared to that of FPU members. His inclusion was perhaps to mitigate the overwhelmingly English character of the other heroes listed. Parnell was also a peculiar choice to include, given his contested legacy among Irish-Catholics in Ireland and the diaspora, to say nothing of his Anglo-Irish background. Nevertheless, the use of such figures to justify the FPU’s attacks on the government is indicative of a more general effort by the anonymous editor, likely Coaker himself, to include characters from Newfoundlanders’ collective though obviously fraught ethno-religious past.

Conclusion

The Fishermen’s Advocate was born from the fires of Newfoundland’s ethno-religious tensions. But it is important to note that the paper, as with the union itself, had Catholic supporters from its genesis onwards. Though the paper’s inaugural edition spurred hostility from pro-government newspapers for its alleged irreligion, the union was conceived in the intellectual milieu of the Catholic Plaindealer. The Advocate reveals that the FPU, far from being a strictly English-Protestant organization, had a noticeable Catholic base of support. This was not just in the northeast but also on the Avalon, and particularly in Conception Bay, where Catholics as well as Protestants supported the union in districts such as Bay de Verde. The union and its Irish-Catholic and English-Protestant supporters alike also wrote letters to the editor, articles, and

90 “‘Who’s who?’” Fishermen’s Advocate, June 10, 1911.
91 “‘Editor’s notes,’” Fishermen’s Advocate, June 3, 1911.
92 “‘Who’s who?’” Fishermen’s Advocate, June 10, 1911.
editorials that show evidence of Irish-Catholic–English-Protestant interactions within the FPU, at meetings and on various local councils. Supporters, including Catholic members, sometimes used the language of religion and faith, or unity of “Anglo-Saxons” and “Celts” to flesh out cross-denominational concepts of working-class unity among fishermen. Such appeals also overlapped with the union’s own visions of ethnic unity among Newfoundlanders, mediated through a racial and imperial languages of Britishness.
Chapter 4: Entanglements in the Press and on the Hustings: the General Election of 1913

“By what system of metamorphosis have the thugs and rogues of other times become the angels of light?”

— from “McGrath the Traitor,” Fishermen’s Advocate, May 25, 1912.

Introduction

The press in early twentieth century Newfoundland was as responsible for stoking the fires of ethno-religious tensions as it was in reporting on them. Tensions boiled over in the general election of 1913. By drawing primarily on newspaper sources, this chapter explores the ways in which ethno-religious politics unfolded in the press in the period leading up to, during, and just after the 1913 election. This is a useful case study as it was the first campaign in which the Union Party directly competed and, despite its electoral alliance with the Liberals, the only election in which the Union Party fielded its own separate slate of candidates. As in a number of general elections in the nineteenth century, Newfoundland’s fragile ethno-political compact cracked open temporarily in 1913, revealing the ways in which Newfoundlanders wielded ethnicity in the causes of ethno-religious unity, class solidarity, and political loyalty.

As with Chapter Three, this chapter was unable to make use of content from all national and regional newspapers in Newfoundland. However, this chapter consults the Western Star, a West Coast weekly, and the Daily News of St. John’s, both of which backed Prime Minister E.P. Morris and his People’s Party, as well as the Evening Telegram, a St. John’s daily that backed the Liberals under Robert Bond. The use of these papers helps complement this chapter’s reliance on the FPU’s newspaper, the Fishermen’s Advocate. Other important newspapers include the Evening Chronicle and
Evening Herald, where anti-union opinion also thrived. P.T. McGrath, a Catholic, Morris supporter, and editor of both papers, featured prominently as a lightning rod of controversy in the lead-up to the 1913 election. McGrath’s advocacy of the values of a rather conservative clique of the Catholic middle class centered in St. John’s has been well covered elsewhere. But in this chapter, the views of rural fishermen will instead be highlighted.

Newspaper sources are not without problems. The hyper-partisan nature of some of the election commentary in various newspapers can give readers then and now the sense that the mudslinging that pervaded politics in the election of 1913 was more commonplace or severe than it actually was. The newspaper evidence that was mined for this chapter is itself responsible for perpetuating the very priest-led hypothesis that continued to dominate histories of the FPU long afterward. The partisanship of the sources also has the effect of excluding the voices of those whose opinions reflect more independent or nuanced perspectives, or those whose voices were long marginalized. It is hoped that the findings in this chapter and Chapter Three are considered alongside the more intimate and serene reflections found in the private correspondences of Chapter Two and the oral histories found in Chapter Five.

The FPU was keen to stress its interdenominational character, but this eventually gave way to messages of English-Protestant unity in the aftermath of the election. The Fishermen’s Advocate highlighted Catholic union supporters as it became ever clearer in the fall of 1913 that the People’s Party was pulling Catholic support away from the Union Party and its Liberal allies. While it is true that the number of Catholic supporters of the Liberal–Union alliance was not enough for them to win the election, it is also true that a sufficient number of Protestants voted against the alliance as well. This is just one of many oft-overlooked facts downplayed by contemporary sources and historians alike in favour of a view that blamed the bogey-man of “sectarianism” for derailing the Bond- and

1 P.T. McGrath bought the Evening Herald and merged it with the Evening Chronicle under the Herald’s banner in 1912, causing the Herald to abandon its Liberal orientation and to instead support Morris. See Historical Directory of Newfoundland and Labrador Newspapers, D-F, retrieved August 31, 2016 from http://www.library.mun.ca/cns/nlnews/title/df/.

Coaker-led opposition. Coaker and the other editorial staff of the *Advocate* interpreted the re-election of Morris’s government as the result of Catholic ethno-religious unity against the FPU. The union transitioned from running a defensive campaign, where it tried desperately to refute accusations of anti-Catholicism, godlessness, socialism, and even anarchism, to an offensive one after the election results came in, arguing that Catholics had acted in concert to protect the interests of their ethnic group and that Protestants could do likewise. Yet, Irish-Catholic and English-Protestant supporters of the Morris government had non-sectarian reasons for their votes. For their part, Irish-Catholic unionists increasingly found themselves having to explain how their support for the FPU was compatible with their ethno-religious identity. In the ethnic entanglements of the 1913 general election, fishermen’s interests fractured along ethno-religious and other lines. While the Union Party won most of the seats it contested, the Liberal–Union coalition suffered a loss overall as Prime Minister Morris was returned to power.

**The early beginnings of the FPU's involvement in parliamentary politics**

Coaker initially encouraged union men to support Morris in the period between 1908 and 1910, on the grounds that Morris had made overtures to fishermen, whereas Bond, a former prime minister and Liberal leader, had, by that time, began pursuing a policy of retrenchment that had little to offer resource producers. Meanwhile, the FPU had not yet established the various organs through which it was yet to effect influence and power, such as the *Fishermen’s Advocate* and the Union Party. Due to Morris’s failure to deliver on reforms for which Coaker had lobbied, such as regulation of fish prices, standardization of the grading of fish, and the implementation of various welfare state measures, the FPU hammered out plans to launch the Union Party. By the end of 1911, and despite Bond’s preference for limited state intervention in the economy, the FPU began to align itself with the Liberals, with whom they eventually became allies for the 1913 election and beyond.3

So eager was the union to contest the forthcoming election that by March 1912, the union gathered petitions “from Freshwater in Conception Bay to Conche on the

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3 McDonald, “W.F. Coaker” (1971), 76-78; and Baker, “Plaindealing,” 43.
"Treaty Shore" asking for early elections. Though the election was not scheduled for another eighteen months, for the FPU, the campaign had begun. The question became one of how, precisely, the union was going to compete electorally with the two established parties. The Advocate had addressed the budding rumours that, having lost faith in Morris’s People’s Party government in 1911, the FPU leadership was officially switching sides to the Liberals. The paper dismissed such speculation early on, but Coaker had already unsuccessfully tried to convince Bond to lead a Liberal–Union coalition earlier that year. In 1912, Bond presented the union’s petitions regarding moving the election ahead a year to the House of Assembly. Despite his warm words about Coaker and the FPU while on the campaign trail, Bond privately disapproved of the union’s involvement with parliamentary politics, viewing it as having sectional rather than public interests and thus little different from lobbyists for corporate concerns such as the Reid Newfoundland Company, which had a monopoly on building the country’s railways. But, by this point, the Liberal Party had foundered with the rise of the People’s Party, and even Archbishop Howley had prodded Bond to unite with the union.

It was not until August 30, 1913, just two months before the election, that both parties finessed their electoral agreement. The two sides agreed to field only one candidate in those electoral districts that returned single representatives, based on an equitable division between the two parties; and to compete in multimember electoral districts on a common slate, though as separate parties. The FPU ran its own candidates on behalf of the opposition under the Union Party banner in what it deemed to be safe seats in three districts, while jointly fielding candidates alongside Liberals in three other districts. The Union Party refrained from competing in the remaining districts.

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4 "Editor’s Notes: The F.P.U. Again Insulted," Fishermen’s Advocate, March 30, 1912.
5 "What’s What!" Fishermen’s Advocate, March 30, 1912.
6 O’Flaherty, Lost Country, 257.
8 McDonald, To Each His Own, 43-44; O’Flaherty, Lost Country, 262; Noel, 100-101.
9 The Union Party solely contested Bonavista, Fogo, and Port de Grave.
10 In Twillingate, Trinity Bay, and Bay de Verde, both Unionists and Liberals put forward candidates on common slates. The presence of multimember districts and the ability to engage in split ticket voting meant that voters would sometimes elect multiple members from different parties.
districts, including all six districts with Catholic majorities, and six Protestant-majority districts where Liberal candidates exclusively carried the Liberal-Unionist banner. Conventional histories explicitly blame Irish Catholics, or the Catholic Church, for the FPU’s limited electoral performance. But the FPU made its own decisions about running Union candidates where it did. Catholics in all those districts where the Union Party opted not to compete were therefore not afforded the privilege of being an obstacle to the union, as some histories have long cast them.

![Newfoundland electoral districts, 1889–1924](http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=23419&lang=en)

**Figure 7:** Newfoundland electoral districts, 1889–1924


Meanwhile, the leadership of the FPU wasted no time in drumming up support for the election. Coaker’s regular tours through rural Newfoundland to speak to fishermen

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11 These were Ferryland, Harbour Main, Placentia–St. Mary’s, St. George’s, St. John’s East, and St. John’s West.

12 These were Burgeo–La Poile, Burin, Carbonear, Fortune Bay, Harbour Grace, and St. Barbe.
and recruit members into the union also allowed him to do some early campaigning for the election. Not all these efforts went smoothly. On one occasion in January of 1913, over nine months before election day, Coaker’s tour through Bay Roberts was challenged by a “drunken mob” at a public meeting where both Coaker and Union Party candidate William F. Lloyd of Trinity Bay were speaking.  

Tensions surfaced on January 18, when Coaker and his supporters marched from the harbour at Bay Roberts through town to the Orange Hall. Coaker’s own report of the incident in the Fishermen’s Advocate suggested that a “gang” tried to prevent Coaker’s entourage from proceeding through the harbour. The Daily News later mocked the union procession and was quick to stress that it had been “headed by some boys and young men,” who were not from Bay Roberts but rather from “outside places, viz., Bareneed, Port de Grave, and Clarke’s Beach.” The unionists overcame the initial resistance they had faced, and proceeded to the hall for a rally. However, the protesters returned, and although Coaker was given a “good hearing,” Lloyd was “prevented from speaking” by unruly members of the crowd. The protesters were supporters of Archibald W. Piccott, an Orangeman and fisheries minister in the People’s Party government who would run in the election nine months later and win. The Fishermen’s Advocate derided the protesters as either the “Piccott gang” or the “Piccottites”. A riot broke out between the factions, and the Daily News reported that nine anti-union men were later arraigned at the courthouse in Bay Roberts for having “riotously and tumultuously” obstructed the FPU’s activities on the day of Coaker and Lloyd’s visit. The Fishermen’s Advocate later boasted that, despite the antics of irresponsible outsiders, 115 men that day had joined the union, “a record enrollment at a meeting, the highest before being 80.”

Although the newspapers covering the melee made no comments about the ethno-religious identities of Piccott and the protesters, the Fishermen’s Advocate alleged that the Piccottites had torn down the Union Jack, and that it “had been thrown in the mud” and “trampled” on. The paper may have been implying that such anti-British behaviour reflected strong Irish-Catholic support for the People’s Party. Piccott, however, was a Protestant, as were the majority of fishermen in and around Bay Roberts. Nevertheless, the FPU was keen on drawing attention to the flag’s purported desecration. It positioned unionists as defenders of empire and compared English-Protestant respectability to the irresponsible supporters of the People’s Party. The riot at Bay Roberts foreshadowed the acrimony of the rest of the campaign.

As unruly as events were on the ground in places like Bay Roberts, the press coverage of the general election campaign was especially raucous. P.T. McGrath fuelled much of the ethno-religious tensions of the 1913 campaign, and became a prime target of the union’s acerbic attacks in the Fishermen’s Advocate, often being mocked as a “Money Grabber” or “Grab-all” along with other government supporters. A year earlier, in the spring of 1912, McGrath had published a series of articles in the Evening Chronicle under the heading “Coaker Week.” He had intended to undermine Coaker and the fledgling Union Party, which McGrath saw as a threat to the People’s Party and Prime Minister Morris. McGrath tried to paint Coaker as a failed businessman who had allegedly compared himself to Jesus Christ. McGrath also accused Coaker of trying to stir up Protestant anger by attributing McGrath’s critiques of Alfred Morine, a Protestant former MHA, to McGrath’s Catholicism. This incident showed the FPU’s own willingness to lean on ethno-religious tensions in the service of politics, although divisions were never straightforward. As Mel Baker has noted:

[Coaker] held close relations with Catholics. During the libel suits, Coaker used Catholic James McGrath as his lawyer; at a sealers’ meeting in March 1912 in St John’s, two Catholics—John Devine and Roger Callahan—spoke prominently; when he needed salt the year before to supply fishermen, he turned to [PJ] Shea, a Catholic businessman, and in

21 “Money Grabber McGrath,” Fishermen’s Advocate, April 13, 1912.
a recent lawsuit against sealing merchants to determine whether they should pay $4.50 for fat, he retained JM Kent, a Catholic lawyer.\textsuperscript{22}

The \textit{Chronicle} also accused the FPU of having attacked the presence of convents in Newfoundland, to which the \textit{Advocate} responded, “Needless to say... the word ‘Convent’ has never been used in our columns, nor have we referred in any way to such.”\textsuperscript{23} Coaker responded to each daily attack. He particularly objected to the accusation that he had stirred up sectarian sentiment in Bonavista, and reminded readers that the Catholic Church had actually denounced McGrath, not the FPU, though it is unclear how the Church supposedly did this.\textsuperscript{24} Coaker also accused McGrath of having suffered from “nervousness” and for having had his “head washed.”\textsuperscript{25} In a piece titled “McGrath the Traitor,” the \textit{Advocate} referred to McGrath as a “Patsy” or as “Patsy McGrath,” and also mocked him as a “henchman, the abject, cringing, sneaking coward... ready to assail all and sundry who oppose those who have hired him.” The piece continued: “Neither church, nor state, nor citizen is safe from the attacks of this ruthless invader.”\textsuperscript{26}

While bickering between McGrath and Coaker certainly would have influenced some fishermen to take sides, such noise was part of a more complex feedback process. Not all fishermen were literate, and some of those that were may not have read the outrageous abuse from both sides; those that did read it would have decoded it in ways that reflected their own perspectives, worldviews, and ideas. Many would have ignored it. Some would have viewed it as entertainment. Still others might have viewed both sides’ scandalous claims as proof that neither was worth their time, attention, or vote. Some may have silently agreed with the attacks being hurled from either side, but viewed it as peripheral to their own decision-making. This holds true for the entirety of the press war that was yet to unfold for the duration of the campaign. Nevertheless, what

\textsuperscript{22} Baker, “‘Coaker Week,’” 54.
\textsuperscript{23} “Another Sectarian Attack,” \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, June 22, 1912.
\textsuperscript{24} Baker, “‘Coaker Week,’” 55. Closer to the election, Coaker claimed in an editorial in the \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate} that “Few in the colony despise [Patrick McGrath] more than the clergymen of the Catholic Church,” in “Non-sectarian schools,” \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, August 23, 1913.
\textsuperscript{25} “Pity for Patsy,” \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, May 18, 1912.
\textsuperscript{26} “McGrath the Traitor,” \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, May 25, 1912.
is revealing here is that political and media elites viewed the media as an appropriate venue in which to make various claims about the other party’s ethno-religious shortcomings. McGrath’s suggestion of Coaker’s sacrilege, or Coaker’s accusation about McGrath’s unpopularity within his own church, were both meant to taint the brand of the Unionists or People’s Party, respectively. The mutual accusations of sectarianism speak to both parties’ understandings of Newfoundland politics as a space where denominational compromises first established in the 1860s were not to be breached. There existed a popular fear among the populace and elites alike that the threat of ethno-religious conflict always lurked below the surface, that it was always capable of returning, and that anyone who instigated it was threatening the very fabric of public life. Accusing one’s enemy of trying to do precisely that was the highest of insults. We should thus read the presence of denominational animosity and discourses of sectarianism as evidence not of top-down manipulation but of a significant ethno-religious impulse in Newfoundland society that undergirded popular politics.

The campaign heats up: socialism, anarchism, and godlessness

Whatever effects the animosity between Coaker and McGrath had on ordinary working people’s views, it bled into the 1913 election campaign. People’s Party candidates adopted a tone that was just as acrimonious as the one McGrath had helped set, and lobbed attacks of their own, claiming that the FPU espoused anti-Catholicism, Orangeism, Protestant sectarianism, socialism, anarchism, and godlessness. Such accusations were intended to draw Catholic support away from the Liberal–Union alliance toward Morris’s camp. It may have worked in some cases, but in others, pro-union Catholics could be found resisting attacks on the FPU and rationalizing their own support of it, often using ethno-religiously inspired reasons such as appeals to Christian unity. Either way, the ethno-religious mud slinging of People’s Party politicians, and the ensuing rise in support for the People’s Party among Catholics, can easily be misread as cause and effect. But, while the Morris machine no doubt tried to manipulate what they saw as gullible Catholic voters, such a facile explanation by scholars would again ignore the agency of Irish Catholics and the complexity of their decision-making. While incitements to Irish-Catholic ethnic solidarity around Morris and the People’s Party would have been part of this process, so were other considerations. The outcome of Irish-
Catholic unity behind the FPU's adversaries was never assured and was vastly overstated.

Unquestionably, the election was, as Patrick O’Flaherty noted, an “ugly affair.”27 In Northern Bay, accusations of bribery and unfair ballot box monitoring procedures plagued the local campaign.28 In King’s Cove, someone claimed that the FPU tore down the British flag, mirroring the FPU’s own assertions about its rivals in the Bay Roberts melee in January 1913.29 Two weeks after the poll, the union’s paper declared with concern, “We have the North against the South in this Country just as they have in Ireland.”30 While some of this was not unusual for a pre-Confederation Newfoundland election, ethno-religious tensions were amplified by the government’s attempts to typecast the upstart Union Party as an anti-Catholic, socialist organization. In response, the *Fishermen’s Advocate* began publishing more content from Catholic areas, including one letter from Ferryland: “I suppose you think there is no one for you up here. But you will find quite half the voters on your side.”31 Without any Union Party candidates running in Ferryland district, the writer was promising support to the FPU’s Liberal allies. In the Catholic district of Placentia–St. Mary’s, where several councils had arisen and then disappeared after Archbishop Howley’s interventions four years earlier, fishermen wrote to the *Fishermen’s Advocate* in support of Liberal candidates there and against the governing People’s Party.32 The *Advocate*, by publishing such letters, was hoping to shed more light on Catholic unionists such as the anonymous Ferryland writer in an attempt to scupper claims of the FPU’s alleged anti-Catholicism. These glimmers of support from non-unionized areas gave the impression that not only was the FPU still getting support from Catholics, it was even popular among Catholics in areas far outside the union’s northeastern base.

28 “Red hot bribery at Northern Bay,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, October 22, 1913; “Deputy acted the whole hog,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, November 29, 1913.
29 “Strife-creating sectarian rascals,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, November 29, 1913.
30 “Some undesirable features of the sectarian situation as created by grab-allism,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, November 15, 1913.
31 “Ferryland anxious to have a branch,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, August 16, 1913.
32 “Placentia Bay Speaks Again,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, December 14, 1912; “Placentia Bay Awake!” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, March 1, 1913; “Notes from Placentia,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, October 15, 1913; “M.S. Sullivan,” *Fishermen’s Advocate*, October 1, 1913.
Nonetheless, the People’s Party successfully sowed divisions among voters by concocting a story that the FPU was threatening to end denominational schooling. In August 1913, the Advocate began responding to claims made in letters to the editor of rival newspapers like the Daily News and the Evening Herald that Coaker had announced Bond’s intention to create “non-sectarian” or non-denominational schools at a meeting in Change Islands. Coaker responded by reminding readers that “no such thing as sectarian schools has ever been discussed in any Council of the Union, such a question being debarred from consideration in the Councils of the F.P.U.”33 Although the Supreme Council could discuss the issue, it had not done so, as Catholic attendees of the Supreme Council could verify. Both the Liberal Party and the FPU supported retention of the denominational schools system, Coaker wrote, and any claim to the contrary was a “wicked and malicious falsehood, circulated to stir up sectarian bitterness.”34 Nevertheless, the issue became a rallying cry for opponents of the alliance. In St. John’s East, where the Liberals were more competitive than they were in St. John’s West, the one successful People’s Party candidate of three, William J. Higgins, was said to have accused Coaker of wanting “godless schools.”35

The charge of godlessness was meant to convey the union’s supposed threat to Catholicism in particular, and it was bolstered by repeated claims of the FPU’s socialism or even anarchism. These terms were loaded with political, economic, cultural, and religious significance, particularly after Archbishop Howley had raised the specter of socialism in his indictment of the union four years earlier. After the election, one piece in the Fishermen’s Advocate complained that the People’s Party had “represented Coaker and the F.P.U. as Socialist to a degree inimical to Roman Catholicism,” even though the

33 “Non-sectarian schools,” Fishermen’s Advocate, August 23, 1913.
34 “Non-sectarian schools,” Fishermen’s Advocate, August 23, 1913.
35 “Billy Higgins appeals along sectarian lines to east end electors” September 20, 1913.
union had "no case against Roman Catholic voters on the score of their religious beliefs" and the Catholic Church had found no fault with the union.36

Though the union’s opponents hoped to defeat the Liberal–Union alliance with accusations of godlessness, socialism, and anarchism, such hyperbole was normal in the campaign, and generally reflected the apoplectic nature of the hyper-partisan news media. However, such accusations took on additional currency when, on October 19, just 11 days before the election, a man by the name of James Hare shot at the Bishop of Harbour Grace.37 Hare had been described in the press at the time as a socialist and an anarchist. This did not help the FPU, which had spent the better part of the campaign fending off charges of socialism. Archibald Piccott, running for the People’s Party in the district of Harbour Grace, positioned himself as the champion of the Catholics, despite being an Orangeman, by repeating the pitch in the Catholic area of Riverhead that Coaker was a socialist and an anarchist.38 This contrasting of Coaker and Hare, and the conflation of the FPU with violence, would have resonated strongly with Harbour Grace residents, including those in Riverhead, many of whom remembered violent confrontation between Irish Catholics and English Protestants in 1883.39

The shooting of Bishop March was on the tip of everyone’s tongue in the final days of the campaign. Government operatives attempted to drive home that, like Hare,

36 “Morris must do the square thing,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 29, 1913. The wording here is interesting: although the union rebuffed claims it was socialist in other contexts, here it was careful not to do so, preferring instead to suggest that it was not so socialist that the Catholic Church should oppose it. This may reflect the paper’s occasionally enlightened views about socialism elsewhere in the world, and the fact that one of its elected MHAs, George Grimes, was a self-proclaimed socialist. It perhaps also reflected the union’s awareness that the Catholic Church had become more receptive to unions and ideas that challenged laissez-faire capitalism; see “An Appeal for Organized International Labor,” Fishermen’s Advocate, October 10, 1912, and “Important pronouncement of Roman Catholic Church on labor organizations,” Fishermen’s Advocate, December 6, 1913. However, the union also tried to turn accusations of socialism around on the government by accusing the People’s Party of having also espoused socialist ideas, in “Public declarations characterise Morris as being socialististic,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 15, 1913.

37 O’Flaherty, Lost Country, 264; “How Morris manipulated the Roman Catholic vote to gain the elections,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 22, 1913.

38 “Harbor Grace Campaign was won by the Grab-Alls on Sectarian Appeals,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 8, 1913.

Coaker too was a socialist, with all the anti-Catholic connotations attached to that label. Peter Tremlett, writing from Salmonier, St. Mary’s Bay, claimed that someone had been spreading the rumour in Placentia–St. Mary’s a “day or two before polling day” that it was actually Coaker himself who had shot at Bishop March.\textsuperscript{40} Catholic areas in the district of St. John’s East, such as Torbay and Outer Cove, long bastions of Liberal support, switched support to the People’s Party. William J. Higgins, the \textit{Advocate} claimed, had been particularly prone to engaging in sectarian tactics, and blamed the shooting of Bishop March in Harbour Grace on the “anarchy racket” at the center of the FPU’s political rhetoric.\textsuperscript{41}

Meanwhile on September 18, 1913, a mysterious document claiming to have been from the Archbishop’s desk was drafted. Little is known about the document other than that it was purportedly “circulated in the Catholic districts with a view to influencing the coming elections,” as Archbishop Howley would later remark.\textsuperscript{42} The document, titled “Extract from the letter of his Grace Archbishop Howley, addressed to the Catholic people of St. John’s,” with the heading “Secret and Dangerous Societies and Unions,” contained excerpts of Howley’s March 31, 1909, circular letter, with the following quote (emphasis in original):

\begin{quote}
In connection with Secret societies His Grace has posted in all the Churches in the Placentia District, a notice forbidding from joining or having anything whatever to do with \textbf{COAKER’S UNION}.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

Archbishop Howley claimed not to have crafted this 1913 document. In response to a letter from Liberal MHA J.M. Kent about the matter, Howley reminded Kent that after Coaker had “immediately altered the Constitution of the Fishermen’s Union, and withdrew the obnoxious clause so as to make it possible for Catholics to join it” four years earlier, Howley had, in turn, withdrawn his own condemnation of the union. “Any

\textsuperscript{40} “Very able letter from P.J. Tremlett, Salmonier,” \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, January 3, 1914.
\textsuperscript{41} “The election returns demonstrate the power and influence of the F.P.U.,” \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, November 4, 1913.
\textsuperscript{42} Letter to J.M. Kent from Archbishop M.F. Howley, September 29, 1913, 106/19/2, ARCA.
\textsuperscript{43} Extract of letter to the Catholic people of St. John’s from Archbishop M.F. Howley, September 18, 1913; 106/19/2; ARCA/MHArc.
Catholic,” he explained, “may now join it, and I have no objection to their doing so.” Just as Howley had quietly rescinded his ban of the FPU in 1909, he was now quietly reminding one Liberal partisan, Kent, of the rescission. Catholics had been free to join the FPU, vote for it, and do business with its trading companies, but no circular letter loudly proclaiming the lifting of the ban was distributed. Howley’s comments to Kent in 1913 were equally discreet.

The election results

The election was held on October 30, 1913. Morris remained prime minister, his party having won 21 of 36 total seats in the House of Assembly. The Liberal Party won seven seats, and the Union Party won eight of the nine seats it contested, with candidate Nathan Barrett of Bay de Verde losing by a slim margin. If one measured “FPU support” solely on the basis of Union Party support, then we have the disadvantage of only being able to appraise the results in six electoral districts instead of all 18. Despite the fact that the Liberal–Union alliance ate into Morris’s support over the previous election’s results in 1909, increasing the size of the opposition benches overall, and despite the overwhelming success of unionist candidates, the Advocate largely adopted the narrative that the election had been lost. The union openly admitted that People’s Party attacks against Coaker and the FPU tainted the Liberal brand in areas where it might have been more competitive. The Advocate nevertheless bragged that “every notable success of the election so far has been won by the union section of the Opposition.”

44 Letter to J.M. Kent from Archbishop M.F. Howley, September 29, 1913, 106/19/2, ARCA.
45 Letter from Archbishop Howley to JM Kent, St. John’s, September 29, 1913, 106/19/2, ARCA.
46 Coaker, Twenty Years, 65.
47 No official polling station or municipal-level results appear to exist for any elections prior to Confederation. The best analysis of the available data for the 1913 election in particular is that of Brym and Neis, who compared the denominational profile of each district with percentage of the vote that went to the Union Party, FPU membership as a percentage of registered voters, and persons employed in the Labrador fishery and logging as a percentage of registered voters; see Brym and Neis, “Regional Factors,” 394.
48 “Harbor Grace Campaign was won by the Grab-Alls on Sectarian Appeals,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 8, 1913.
Yet, elections are won and lost for countless, complex reasons. The general election of Newfoundland on October 30, 1913, was no different. Morris’s government, in power since 1909, had the benefit of incumbency. Although Bond, his chief opponent, was well-respected, his campaign floundered. He was half-hearted about the campaign in the first place, having been ill for some time, and again, was unenthused with the alliance his party had with the Union Party. For its part, the People’s Party had passed legislation in 1909 promising six new branch line extensions of the Newfoundland Railway.\(^4^9\) While it saddled the country with debt, and two of the promised extensions were cancelled due to the First World War, the introduction of the railway into key districts provided convenient transportation, faster modes of shipping, and much needed employment to rural communities, making the appeal of Morris’s government all the more materially real. As Kurt Korneski points out, in the case of the railway, there is “evidence to suggest that fishermen and other working people in Newfoundland were tired of the uncertainties of the fisheries and that they took politicians’ promises of well-paid and long-lasting employment seriously.”\(^5^0\) One of the new branch lines extended to Trepassey in Ferryland district, the construction of which began in 1911 and ended in 1913, the year of the election. Granted, the Bonavista line had also been completed the same year, and voters there balked at People’s Party candidates. But they also had a long memory of the highly politicized and regionalized ways in which the branch lines historically had been granted, and the laying of track for a line extending to Placentia decades earlier had rankled northeastern voters at the time.\(^5^1\) So, aspects of the 1913 campaign having to do with the calculus that ordinary working people made as they headed to the polling station are sometimes overshadowed by narratives about the re-emergence of “sectarianism” in the election of 1913. In fact, the classic “bread and butter” issues largely drove the outcome of this and other elections, and this motivation drove much of rural fishermen’s support of the FPU as well.

\(^4^9\) “Reid Newfoundland Company,” Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador, 566.
\(^5^0\) Kurt Korneski, “Race, Gender, Class, and Colonial Nationalism: Railway Development in Newfoundland, 1881-1898,” Labour/Le Travail 62 (Fall 2008), 97.
\(^5^1\) Eaton, “‘To the disgust,’” (2013).
Figure 8: Seats won by party in the general election, 1913


The Advocate however did not see things this way. It analyzed the results district by district in one post-election piece while also identifying the rough denominational breakdown of each district. The message was clear: the election of 1913 was a sectarian one, and sectarian issues hurt the union. Officially, the editorial line of the Fishermen’s Advocate was one that tried to downplay sectarianism, or blame the sectarianism of the campaign on the government and its supporters. It was also keen on stressing the FPU’s cross-denominational support. In its first edition after the election,

52 “Some undesirable features of the sectarian situation as created by grab-allism,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 15, 1913.
the paper reminded readers that Archbishop Howley had long since rescinded his ban on FPU membership.\textsuperscript{53} This decision suggests that even though the union generally did not campaign in Catholic areas, largely leaving them to the Liberals, it was still quite worried about its reputation in Catholic communities even after the election was over. Rival newspapers of the \textit{Advocate}, such as the \textit{Evening Herald}, planted the idea that the FPU and Liberals had also stoked sectarian tensions on the campaign trail in Protestant districts, a claim that the \textit{Advocate} vociferously denied. A full month after the election, the paper was still protesting that the basis of union complaints about Morris was not his Catholicism but his “ruinous and extravagant expenditure; by graft, by boodling; by incompetence and by lack of statesmanship.”\textsuperscript{54}

But cracks in the FPU’s hitherto tolerant and accommodative attitude towards Catholics also started to appear after the election, when the editorial line began to become more antagonistic not just to the Morris machine but to Catholics generally. The union drove home the idea that, again, pro-Morris voters were easily duped or had been “simple-minded” enough to be made “tools” of the People’s Party during the election. The \textit{Advocate} condescendingly explained that the overall loss by the Liberal–Union alliance was because voters, particularly Catholics, had been duped by People’s Party campaign tricks. One piece noted that “catch-cries” such as “‘Vote for your religion,’ ‘Will you swallow Godless Schools,’ ‘Will you Vote for Socialism,’” and associations between Coaker and the assassination attempt at Harbour Grace were pivotal.\textsuperscript{55} In a post-mortem analysis in December 1913, the \textit{Advocate} expressed shock that “a portion of the electorate could be found simple and ignorant enough to be coddled by such baseless catch cries” and that such ignorance invited “a serious reflection upon the Colony’s

\textsuperscript{53} “The election returns demonstrate the power and influence of the F.P.U.,” \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, November 4, 1913.

\textsuperscript{54} “Morris made tools of fellow Catholics to win the election,” \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, November 29, 1913.

\textsuperscript{55} “Grab-alls were astounded by the splendid majority given Clapp in St. Barbe,” \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, November 22, 1913.
educational advancement." In another piece, the Advocate made it clear that “Roman Catholics... have allowed themselves to be made tools of by sectarian firebugs like Piccott,” a claim repeated elsewhere in the paper in the election’s aftermath.

**Pro-union Catholics respond to the election results**

Pro-union Catholics, the “rogues among the rebels,” found themselves in the tough position of having to make sense of their status as Catholics in a union that their fellow Catholics had, as the rhetoric went, turned against en masse. But their unionist views also became a challenge to reconcile, as the editorial line of their union’s newspaper had increasingly adopted the tone that it was they—“Catholics”—who had undermined the union’s path to power. This was an ethnic entanglement wherein some Catholic unionists also framed their co-religionists as simple-minded. Peter Tremlett of Salmonier noted that it had been “generally known that the Tories in St. John’s circulated the Godless School and closed Convent scares and quoted priests as their authority, influencing thereby simple-minded people.” Arthur English, a Catholic from St. John’s who had helped to edit the Fishermen’s Advocate, wrote a letter observing, “thank God Catholicity has nothing but pity for” those politicians and journalists who invoked sectarianism during the campaign, because “I am sure every honest Catholic must repudiate the unwarranted attitude of those self appointed champions.” He also agreed with the union’s diagnosis that Catholics had generally been swayed by the fires of sectarianism, as stoked by the People’s Party: “It pains me to admit that my fellow Catholics have permitted themselves to be imposed upon by designing scoundrels of the sectarian firebrand type.” He added, “Not all Catholics have been led to repose confidence in the scamps, ‘tis true, but a great many of them, it must be admitted, voted

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56 There was little doubt as to which group of the population the union was lambasting; these condescending claims were made in introduction to a piece meant to remind readers, particularly Catholics, that their Church, including the Vatican, had actually warmed up to unions around the world; see, “Important pronouncement of Roman Catholic Church on labor organizations,” Fishermen’s Advocate, December 6, 1913.
57 “Morris must do the square thing,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 29, 1913.
58 “Morris made tools of fellow Catholics to win the election,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 29, 1913.
60 “Sectarianism has insulted our electors,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 15, 1913.
to save their religion as they believed.” Reading the overwhelming emphasis on “sectarianism” in the newspaper press, it is little wonder that Catholic partisans at the time arrived at the vastly exaggerated conclusion that their fellow countrymen had been priest-led.

English wrote a follow-up letter a week later on November 22, warning Protestant members of the union to resist the temptations of sectarianism. The subheading of his letter read, “The Fight is Not Against Catholics But Against Their Enemies.” In the letter, English noted that he was as “staunch a Catholic as any” but that in this election, he had been “one, heart and hand with my Protestant fellow-countrymen,” who, he warned, “must bear the burden of the day. They must be as one man to resist [the] demon” of a sectarian approach to politics. Other Catholic unionists had witnessed the rise of ethno-religious tensions in the election early on, and attempted to diffuse the situation with appeals to Catholic–Protestant unity. A St. John’s Catholic, James Murphy, wrote the following poem and sent it to the editor of the Fishermen’s Advocate:

“Orange and Green”

We will live on here in friend forever.
Helping each other by word and by deed;
Praying that those silken ties may be never
Toyed with, or broken by envy or greed.

What if we kneel not before the same altar,
It is on God that we all have to lean.
Why should my love for a friend cease to falter
Because he loves Orange and I should love Green.

Stronger and stronger the ties that should bind us,
Pointing the pathway to Heaven on high.
Loving, and doing kind actions should find us
The right way to live on in life till we die.

61 “Sectarianism has insulted our electors,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 15, 1913.
62 “Sectarian Firebugs Should be Ousted From Public Life,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 22, 1913.
Why should we dare not to love one another,
Casting aside all our envy and spleen;
God in His mercy made each man his brother,
Those who love Orange and those who love Green.

Too long the banner of discord was waving,
In dear Terra Nova in days that are gone;
Shame on the one who to-day would be braving
The danger of trying to again bring it on.

Let us be true to the Flag that floats o’er us,
The banner of Britain, the grandest we’ve seen;
Fathers and mothers let this be your chorus:
Keep envy from blending with Orange and Green.

James Murphy
St. John’s, July 29, 1913.  

These sources indicate that some members of the Irish-Catholic community were able to recognize that sectarian discourses were being deployed to stoke ethnic tensions that were rooted in a not-too-distant past.

The party line of the union was still that religion was of no significance to its outlook on politics. As one piece noted in the gendered language that Coaker and other union members employed, “We care not what religion a man is, if he is a man and lives up to a manly standard in his actions.” The piece went on to speculate that Andrew Broaders, a Bay de Verde Catholic and vice president of the union, could have prevailed had he run as a candidate in the election. With Nathan Barrett’s close loss in Bay de Verde district, Coaker was livid that “twenty-eight unionists” in the district had apparently split their vote between the Liberal candidate and one of the two People’s Party candidates. Coaker was clearly questioning whether or not the union would have won all of its candidates had Broaders, who was more well known than Barrett, run instead.

63 “Orange and Green,” Fishermen’s Advocate, August 2, 1913.
64 “Morris and his gang must face the music of their own making,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 15, 1913.
65 “Bay-de-Verde: Hickman returned, Barrett defeated,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 4, 1913.
Table 2: Breakdown of the vote in Bay de Verde district, 1913

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Vote total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albert E. Hickman*</td>
<td>Liberal Party</td>
<td>1,168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Crosbie**</td>
<td>People’s Party</td>
<td>1,150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan Barrett</td>
<td>Union Party</td>
<td>1,140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse Whiteway</td>
<td>People’s Party</td>
<td>1,078</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Winners

Source: Mark Graessar, “Newfoundland General Election Results, 1900-1932,” unpublished report, n.d., on deposit, 789.0 (JL 559 A15 N37), PANL.

Broaders responded, writing a letter in which he expressed his regret that he had not anticipated the sectarian nature of the election during the final days of the campaign. “Had I contemplated for a moment that [the People’s Party] should have recourse to such cowardly attacks on an innocent man,” he said, “I would have visited these Catholic districts myself and proven to the electors the sincerity of W.F. Coaker to uplift the downtrodden Toilers of his native land.” Broaders immediately assumed that the hyperbole of the Morris machine had an effect on voters in the first place, but proof to that effect remains elusive. It is also worth noting that the governing People’s Party had lost seats over its 1909 results, going from twenty-six seats to twenty-one. Additionally, it also won roughly half its seats in Protestant-majority districts, where, presumably, Broaders might also want to have focused energies. Instead, it was Catholic districts that Broaders isolated as being the problem districts. In asserting the sanctity of the union’s constitution and by-laws, Broaders went on to affirm his own Roman Catholicism, and goaded opponents of the FPU to contact the priest in the Bay de Verde parish if they wanted proof of his commitment to his religion. Broaders even went so far as to suggest that, as the vice-president of the FPU, he “represent[ed] the Roman Catholic body with the approbation of His Grace the Archbishop of St. John’s.”

66 The editor responded, thanking Broaders and noting that “in settlements like Bay de Verde, King’s Cove, Melrose, St. Brendan’s, Tilting Harbor, Fogo, Conche, &c., Catholic members of the

66 “Morris won by low-down catch-cries,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 15, 1913; Broaders also wrote similar sentiments in “The Sectarian Appeal,” Evening Telegram, November 10, 1913.
union stood firm against sectarian appeals.”67 Perhaps, though, most Catholic communities resisted them, but chose the People’s Party for other reasons.

The reminders of the support of Catholic–unionist towns in the northeast, and letters of support from Catholic unionists such as English, Murphy, Broaders, and Tremlett from the southeast, were perhaps little consolation given the overall loss in the election and given the reports of sectarian campaign tactics that continued to trickle in well after the election had been fought. The union accused one of the People’s Party candidates in Placentia–St. Mary’s of holding prayer beads during a speech and of accusing the union of wanting to set up a Protestant school in Branch, an Irish-Catholic town in the district, and to force Catholic children to attend it.68 This candidate was perhaps William Walsh, who Arthur English noted had “exposed articles of devotion before his Catholic listeners and asked them if they were going to have such articles driven out of their lives.”69 English drew a comparison between these contentious events in the south to what had been happening in the north, where the FPU was considered a “blessing,” for it united “men of different creeds” and in so doing had “broken down all barriers on religious grounds and established confidence among men who formerly because of religious differences were mistrustful of each other.”70 This romantic image of the FPU being a site where ethnic differences were overcome was an attractive one, and up until the beginning of the election campaign, was arguably true. This image was also one that was being painted to counter what English thought was the Catholic community’s excessive unity behind the wrong party, and a subtle dig at the FPU’s own excessive belligerence regarding Catholics’ not voting the correct way.

Peter J. Tremlett pointed out that he, “as a Roman Catholic, [upheld] Mr. Coaker in his outspoken denunciation of sectarian cries.”71 “If we are going to be civilized men and Christians and true citizens,” he argued, “let us leave all religious differences of

67 “The campaign as summed up by a Catholic,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 15, 1913.
68 “Public declarations characterise Morris as being socialistic,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 15, 1913; “The election returns demonstrate the power and influence of the F.P.U.,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 4, 1913.
69 “Sectarianism has insulted our electors,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 15, 1913.
70 “Sectarianism has insulted our electors,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 15, 1913.
71 “Roman Catholic Criticises Morris,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 22, 1913.
opinion outside the polling booth and cast our ballots from the standpoint of the common good and tar and feather the first candidate that attempts to approach the subject on a hustings.”

Tremlett then, despite his belief that “simple-minded people” had been influenced to vote against their wishes, believed strongly in a particular notion of the common good, and that the FPU was the best party to influence government to pursue policies that aligned with his idea of it. While Tremlett and other Catholic unionists looked down on those of their fellow Catholics who voted for Morris for having supposedly succumbed to his sectarian appeals, pro-FPU Catholics like him also had their own ethno-religiously inspired vision for politics and for the future. His appeal to the shared Christianity of Newfoundland fishermen, as well as to what he felt was their common aspiration to be “civilized,” shows alternative ideas about ethnic and working-class ideas among some Catholic unionists. While these ideas often fostered hegemonic discourses, just as did elite appeals to sectarian sentiments and denominational anxieties, they nevertheless attempted to downplay religious differences in a political environment where such differences had been institutionalized since the mid-nineteenth century. Tremlett also recounted non-ethnic rationales he would hear while trying to mobilize support among fellow Catholics against Morris and in support of Bond and Coaker:

Many a time have I heard a man say, ‘Well I’m not going to vote against my bread and butter.’ Did this mean that besides giving his supplies, his 12 months’ earnings for a miserable living, he had to sell him his conscience, his privileges of manhood also and become as it were his slave?”

For Tremlett, it was not just ethno-religious concerns that were to blame for Catholic foot-dragging over union membership, but also economic anxieties. He and other Catholic fishermen were motivated by the new politics of class that the FPU helped foster, along with the material benefits that could be gained from acting in concert under the union’s guidance. Fishermen’s shared experiences and identities as rural producers across ethno-religious divides were things that ordinary Catholics and Protestants had long understood and sporadically acted on. But now such ideas were being marshaled

72 “Roman Catholic Criticises Morris,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 22, 1913.
73 “Roman Catholic Criticises Morris,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 22, 1913.
under the umbrella of the FPU, triggering a fissure in Catholic working communities, where some were beginning to assert ideas about their ethnic and class interests and identities that were radically different from those of Catholic elites.

Explaining English-Protestant opposition to the FPU

The Advocate’s analysis of the election results revealed much about a dominant English-Protestant narrative of Catholic ineptitude as well as a degree of disdain for the way that working people made political choices in complex situations. This transferred over not only to Irish Catholics but also to English Protestants. Where the Liberal–Union alliance failed to win over Catholics, it was claimed that Catholics had been duped into voting in support of their religion, according to the paper. But where the alliance had failed among English-Protestant electors, it was alleged such voters had been bought off with government money. In Carbonear district, Protestants outnumbered Catholics two to one.74 In the communities of Victoria, Freshwater, and Salmon Cove in that district, local Reid railway contractors who canvassed for the People’s Party were said to have hired “many men” to build and maintain local roads.75 The union charged the Reid railway of continuing “to dominate the country and to sap its life blood” and warned: “Until the men of the North and South unite in a moral warfare, the buying up of electors and legislators, public officials and journals with public money, is certain to continue.”76 The Advocate also accused the Reid company of giving money directly to Catholic churches in Burin district, where the population was about one-third Catholic and two-thirds Protestant. It was there that an unnamed Catholic clergyman repeated the charge of “socialism and anarchism” that had been lobbed at Coaker, but with the added touch that “Coakerism and Orangeism were synonymous.” No union member ran in Burin, but Liberals Henry Gear and G. Bartlett did and both lost.77 So, the logic of the Advocate was that Catholics who voted for Morris had been fooled into doing so because they had passively been led to prioritize their religion at the expense of their other interests, while Protestant votes had been bought with money and jobs. The union press tended to view

74 “Some undesirable features of the sectarian situation as created by grab-allism,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 15, 1913.
75 “Reid’s and religion put Morris in power,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 22, 1913.
76 “Reid’s and religion put Morris in power,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 22, 1913.
77 “Vote-catching presents given,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 29, 1913.
Catholic outliers or opponents to the union as religious and priest-led, and Protestant opponents of the union, while still misguided, at least had more rational and economic reasons for their opposition however shortsighted these may be.

The union’s messaging after the election thus revealed a crack in its hitherto interdenominational and non-sectarian position: it started to issue carefully worded ethno-religious threats. If the Catholic minority could use unity to win power, the paper began to argue, Protestants could much more easily do the same since they were already in the majority in Newfoundland—a prospect that the paper increasingly endorsed after the election. This was a shift from its previously more forgiving view of Catholic antipathy to the union, but it was also a departure from its contemporaneous belief that Catholic voters who “voted their religion” were simple-minded: here, Catholics were not just simple-minded but rather conscious, deliberative, and acting in unison. The Advocate bemoaned the fact “that the Roman Catholic population is not as great as the Protestant population, yet they are able to elect a majority of members when they want to.” Another piece ominously asked, “Is it any wonder the Protestants of the North are furious and are ready to stand for Coaker to a man in any steps he may take to repudiate the right of [Morris] to rule Newfoundland.” This goading of the Advocate’s largely English-Protestant readership would likely have reminded them of the ways in which ethnic politics could be deployed. It is interesting that the union also identified what it thought was the power of Irish-Catholic unity to hinder the growth of the FPU; it was contradicted by the union’s earlier, laudatory assertions that northeastern Catholics in places such as Tilting had actually voted for the union.

Union organizers, including Catholic ones, continued their efforts in organizing local branches and regaled the Advocate with stories about the difficulties doing so in the aftermath of the election. M.E. Hawco of Holyrood had attempted to establish a local council at Conception Harbour in the district of Harbour Main and was granted permission from Monsignor William Veitch to use the Parish Hall there. Upon hearing

78 “How Morris Manipulated the Roman Catholic Vote to Gain the Elections,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 22, 1913.
79 “Morris must take responsibility for sectarianism,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 22, 1913.
80 “The campaign as summed up by a Catholic,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 15, 1913.
about this, People’s Party activists showed up to interrupt the meeting, during which Hawco was shouted down and faced “the worst kind of abuse, jeers and threats,” after which “25 or 30” government supporters rushed the stage, threatening Hawco with death.  

During the election, the union saw hostility in this district due to rumours that Coaker was planning on banning the use of squid and capelin for compost by fishermen in that region because of a scarcity of bait in northern regions.

In response, the Advocate printed a reply to Hawco’s letter that continued in the acrimonious vein that typified its newly uncompromising position against Catholic support for Morris. The reply accused Morris supporters in Catholic outports of wanting to “inflame the feelings of the Protestant Union men all over the Colony.” The reply emphasized the FPU’s “non-sectarian principles,” its desire to organize Catholic districts, and its preference that all “denominations work side by side.” But it also implied that Catholics themselves would be to blame if the FPU became overwhelmingly Protestant due to the sectarian tensions from the election and that “if those who for present personal gain are foolish enough to allow the [government] to overcome their best judgment, and turn their common sense into childishness, then they must be responsible for the consequences.” This response combined two significant ideas the Advocate had been advancing since the election: that Catholics were, again, simple-minded, and that English Protestants could and should exercise unity behind Coaker in light of Irish Catholics having apparently done the same behind Morris.

The editor in 1913—likely either Coaker or Dr. Harvey M. Mosdell, or both—spelled out its case for Protestant unity against Catholic unity: “Men of the Protestant districts of Newfoundland, by appealing to sectarian prejudices, by carefully and ostentatiously parading Morris on the score of his religious affiliation, the Grab-alls have

81 “Friend Hawco writes re the Conception Hr. Melee,” Fishermen’s Advocate, January 17, 1914.
82 “Methods employed by Gaffney Woodford to gain Harbour Main,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 15, 1913.
83 “Editor’s response to ‘Friend Hawco writes re the Conception Hr. Melee,’” Fishermen’s Advocate, January 17, 1914.
84 “The Fishermen’s Advocate,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 15, 1913.
unified the Roman Catholic vote and thus secured majorities in several districts." Protestants too, the Advocate warned, were capable of unity: “Come, get together yourselves and if they want the thing determined on denominational lines give them all they want of sectarian voting.” The editorial went on to say, “If Morris and his men are ready to depend on the Roman Catholic vote for election, we also are prepared to pin our faith to our Protestant countrymen.” Although the piece sounds menacing, the editorial line ends by warning, “We’ll teach these sectarian firebugs one grand lesson and, with the help of the Almighty, we’ll put this sectarianism out of business once and for all.” Here, the editorial line invoked a rather ironic strategy: to engage English-Protestant unity in the interest of ending sectarianism.

Conclusion

As the general election of October 30, 1913, drew near, a media war between the Fishermen’s Advocate and its rivals heated up and helped stir the pot of ethno-religious tension. Papers such as the Daily News, Evening Chronicle, and Evening Herald of St. John’s and the Western Star of Corner Brook spread ideas about the FPU’s purported socialism and anarchism as well as its unproven support for “godless” or non-denomination schools. These claims were sometimes coded, but sometimes flagrant, attempts at scaring Irish-Catholic voters into supporting the governing People’s Party of E.P. Morris, himself a Catholic. Although there is some evidence to suggest that such appeals worked, it is as likely that they simply made sense to Catholic voters given Newfoundland’s long history of ethno-religious tensions, and that unity had previously been a way that Catholics had found access to power in an environment where they were outnumbered. It is also just as likely that Catholics supported the People’s Party for other reasons, including its record in power, the promises of railway extensions to the Southern Avalon Peninsula, and the promise of jobs in sectors outside the fishery.

Furthermore, numerous Irish-Catholic unionists openly supported the union and articulated their own understandings of ethnicity and class to bolster their case for it. At

85 “Harbor Grace Campaign was won by the Grab-Alls on Sectarian Appeals,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 8, 1913.
86 “Harbor Grace Campaign was won by the Grab-Alls on Sectarian Appeals,” Fishermen’s Advocate, November 8, 1913.
the same time, the union leadership moved away from inter-denominationalism and adopted a more aggressive ethnic stance, dabbling in discourses of English-Protestant unity. This shows the full power of ethnic tensions: anxieties about an imagined Irish-Catholic unity against the FPU motivated the union’s leaders to in turn begin speaking the language of English-Protestant solidarity. This in turn put Catholic unionists in the difficult position of having to articulate the compatibility of their ethnicity with their unionism. Yet, mutual suspicions and resentments on both sides were rooted in memories of long-standing tensions between them. Both sides were entangled in an interethnic dialogue where unity in one group mandated unity in the other.

This chapter has used the concept of the ethno-religious “entanglement.” Irish Catholics found themselves bound up in an inextricable web of links with fellow fishermen, their own ethno-religious elites—in this case, elites in politics and journalism—and with their ethno-religious ‘other,’ English Protestants. Ethnicity was, and is, a “dialogue,” wherein groups negotiate claims to political power. The new politics of fisheries unionism, brought by the FPU, unraveled previously existing settlements about rival claims and created totally new entanglements through which Irish-Catholic ethno-religious power was mediated. The diversity of Irish-Catholic approaches to the union proves the historically and locally contingent nature of ethnic politics.
Chapter 5: ‘That stubborn Irish strain was in them’: Oral Accounts and Memories of Catholic-FPU Entanglements

Introduction

Much of what is commonly known about the FPU is disseminated through oral accounts. Some are first-hand, directly experienced accounts, while others are collective historical memories spread in familial and community settings. Some oral histories of the union align with state- and heritage industry-sanctioned narratives, while many do not. The unfolding of the history of Irish-Catholic–FPU entanglements is thus a contested debate about the past. It is also a reflection of the ambiguous place of memory at the interface of the past and the present. As Pierre Nora argues, “[m]emory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present.”¹ This chapter employs oral historical evidence as the bulk of its source base. Oral histories were conducted in 2014 for this research project. Other interviews, including but not limited to those about the history of Port Union that were conducted for the Sir William F. Coaker Foundation in 1998 and 1999, were also used.²

Oral history interviews are used for a variety of purposes. While oral historical methods are not new in social history and labour history,³ some historians have urged caution about an overly functionalist reliance on using oral historical sources for

² Those interviews can be found on the “Digital Archives Initiative,” Memorial University of Newfoundland, retrieved on July 29, 2016 from http://collections.mun.ca/.
reconstructing “objective” facts, or a single truth, about the past. Others have warned that the desire to “give voice” to the unheard, while important, has the potential to create what Luisa Passerini called an “alternative ghetto” of facts, “where at least the oppressed may be allowed to speak.” The main goal of this chapter, rather, is to navigate the contested web of meanings that those being interviewed attach to stories of Irish-Catholic–FPU entanglements. As Alessandro Portelli reminds us, oral history “tells us less about events as such than about their meaning.” While oral histories reveal new facts about these entanglements, as well as give voice to marginalized peoples caught up within them, thus decolonizing and democratizing access to and production of knowledge about the past, they also reveal a past—and a present—permeated with ethno-religious languages, narratives, and meanings that people attach to the FPU. Irish Catholics occupy an important though understated place in oral accounts of the union’s history.

The northeast, where many of the interviews at the heart of this chapter were conducted, contained sites of Catholic–FPU interaction that illustrate support and opposition to the union that defy simple patterns and conventional narratives. It is with the union’s supporters in the northeast that we see the fullest demonstration of what it was like to have been from the Irish-Catholic minority in Newfoundland, and also a supporter of a new movement of political outsiders: the rogues among the rebels. Yet Irish-Catholic fishermen’s responses ranged from resistance to the FPU in the case of Phil Donovan, adaptation in the case of Bill McNamara, and enthusiastic participation

5 Luisa Passerini, “Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism,” History Workshop, no. 8 (1979), 84. Likewise, Joan Scott, who was fundamentally in favour of experience-based knowledge, including oral history, nevertheless argued that, in accepting the “uncontestable” nature of a “subject’s own account of what he or she has lived through,” historians’ ability to sufficiently critique the very bases of social differences, such as ethnicity, was hindered; in “The Evidence of Experience,” Critical Inquiry 17, no. 4 (Summer, 1991), 776-777.
and membership as revealed in the case of Tilting's fishermen. While oral testimony of Catholic–FPU entanglements can, like documentary sources, repeat the flawed priest-led hypothesis, they can also uncover alternative narratives that show the complexity in how such relationships are remembered.

Tilting

The town of Tilting, located on the northeastern tip of Fogo Island (see Figure 6), provides an interesting case study of how Catholic–FPU relationships are remembered. It was, as Melvin Combden remembered, “the only community on [Fogo] Island that’s totally Roman Catholic,” and it had an established Catholic church. It was largely removed from most other communities on the island, and while most of those were predominantly Protestant, Roy Dwyer, a fisherman and retired teacher in Tilting, also highlighted the presence of a Catholic section, the “south side,” in the nearby town of Joe Batt’s Arm. Other communities on Fogo Island have historically had Catholic minority populations as well. Tilting also had one of the earliest FPU councils, and, according to its local chairman and secretary in 1912, Patrick Greene and Daniel Foley, its members were “solid Union men determined to mark [their] ballots to transfer real political power from ‘get rich quick’ politicians to the shoulders of the people’s own selected candidates.” Tilting is therefore a useful case study since it had a majority of Catholics, but was also a steadfast union town.

In present-day panorama, Tilting looks much like any other picturesque rural outport in coastal Newfoundland, but it also has some distinctive features. It maintains traditional fishing stages that extend out into the calm waters of Tilting Harbour. A handful of Irish flags dot the vista, and a welcome sign on the road entering town is bilingual, including the Irish “Fáilte go Tilting,” as well as the English version. Some of this flavour is undoubtedly the result of local tourism strategies. Yet, Tilting’s “Irishness” is not just the fruit of recent branding efforts. The old graveyard in the town—there are

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8 Melvin Combden interview, July 18, 2007.
9 Roy Dwyer interview, August 2, 2014.
10 “The President visits Tilting,” Fishermen’s Advocate, July 27, 1912.
three cemeteries—contain gravestones in the shape of the Celtic cross.\textsuperscript{11} The town is surrounded by gently rolling, lush, green grazing land. Traditional markers of property ownership are often absent,\textsuperscript{12} suggestive of pre-migration communal settlement and agricultural patterns in Ireland.\textsuperscript{13} Tilting’s distinct status as a predominantly Irish-Catholic rather than English-Protestant town is visibly apparent, and makes its heavy support for a largely Protestant fishermen’s union in the early twentieth century all the more intriguing.

Dwyer spoke knowledgably about Tilting’s history. When I asked him why the residents there seemed to have joined the FPU with great enthusiasm, he responded, “Well, I could speculate, but that’s all I’d be able to do: that stubborn Irish strain was in them… it was totally Irish.”\textsuperscript{14} Though hypothetical, this is an interpretation that turns the traditional narrative of Catholic passivity upside down: Irishness was not an obstacle to the union as conventional histories portray, but rather a catalyst for support for it. The spirit of rebellion, forged over centuries of subjugation in Ireland, spurred Tilting’s Irish to view the merchants as a sort of transplanted oppressor. Here, the Irish nationalist tradition of rebellion was evoked to explain how a politics of fishermen’s unionism could take hold among rural Catholics. As Willeen Keough has noted, Newfoundland’s Irish community held a “sense of historic deprivation that ran centuries deep.”\textsuperscript{15} Moreover, Newfoundland’s Irish Catholics had arrived before the Great Famine, a period when the Catholic Church in Ireland was typified by a “general laxity in internal discipline,” and in which the laity, particularly smallholders, cottiers, labourers, and farm servants, while


\textsuperscript{13} Willeen Keough has drawn connections between the settlement process in eighteenth and nineteenth century Newfoundland and the Irish \textit{clachan}, settlements managed jointly by kinship networks through a system known as rundale. Irish-Catholic communities on the southern Avalon Peninsula and Tilting contain the vestiges of these settlement and land-use patterns, including “lazy beds”. See Keough, \textit{Slender Thread} (2008), chapter 3; and Keough and O’Flaherty, “Bogs, Barrens, Woods, and Foreshores,” (2017).

\textsuperscript{14} Roy Dwyer interview, August 2, 2014.

\textsuperscript{15} Keough, “Ethnicity,” 25, 28n54.
firmly Catholic, had a long tradition of irreverence. These Catholics, who came to populate such places as Tilting, brought with them a level of indifference for clerical admonitions, as well as a fine-tuned memory of the penal laws and feudal oppressions from which they had absconded.

In certain other contexts in Irish-Catholic Newfoundland, the “Irish strain” led to the rejection of the FPU, often to show solidarity with the ethno-religious community. The FPU itself was often seen as a vehicle of the ethnic ‘Other’: it seemed Orange, loyalist, and foreign to many Irish Catholics. Even in Tilting, fishermen, while content to join the FPU, were averse to a politics of “King and Country.” But, in a place like Tilting, as alien as some of the FPU’s traditions might have seemed, merchants were the main adversary. The Catholic hierarchy in Newfoundland preferred an ethno-political alignment whereby Catholic merchants and the Catholic working class were part of the same exclusive community. But in Tilting, solidarity with the union, rather than with the Archbishop, flourished.

Tilting was the site of not only a local council but the early establishment of a Union Trading Company store. But Tilting also had another merchant house, the Carbonear-based Earle Sons & Company Ltd. Barbara Neis’s competitive merchant hypothesis suggests that it was precisely within those environments where merchants competed that fishermen were best able to bargain. Fishermen in the northeast were thus more likely to be compelled by the union idea than fishermen in the southeast (and southwest). In Tilting, with the arrival of the union trading store in 1912, fishermen came to have increased power to name their price, and so both the FUTC and Earle Sons & Co. would have competed with one another. But according to Dwyer, “there was enough fish for both Earle’s and Sons and the Fishermen’s Trading Company to turn a

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16 Sean Connolly, Priests and People: Pre-Famine Ireland, 1780-1845 (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), 65-66, 76-77. Sara Jodi McDavid has labelled this tradition counter-clericalism, which identifies “individual or community-based expressions which circumvent the dominance of the local priest” in, “Counterclericalism: Vernacular Commentary on the Power of the Catholic Priest in Atlantic Canada” (PhD thesis, Memorial University, 2012), 7; see also 51-118.
17 Roy Dwyer interview, August 2, 2014.
19 Coaker, Twenty Years, 45.
profit.”

A more radical view of the situation appeared in 1912, when one Tilting resident eagerly anticipated a future without merchants, suggesting, “Put three Union Stores on Fogo Island Mr. Coaker, and our merchants will quietly retire.” This critique of the mercantile system that governed Newfoundland emanated from increasingly class-conscious fishermen, but also from their collective historical memories and identities as Irish Newfoundlanders. But Earle Sons & Company and other merchant firms in other communities throughout the northeast coast did not disappear, owing to the adaptability of highly capitalized fishing enterprises in that region. Also, FUTC stores and traditional merchant houses sometimes provided different services. For example, the Earle Sons & Company location at Tilting hosted one of three cod oil factories on Fogo Island until the 1950s. As such, though fishermen were beginning to view merchants as class enemies in many ways, the presence of a union store was not enough to do away with the old merchant-run businesses. In fact, the presence of multiple stores allowed fishermen to play each against the other to get better prices on their fish.

Dwyer’s interview, like many oral histories, also touched on the dynamics between clergy and laity. One reason for Tilting’s dogged support for the union was its distance from St. John’s, the seat of Catholicism in Newfoundland. Tilting was “far away from St. John’s, [and] there’s more room to do the independent thing,” said Dwyer. This distance from St. John’s was as political as it was geographic. Dwyer, drawing upon elements of the priest-led hypothesis, stressed that whatever was happening on the Southern Avalon, Tilting was different: “It was the fear of God in a lot of Catholic communities, you know, but it didn’t exist that much here. People had a more independent mind.” He said of the local priest, the Rev. Dr. Edward Joseph Jones, who served St. Patrick’s Parish in Tilting from 1914-1944, “I think he was independent… of church dogma, he didn’t bow down and toe the line.”

Father Jones’s liberality toward unions coincided with Tilting’s place in the Diocese of Harbour Grace under the
oversight of Bishop John March rather than the more infamously anti-union Archbishop Howley. But Dwyer’s interview and his emphasis on the “independent” spirit of fishermen in Tilting was a localized upending of the priest-led hypothesis: Tilting’s fishermen did not need to be permitted to join the union—they did so, according to the Dwyer, because they had a long tradition of valuing their independence, in temporal and secular life. This manifested as union affiliation, regardless of whether their priest was favourable or opposed. Patrick Greene, who sat on the executive of the Tilting council, was Dwyer’s grandfather. Reminiscing about this, Dwyer reiterated that the Catholic fishermen of Tilting’s branch of the FPU were “independent minded,” and that they were not “going to give up their independence” for anything.25

While we must be careful not to fall into the trap of repeating the priest-led hypothesis, the findings in Tilting complement recent research that has complicated older ideas about the Newfoundland Catholic Church acting as a monolith in politics. In fact, it is worth noting that the Catholic elites themselves were divided over the union question, as Dwyer’s testimony about Dr. Jones revealed. Another example was Catholic Rev. William P. Finn,26 who had been a close confidant of Coaker since 1897, when the two first met while Finn was stationed at Tilting as parish priest from 1892 until 1910. Finn was a steadfast supporter of the FPU, and helped Coaker write the union’s constitution.27 Mark McGowan has identified how the Newfoundland Catholic Church was regionally divided based on the education of its priests and bishops. With the expansion of Catholicism to the west coast of Newfoundland, the Church increasingly found itself relying on clergy who were trained in Canada rather than Ireland and continental Europe.28 These differences may have helped contribute to the apparent differences in attitudes that rural, northeastern, and west coast clergy had towards the FPU compared to those on the Avalon Peninsula. Moreover, the views of fishermen, who made up the majority of most rural parishes, would have been an important influence on the views of priests. I suggest that differences among fishermen in their

25 Roy Dwyer interview, August 2, 2014.
26 Identified as William Patrick (or W.P.) Finn in most sources, but identified as William F. Finn by Coady in Lives Recalled, 172-173.
views about unionism resulted in parallel differences of opinion among priests and bishops.

While clergy–fishermen dynamics are a part of the intra-ethnic entanglements that shaped Catholic responses to the FPU, Catholic fishermen's attitudes towards the FPU and Protestant neighbours were shaped as much by class and by their work as by ethnic considerations. Collaboration and cooperation with Protestants were remembered as commonplace and mutually beneficial. Dwyer maintained that potential ethno-religious tensions were mitigated by the nature of fishing labour:

But some people ask me about the divisions and the Catholic and Anglican, Protestant, and so on. And I say “Look, in a way the sea levelled things out.” Because when you're out, out on the ocean, that's neutral to everybody. Your work is there. You go against high wind, storms, everything else. If someone gets in trouble, you don’t ask what religion they are. So Catholics over history, over time, were beholden to Anglicans on the sea, and vice versa. So you rescued people. You didn’t care what religion they were, and not only that, but, at the time, if someone did that, they’d get favoured status.29

In this recollection, interdependence in the fishery tempered the ethno-religious differences of Newfoundlanders, and resulted in opportunities and inducements for ethno-religious cooperation and fraternity. While this view shaped part of the collective historical memory about the fishery in Tilting, it is also an observation that has been made elsewhere,30 and thus forms part of a larger narrative in rural Newfoundland’s popular memory that counters the priest-led hypothesis. Priestly “permission” for union membership was not the only or even main consideration of fishermen deliberating about union membership in many places. For Tilting’s Catholics, the fishery, and their understandings of what it meant to be Irish Newfoundlanders, resulted in politics favourable to fisheries unionism.

29 Roy Dwyer interview, August 2, 2014.
Port Union and area

Port Union, now one of four constituent towns of the municipality of Trinity Bay North along with Melrose, Catalina, and Little Catalina (see Figure 5), was the home of the FPU. Billed by the Sir William Ford Coaker Heritage Foundation as “the only ‘union-built town’ in North America,”^31^ the town was constructed in 1916, eight years after the union was founded, and had full-time residents by 1917.^32^ The *Fishermen’s Advocate* moved its operations there from St. John’s in 1924.\(^{33}\) Coaker and union officials resided at Port Union, and most of the business of the union was conducted there. It was also predominantly Protestant. Of the four towns now comprising Trinity Bay North, only Melrose had a majority Catholic population, though Catholics lived in each town and also inhabited a small, nearby settlement—now resettled—identified variously in oral sources as Murphy’s Cove or South East Cove. The Port Union area provides an interesting comparison to Tilting, not only because of its mixed population with a Protestant majority, but also because options for Catholic schooling were relatively more limited than in Tilting and interactions with clergy were, for some, sporadic.

In 1998 and 1999, the Sir William Ford Coaker Heritage Foundation, together with academics at Memorial University and interviewers Ray Troake and Margaret Joy, conducted roughly 30 oral history interviews, documenting Port Union’s history.^34^ So interlocked is the history of the town and neighbouring communities with histories of the FPU that the latter was a recurring topic in virtually every interview. The interviews are rich with information about the customs, politics, economic life, and physical layout of the region in the early years of the union’s history. Although these interviews were not intended to inquire into ethno-religious aspects of FPU support or opposition, such topics nevertheless arose in the course of several of the interviews, providing us with information about ethno-religious shadings in local FPU politics that have evaded most histories dependent solely on written sources.


[^33^]“Fishermen’s Advocate,” *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, 179.

One of the men interviewed during the project was Bill McNamara, a long-retired fishermen and former FPU member who hinted at the pressures that Catholic men faced upon entry into the union. McNamara revealed that, as a young man, he had tried to get a job with the FUTC. The store’s owner had told his father that if Bill wanted to be hired, he would have to join the union first. Joining the union in that time in Port Union required taking its oath of secrecy and enduring a ritual hazing process similar to that of the freemason tradition. Bill was only thirteen, four years below the minimum age for union membership, but through “devious ways,” he went to his first meeting. Embarrassed, McNamara admitted, “I rode the goat. That’s what you had to do at that time. You had to ride the goat.” When asked to elaborate, he said, “I cannot. It’s a secret. And the password is a secret too so I cannot say any more than that. It was rough. I tell you it was rough.”

The transcript contains no further information on “riding the goat,” but according to William D. Moore, who has traced the development of this ritual in contemporary American fraternal organizations, this initiation rite involved the blindfolding of a prospective member of a group and moving him around rapidly and in an up-and-down motion on a wheeled device in the shape of a goat. He traces the development of this ritual in American fraternal organizations from 1845 to 1930. While McNamara remained silent about details of the ritual—keeping faithful to an oath he swore to a society that, in the 1990s, had long been defunct—it is in his silences that we can read a confrontation of Catholic and Protestant worlds. The ritual hazing of secret society members and other typical Protestant expressions of working-class, fraternal politics

35 William (Bill) McNamara interview, February 1, 1999.
would have been a foreign practice to Newfoundland’s Irish Catholics. As Don Johnson, a heritage worker in Port Union, said in recounting how the FPU did so poorly in Catholic communities:

They looked like Orangemen. It had to be the only way to organize. There was no precedent for what he was doing. Secret hand-shakes and a vow of secrecy. Marching around with horns. [Coaker] wasn’t sectarian himself. He did try to encourage Catholics to join the union.38

Those Catholics who knew about them would have recognized these traditions as threatening, given the not-so-distant memory of ethnic clashes at Harbour Grace and elsewhere. The FPU was a fisher’s union above all else, but one whose internal culture had roots in the traditions of Orangeism and masonry, both of which would have been unfamiliar and menacing to the young McNamara. Though presumably all entrants into the local council would have experienced the same rite,39 Irish Catholics would have experienced it differently and may even have felt ashamed of performing the ritual. The

37 Nevertheless, Irish Catholics were familiar with similar forms of associational politics. “Respectable” Catholic organizations that were led by middle-class elites or the Catholic hierarchy, such as the Star of the Sea Association, the Knights of Columbus, the Holy Name Society, and the Benevolent Irish Society, had varying degrees of success and popular membership. But working-class Irish Catholics also had a long tradition of secret societies of their own, which were underground or illegal, having formed largely in reaction to British oppression in Ireland. Newfoundland’s Irish community, who came from a largely pre-famine migrant group, would have been familiar with or likely even had direct experience with Ribbonism, the Whiteboy movement, and other coordinated and uncoordinated forms of Catholic, peasant resistance to landlords and British colonial rule. These traditions had traction throughout Ireland, including in the counties of Waterford, Wexford and Cork, from where most Newfoundland Irish migrated. See Beames, Peasants and Power, 25-26, 43, 44, 46, for information about such movements in Ireland. For more information about Irish migration to Newfoundland, see John J. Mannion, “Introduction,” in The Peopling of Newfoundland: Essays in Historical Geography, ed. John J. Mannion (St. John’s: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1977): 1-14. These societies, however, were not marked by the more typically Protestant lodge system, and operated under conditions of illegality. Wileen Keough has further argued that traditions deployed by these movements, such as conspiracies of silence, were on display in the Harbour Grace Affray of 1883; see, “Contested Terrains,” 49, 50-51, 56, 64.

38 Don Johnson interview, July 20, 2014.

39 There is no record of whether or not Catholic-majority or Catholic-only locals of the FPU also adopted these initiation rites. It is unlikely that they did, given the largely decentralized nature of the local councils, the frequency with which local councils autonomously formed and closed, and the tendency for local councils to generally operate within their own frameworks as well as within the limits set out in the FPU constitution and by-laws. The union’s constitution, in any case, did not prescribe initiation rites beyond the password and the declaration of membership or oath of secrecy.
most McNamara would say about riding the goat is that “it was rough.” His story showed how one’s ability to navigate an evolving mercantile-capitalist class structure and gain employment in early twentieth-century Newfoundland could require enduring membership tests, outright humiliation, and the acceptance of unfamiliar ethno-religious practices. Hidden behind the veil of union secrecy were these entanglements between Irish Catholics and English Protestants, whereby Irish Catholics were compelled to follow English-Protestant associational and fraternal practices in order to protect their livelihoods as members of the union.40

These moments of interdenominational encounter and entanglement, shrouded though they may have been, are historically significant. They give lie to the notion that Irish Catholics in Newfoundland avoided the union en masse, of course, but more importantly, they reveal the subtle and personal ways in which ethnicity was enacted and imprinted on fishermen’s memories. In analyzing these encounters, however, we must be mindful of variance across time and place. When asked if such rituals would have been practiced in the majority Catholic council at Tilting, Dwyer was skeptical: “They had their meetings and their executives. I wouldn’t say…they might have modified what they had to [do in terms of] the rituals….”41 In Port Union, English-Protestant unionists would have been familiar with a loyalist, Orange tradition, as was the case in other towns with English-Protestant majorities. “Port Rexton, Catalina, and these places, they did have these lodges,” said Dwyer, “and that was the only organizations that they knew. And they grew up listening to their fathers talk about it. And when they became adults, they

40 Here, a parallel might be drawn between McNamara’s forced adoption of rites of passage to the English-Protestant tradition of “souperism” coming out of the Irish famine, wherein Protestant bible societies would provide free meals and schooling to Irish-Catholic children so long as they attended Protestant religious services. See Robert Kent Donovan, “The Donominalational Character of English Catholic Charitable Effort, 1800-1865,” Catholic Historical Review, 62, no. 2 (1976), 216-217. Some have questioned the extent of souperism and the degree to which it won converts. Nevertheless, such forms of evangelical bribery predated the famine and were “state policy” in the era of the Penal Laws. Canadians were well aware of the practice, and Newfoundland’s Irish-Catholic and English-Protestant communities both would have been sensitive to interdenominational encroachment or attempts at conversion. See John W. Boyle, “Review: Souperism: Myth or Reality? A Study in Souperism by Desmond Bowen,” Canadian Historical Review 53, no. 4 (1972): 464-465; and Murray W. Nicolson, “The Irish Experience in Ontario: Rural or Urban?” Urban History Review 14, no. 1 (1985), 39, 42.

41 Roy Dwyer interview, August 2, 2014.
joined it. So you’d expect them to carry that influence with them.” Catholic initiates to the FPU in predominantly Protestant Port Union had to accommodate themselves to these unfamiliar traditions. They did so to protect their material conditions, maintain employment, and avail themselves of better prices negotiated by the union. For some Irish-Catholic fishermen, their interests as poor, rural workers were influential in their decision to join the union, but such decisions nevertheless played out interculturally.

Evidently, those elements of secret societies that had spurred the Catholic Church’s early opposition to the FPU—the requirement of secrecy in the union, the use of rites, and so on—were known to have been practiced in Port Union and likely elsewhere. McNamara’s interview certainly shows that in some branches, Catholics would not have been exempt. The use of a password was also used when the union began, according to Josiah Kearley, who identified it as “ringtail hook.” An interview by John Blackmore sheds light on the fact that some of these traditions continued long after the FPU was defunct. Blackmore was 58 years old by the time he did the interview in 1998, and as such, his memories of the union were from a much later period. By the time Blackmore came of age, he joined an unnamed independent fishers’ union that was a “direct descendent of the FPU.” The role of door guard had acquired more formality, and a Sergeant-at-Arms oversaw who attended meetings and who could not. Blackmore remembered the password at the time was “Vote for Union Friends,” suggesting that the traditions of the FPU were transplanted onto the new fishermen’s union that began to emerge in the area after Confederation. Don Johnson elaborated that requirements such as passwords and oaths of secrecy were understood to have dispelled interest in the union among Catholics, since it “interfered with confession and the like.” While Johnson’s framing raises the prospect of the priest-led hypothesis, his suggestion nevertheless centered around Irish-Catholic fishermen themselves, noting that it was they, and not just their clerical elites, who held such concerns.

42 Roy Dwyer interview, August 2, 2014.
43 Josiah Kearley interview, September 1970.
46 Don Johnson interview, July 20, 2014.
Some interviews directly touched on the topic of religion, particularly when people talked about their childhoods and which schools they attended. Newfoundland schools were largely organized along denominational lines, though in Port Union, students of all denominations, including Port Union’s Catholics,\textsuperscript{47} initially attended a Methodist-run school. Yet according to Phil Donovan, a fisherman from nearby Melrose, Catholics there went to a Catholic one-room schoolhouse instead,\textsuperscript{48} showing that Catholics just a few kilometres apart would have experienced what it meant to be Catholic in their upbringings quite differently. Over time, Hazen A. Russell, manager of the FUTC, helped establish a separate school for Anglican children at St. Peter’s Church in Catalina due to population growth in that denomination.\textsuperscript{49} Louie Mouland looked at these denominational divisions in a critical way by remarking, “Talking about that now, it’s silly to me. But it wasn’t then!”\textsuperscript{50} This echoed Roy Dwyer’s observation in Tilting when, during the interview, he remarked that the church bell had sounded a few hours beforehand: “It tolls for much fewer people now.”\textsuperscript{51} While religious differences seemed increasingly anachronistic to the lives of most of the oral history narrators consulted for this research, it was nevertheless extremely important to mention when recollecting the past, and provided key context for the events being recalled and the identities of the people being remembered.

While Catholic fishermen showed a range of responses to the FPU at the time, some admitted their disinterest in it. It was, for some, a mark of independence to have defied and resisted the union’s predominance. Donovan, who traced his ancestry to Ireland, proudly declared that, despite the presence of the FUTC nearby in Port Union, Donovan had wanted “nothing to do with Coaker. Never sold no fish or nothing to him.”\textsuperscript{52} Instead, he dealt only with Catholic merchants, the Courages, the Murphys, or the Swyers, demonstrating loyalty to his ethnic group. Despite these misgivings about the union, Donovan spoke very highly of Coaker’s initial legacy. Remembering the sound of

\textsuperscript{47} Elizabeth (Pardy) White interview, July 9, 1998.
\textsuperscript{48} Phil Donovan interview, January 5, 1999.
\textsuperscript{49} Mabel Lodge, Nellie Lodge, and Sarah Lodge interview, July 16, 1998; Louie (Louise) Mouland interview, July 17, 1998; Ethel Courage interview [anecdotes file], August 12, 1999.
\textsuperscript{50} Louie (Louise) Mouland interview, July 17, 1998.
\textsuperscript{51} Roy Dwyer interview, August 2, 2014.
\textsuperscript{52} Phil Donovan interview, January 5, 1999.
the old train “tearing along,” he noted “that’s why Coaker is some smart, the way he planned everything.” Coaker was depicted as having single-handedly created the town of Port Union: “He came down here and that was only a rock there when he built the Trading Company... that’s all rock, a big rock.” In addition to praising Coaker’s resourcefulness in building the town, Donovan also made note of the union’s success in providing power and water to local towns. The FPU had “dammed off the ponds up here, going up Trinity Road. Got the power. Very shrewd stuff isn’t it?”

In Donovan’s narrative, Coaker’s effectiveness declined because of his involvement in government. Coaker, who served as fisheries minister after World War One, had fallen out of favour with the very fishermen he was supposed to represent. Much has been written of Coaker’s earnest efforts at reform having been toppled by a St. John’s based mercantile-political elite, and his resultant fall from grace. “That’s what happened to him,” said Donovan. “If he had stayed clear of the government, he might be better. Everything might be better.” Donovan gave no indication that his concerns about Coaker were rooted in ethno-religious differences. “He didn’t do too bad,” he repeated, “but when he got in the government, right, that was something else.” When discussing Coaker’s role in organizing sealers, Donovan noted that Coaker “was a smart man, boy, whatever he done. [But there was a] lot of good he didn’t do. A lot. You got to do so much bad and so much good. He was a clever man....” Donovan went on to note that many people in Trinity Bay North so adored Coaker that they even had doormats saying, “GOD BLESS COAKER.” In contrast, he repeated a rhyme he noted came from St. Brendan’s, another Catholic town in the northeast, that apparently viewed Coaker suspiciously: “Down on the wharf with a few old guns / When Coaker’d come we’d have to run.”

Donovan’s interview sheds light on some Melrose residents’ attitudes, up to the present, about the FPU and Coaker specifically. These views contrast sharply with the majority of the interviews done for the Sir William F. Coaker Foundation in the late 53Phil Donovan interview, January 5, 1999.
54Phil Donovan interview, January 5, 1999.
55Phil Donovan interview, January 5, 1999.
56Phil Donovan interview, January 5, 1999.
1990s, wherein the FPU and Coaker, generally, were fondly remembered. Here, oral history interviews such as Donovan’s provide counter-narratives that clash with more official understandings of Coaker’s preeminent place in the region’s history, offering critical perspectives about Coaker. Such evidence also demonstrates Melrose’s resistance to the union, which clashes with the cheerful image that the Fishermen’s Advocate tried to portray when the FPU led a failed attempt to organized a branch there in 1911 (see Chapter Three). When asked if anyone from Melrose participated in “Coaker’s Recruits,” a group of 68 men whom Coaker rallied to join the Royal Newfoundland Regiment in World War One, Donovan replied that no one from Melrose had joined, perhaps also speaking to the ambivalence that rural Catholic fishermen in the northeast would have felt about fighting for the British Empire during the war.

These differences between Melrose and the rest of Trinity Bay North continue to this day, as “historically, Melrose has been PC,” whereas the remaining towns there tended to vote for the Liberal Party. Differences between Catholic and Protestant communities, such as with Melrose and its neighbours, subtly emerged in oral histories when narrators spoke of ethnicity, religion, and the FPU. Party allegiance, which has sporadically overlapped with ethno-religious identities in different ways in Newfoundland’s history, continues to divide communities in the present in understated and elusive ways, though Darryl Johnson was careful to note that voters focused more on the abilities of the candidate and that they also switched allegiances back and forth between parties. This suggests that while differences continue to exist in the political orientations of some Catholic towns such as Melrose compared to neighbouring Protestant towns, they are often imperceptible, or are subject to change. But they nevertheless existed just below the surface and sometimes re-emerged in political moments, when power was being negotiated.

Interviews provide snapshots on hidden perspectives and narratives that permeate the history of the FPU, including stories about opposition to it. Donovan’s interview in particular sheds light on aspects of the overall Catholic–FPU relationships in

57 Phil Donovan interview, January 5, 1999.
what became Trinity Bay North. Coaker, Donovan argued, seems to have held a grudge against the people of Melrose, and would not repair the conditions of Trinity Road, which connected Melrose with Port Union and which Donovan remembered as being overgrown with alders.\(^{60}\) This concern mirrors another observation that Melrose’s opposition to Coaker was based on his apparent involvement in deciding that the Bonavista branch line of the railway would pass by Melrose and go directly to Port Union and onwards. This narrative of deliberate neglect by Union Party MHAs echoed in another interview, when Don Johnson pointed out that “Melrose and Little Catalina were the last places to get electricity,”\(^{61}\) which some local residents felt was Coaker’s retaliation against Melrose for not having been pro-union. With regards to Little Catalina, Minnie Johnson also reported that there was opposition to the FPU there,\(^{62}\) even though, as Don Johnson pointed out, that town was “predominantly Methodist, with some Anglicans.” Johnson elaborated that schooner captains there leased their vessels from St. John’s merchants who opposed the union.\(^{63}\) So economic and other local concerns drove opposition to the FPU in Trinity Bay North. But the mapping of Catholic–Protestant tensions onto these conflicts hints at the importance of ethno-religious entanglements in the collective historical memory of the union.

For his part, Donovan’s comments did not overtly engage ethnicity or religion. In fact, he admitted that, despite his otherwise unexplained antipathy to the union, and despite his family doing business with other merchant firms in the area, Donovan nevertheless purchased goods at the FUTC store in Port Union because it was the cheapest place to get them. Donovan’s relationship with the union was, like everyone’s, complicated. The combination of region, politics, economic conditions, class-consciousness, and a subtle undercurrent of ethno-religious concerns motivated his and many other residents’ responses to the union. This is made even more complicated by the fact that the union itself had multiple arms and, as such, people could have a variety of relationships with its many structures: people could shop at union stores without voting for union candidates; or electors could vote for union candidates on election day.

\(^{60}\) Phil Donovan interview, January 5, 1999.
\(^{61}\) Don Johnson interview, July 20, 2014.
\(^{62}\) Minnie Johnson interview [anecdotes file], August 14, 1998.
\(^{63}\) Don Johnson interview, July 20, 2014.
without being a union member; or fishermen could be a member and not vote for the Union Party, and so on.

For Catholics and Protestants alike, the legacy of the FPU, was complex. Critical counter-narratives show people had alternative ideas about the past and could be found straying from dominant narratives, like those that romanticized Coaker and the FPU. These moments were what Michelle Mouton and Helena Pohlandt-McCormick call “boundary crossings,” where people departed from established scripts and revealed truths that otherwise would remain hidden about controversial moments in the history of the union. For Mark Johnson, a Protestant, Coaker was a “good man” at first but then “turned out bad afterwards. Everybody knows that. Once he got in the government he joined the rest of the merchants.” This interpretation echoed Phil Donovan’s narrative about the union’s rise and fall. These memories associated Coaker not with his progressive spirit or his attempted fisheries reforms, but with the very merchants and bourgeois politicians he and other unionists initially positioned themselves against. Coaker was painted as having sold out the fishermen rather than being a hero worn down by opposition from mercantile, political, and clerical elites.

This less flattering picture of Coaker often stems from his role in supporting conscription, an issue that was deeply unpopular with fishermen, including those in the English-Protestant north. For example, Josiah Kearley, a founding member of the FPU, was remarkably candid about the decision to send young Newfoundlanders off to war. He recalled:

[Fishermen] thought Coaker’d do a better job if he hadn’t mixed with politics but I will always contend that for him to do a good job he had to get the power, and that power remained with the government. But then you know the First World War came, and ... our young men, they all went overseas, and they’re over there now. Their remains is over there. Young

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66 Edward Roberts, “Nothing venture nothing have: Mr. Coaker’s Regulations,” M.A. research report, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2006; McDonald, To Each His Own, 86-130.

67 Cadigan, Death on Two Fronts, 153-187.
Johnson’s, Donovan’s, and Kearley’s nuanced, critical perspectives show that these unofficial narratives of disappointment about Coaker’s tenure in politics were espoused by fishermen across ethno-religious lines and among fishermen inside and outside of the union.

Interestingly, though Coaker was unpopular with the merchant class, and rallied popular opposition to individual merchants, ship captains, and sealing masters, some remembered him fondly. Captain Wallace Lodge, for example, provided interesting commentary about the union and about Coaker, viewing him favourably as a patriot and a nationalist. Said Lodge, “I think today, or... in the late forties... I don’t think that Joe Smallwood and [F. Gordon] Bradley [pro-Confederates] and all those fellows would have got their own way like they did if Sir William was alive.” Coaker died in 1938, and so was not alive to have born witness to Newfoundland’s Confederation with Canada eleven years later. “I’m doubtful if we’d ever give up our country if Coaker was alive,” Lodge repeated, transplanting the legacy of the union onto another fraught ethno-religious and political terrain. Although voting patterns in the two referenda that led to Confederation in 1948 showed complexity in people’s voting patterns, the Roman Catholic Archbishop E.P. Roche was officially against Confederation, and Protestant organizations such as the Loyal Orange Lodge officially supported it. We can never know how Coaker would have felt about Confederation as the issue unfolded in the 1940s, but Lodge’s marshalling of Coaker – a liberal Protestant – as a hypothetical opponent of the scheme is an interesting juxtaposition of the political realities of the time with an issue—Confederation—that in many ways was also inscribed with ethno-religious conflict.

68 Josiah Kearley interview, September 1970.
69 Captain Wallace Lodge interview, December 12, 1998.
Kearley remembered that one of the first big obstacles the union faced was the Catholic Church. Though most histories situate the acrimony between the Church and the union in the southern Avalon Peninsula, Kearley recalled that in the northeastern Catholic town of Fortune Harbour, the priest posted signs warning against union membership.\textsuperscript{71} Fortune Harbour nevertheless had a branch of the FPU,\textsuperscript{72} and the town was almost completely Roman Catholic. This raises the prospect that the Catholic Church overtly tried to interfere with parishioners’ associational proclivities in Fortune Harbour; yet, unlike on the Avalon Peninsula where such interventions formed part of a tense intra-ethnic dialogue between fishermen and clergy, in Fortune Harbour it appears to have had little or no effect. It is possible that Kearley could have been remembering events in the southeast and transplanting them onto a Catholic town in the northeast he was more familiar with.\textsuperscript{73} It also conflicts with other narratives in which Irish-Catholic fishermen in the northeast were said to have benefitted from more distance from anti-union clergy. But the possibility that priests in the more union-friendly northeast were just as oppositional to the union as those in the southeast is a reminder of the Catholic Church’s early, open opposition to the FPU, and to the staying power of people’s memories of that opposition.

The popular memory that warnings against union membership were posted in Catholic Churches pervades oral testimony and documentary evidence alike. Yet, there is almost no direct evidence suggesting what form such warnings took, when they were posted, where exactly they were presented or posted, and who drew them up. The circular letter of March 31, 1909, is a possible candidate, but that document was over 3,300 words long, and there is little indication as to how it was presented to parishioners, or even if it was, though it may have been spoken about from the alter by those priests who agreed with it, and ignored by those who did not. Kearley’s memory of “signs” being

\textsuperscript{71} Josiah Kearley interview, September 1970.
\textsuperscript{72} “New Union Halls,” \textit{Fishermen’s Advocate}, October 28, 1911, 3.
\textsuperscript{73} Regardless of whether or not signs were posted on Catholic Church doors in Fortune Harbour specifically, the transplanting of this narrative onto the case of Fortune Harbour is intriguing and mirrors Alessandro Portelli’s portrayal of a traumatic strike in Terni, Italy in 1949, where oral interviews showed inaccuracies in memories, but nevertheless revealed important emphases and subtleties in the meaning-making process, in \textit{The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History} (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).
posted is intriguing, and paints a picture of the Catholic Church using its holy spaces for overtly political purposes. Barbara Neis and Robert Brym, citing Ian McDonald, suggested that “[n]otices denouncing the FPU were hung in every church of the [A]rchdiocese [of St. John’s]. And in the face of this opposition, the FPU councils on the south shore soon folded,” though again, there is little to substantiate the particular claim that notices were actually posted at all. Kearley’s memory of this happening in Fortune Harbour is also interesting because that town is outside the Archdiocese of St. John’s, and would have been in the Diocese of Harbour Grace at the time. It may have had an anti-union priest whose views were more in line with those of Archbishop Howley.

There was also a likely counterfeit flyleaf titled “Secret and Dangerous Societies and Unions” from September 18, 1913 (see Chapter Four), which claimed that “His Grace has posted in all the Churches in the Placentia District, a notice forbidding from joining or having anything whatever to do with COAKER’S UNION.” Yet the “notice” to which the flyleaf alludes does not appear in the archives; and when the flyleaf appeared, Howley was compelled to respond to it, clarifying that he had lifted the ban on Catholics joining the union, and was thus not the author of the alleged notice. Father John J. St. John told Archbishop Howley in his letter of April 9, 1909, that he received the copy of the circular letter of March 31, 1909, late, and that he had opted not to publish it before the election set to take place on May 8, 1909, “as it would be classed as a political manifesto...” and an attempt to tamper with the election. He went on to state, somewhat ambiguously, that when he received a copy from the printer after the polling, “I will send you a triple copy exclusively for your own use and information but not to be shown to anyone.” It is possible that a copy may have appeared four years later in 1913. Whatever the status of the notices, and regardless of the question of where and when they were posted and by whom, it is nevertheless remarkable that this popular memory of the Catholic Church warning parishioners is one of the most ubiquitous memories of

74 Brym and Neis, “Regional Factors,” 402.
75 “Extract of letter to the Catholic people of St. John’s from Archbishop MF Howley,” September 18, 1913, 106/19/2, ARCA/MHArc.
76 Letter to Archbishop MF Howley from John J. St. John, PP, Argentia, April 9, 1909, 106/19/2, ARCA/MHArc.
Catholic–FPU interactions. Its continuation in many forms speaks to sensitivities that Irish Catholics and English Protestants alike held and still hold about denominational interference in politics.

**Conclusion**

Direct, first-hand accounts and collective historical memories about membership in the union or life in union areas provide further insight into the intricacies of Catholic–FPU relationships. While both types of accounts tell us as much about how such relationships are understood in the present, they also provide important understandings about how Catholics and Protestants interacted with the FPU in the past as well. In this chapter, I have identified oral historical evidence from Tilting and Trinity Bay North and showed how they have provided a range of examples of how Irish-Catholic identity shaped people’s experiences with the union. The common understanding of Catholic–FPU relationships in scholarly literature is that Catholics avoided and shunned the union. Evidence in Newfoundland’s northeast indicates that this was true in some cases, such as Melrose, where the union was met with suspicion. Yet other Catholics in the Trinity Bay North area joined the union and found themselves adapting to the English-Protestant character of the local branches. Some Catholic-majority areas such as Tilting had strong local branches, and Irish Catholics joined the union for a host of reasons, drawing upon understandings of their place in the world as Irish Catholics with ethno-religious interests, as well as fishermen with class interests.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis has shown evidence of complex relationships between Newfoundland’s Irish Catholics and the Fishermen’s Protective Union. It has poured over the myriad ways in which Irish-Catholic fishermen marshalled the politics of ethnicity in deciding whether to join the FPU. This thesis has further argued that Irish-Catholic fishermen’s orientation toward unionism can best be understood by looking at the ethnic entanglements within which fishermen’s political activities were constrained, melded, and liberated. The idea of entanglement captures the complicated ways in which ethnic actors’ decision-making is bounded up in a mélange of motivations and influences, including ideas about ethnicity, race, class, religion, and empire, intersecting with regional, local, or individual concerns, clerical and other elite pressures, and other ways in which fishermen understood their position in early twentieth-century Newfoundland society.

The rise of the FPU between 1908 and 1914 was an unusual phenomenon for Newfoundlanders. While they had been witnesses to or participants in labour-based collective action, no union movement had, until the FPU’s ascendance, been so powerful a social and political force. It threatened to undermine the truck-based fishery, the interests of merchants, the power of bourgeois politicians, and those—such as clerical elites—whose power was protected and shored up by a system that safeguarded and institutionalized it. It also threatened to break the delicate ethno-religious compact between the major denominations that had been in place for five decades; yet this compact had always been superficial and cracks had already appeared. Indeed, the FPU was often an “ethnic actor” in its own right. Yet, while it had many of the features of Protestant associational politics at the time, such as marching bands, local branches, and a politics of secrecy, a hitherto understudied group of Irish Catholic supporters found voice inside the union, and supported it with varying degrees of enthusiasm and persistence. As such, Irish-Catholic fishermen’s orientations towards the FPU give us
insight into the degree to which ethnic attachment was just one of an entanglement of identities for working-class Newfoundlanders and rural producers. It sometimes acted as a barrier to unionism; in other cases, it was seen as irrelevant to or even compatible with union membership.

While ethnicity is socially and historically constructed, it is also a site of memory, dialogue, and of mobilization, and has real effects on the attitudes, ideologies, interests, and identities of historical actors. Nevertheless, ethnicity is also not a static identity, a historical inevitability, nor would it have been the most significant identity that fishermen articulated in any given context. As such, while Irish-Catholic fishermen often found themselves negotiating ethno-religious entanglements around FPU membership, ethnicity was not solely determinative of fishermen’s behaviour, and rarely produced the clear patterns of behaviour that political histories and historical materialist approaches often ascribe to Catholics within and outside of the FPU.

Fishermen in the northeast marshalled the politics of “Irishness” to bolster their case for membership in the upstart union. Others were tangled up with, embroiled in, and confronted by the workings of English-Protestant fraternal culture within the FPU. Others ignored the union or opposed it; while Irish-Catholic unity was often advanced as an alternative to union membership, some Irish-Catholic fishermen ignored such calls for unity, and instead embraced union membership. Irish Catholics sometimes listened to their priests’ and bishops’ pleadings to not join the union, but made sense of them in their own ways and through the prism of their own experiences, identities, and memories.

Catholic–FPU entanglements manifested in many ways. As Chapter Two set out, the guardians of the faith in the Catholic hierarchy employed ethno-religious justifications for their own opposition, though not all bishops and clergy universally adopted the same stance. Moreover, while there is evidence that the intra-ethnic entanglement between clergy and laity in the southern Avalon Peninsula caused some fishermen to be disinclined to support the FPU, other evidence actually seems to show that Irish Catholics drew upon their own conceptions of their ethno-religious identities and of acceptable political behaviour. In fact, by 1914, the FPU had more councils on the southern Avalon than they did in the lead-up to Archbishop Howley’s ban on March 31,
1909. Irish Catholics who eschewed the union after Howley's admonishment were not just genuflecting to clerical advice, but were likely reflecting on and making sense of such advice through their own understandings of and feelings about ethnic tensions, shaped and melded in part through a memory of Irish-Catholic–English-Protestant tensions in the long nineteenth century. The presence of resistance and open defiance of the Archbishop's position on the FPU in the southeast in 1908 and 1909 provides evidence of alternative, working-class conceptions about who had primacy in determining Irish-Catholic fishermen's behaviour.

As Chapter Three showed, appeals to ethnicity or religion were employed in support of as well as opposition to the union during the key “organizing period” of the union, when the union increased to 12,500 members in 1911, 15,000 in 1912, 17,000 in 1913, and 20,000 in 1914. The union began to harness the language of race and “Anglo-Celtic unity” to draw out and build up solidarity between fishermen across the denominational divides. Irish Catholics, some of whom bought into these ideas, helped build up Catholic-majority and mixed-denominational local union councils in this time period. Others may have ignored these ideas, prioritizing their class identities over others.

Chapter Four hones in on the general election of 1913. It was during this campaign period that the FPU confronted the governing People's Party and its electoral and media machine, as each mounted sectarian attacks on the union, accusing its leader, Coaker, of being anti-Catholic and socialist and branding him as a supporter of non-denominational schools. In the wake of the Liberal–Union alliance's loss to the People’s Party, the union's newspaper, the Fishermen's Advocate, suggested that if Irish Catholics wanted to vote along ethno-religious lines, so too could English Protestants, a none-too-subtle threat that broke with the FPU's more common rhetoric of inter-denominationalism. Nevertheless, Irish-Catholic unionists were numerous, vocal, and steadfast in their support of the FPU. Though there is no surviving polling station level data about the 1913 general election, the available evidence suggests that Irish-Catholic unionist areas in the north, and some in the south, supported the Union Party and its

1 Coaker, Twenty Years, 29, 45, 82.
Liberal allies on Election Day. In the entanglements of the election campaign, Irish-Catholic unionists found themselves at odds with Irish-Catholic supporters of Prime Minister Morris’s government, yet they also had to reconcile their unionism with an increasingly hostile FPU.

Chapter Five portrayed how the ethno-religious impulse that drove Irish-Catholic—and English-Protestant—behaviour in pre-Confederation Newfoundland persists through memories of Catholic–FPU relationships. In the realm of popular and private memories, fishermen had a robust understanding of their complex identities as economic, ethnic, and religious actors. Oral histories of Catholic–FPU interactions from former FPU members and residents of towns where the FPU had been popular show that knowledge of Irish-Catholic and English-Protestant entanglements in the union’s history continues to reverberate through time.

Sectarianism has long been used to explain Catholic–FPU interactions in political histories and even materialist and structuralist explanations of the relationship. Sectarianism is considered a feature of Newfoundland’s history that separates a pre-modern and modern moment in its past; that is, it is often evoked as a feature of high politics in which the primary actors are politicians or other elites who manipulate ordinary people. The “priest-led hypothesis” is just one articulation of this idea. The contribution that this thesis hopes to have made, then, is to complicate top-down approaches by appropriately historicizing when and how ethno-religious identities were articulated in Newfoundland society during the early development of the FPU. Ethnicity was not solely the province of elites. Revisionist approaches that emphasize manipulation by elites as the cause of sectarianism are convenient, but not properly historical. Nor is it the case that Catholic adherence to their ethnicity, or even religious affiliations, were passive “sighs of the oppressed.” Irish Catholics were firmly aware of their interests, and made calculated decisions about joining the FPU that were complex, though often steeped in ethno-religious considerations.

Future Directions

The period between 1908 and 1914, which grounds much of this thesis, is blessed with a mix of primary sources that can be mined for information about this topic. But there exists potential for future avenues of research in the period from 1914 onwards. That year, Archbishop Howley passed away and was replaced by Archbishop E.P. Roche. Like Howley, Roche preached against socialism, worried about the FPU, and is said to have been “profoundly reactionary.” His attitudes, McDonald argued, affected the FPU’s decisions about where to focus its political and organizational energies. The understudied interactions between the FPU and Catholics in the era of Archbishop Roche invite an analysis that is freed from priest-led parameters. One future direction would thus be to continue the timeline of the research started by this thesis, with the aim of examining how Catholic–FPU entanglements transpired after 1914.

With regards to World War One-era and postwar unionism, Sean Cadigan has described how the tragedies at the ice in 1914 and at war from 1914 to 1918, particularly the Beaumont-Hamel disaster in July 1916, shaped Newfoundland politics at the time and thereafter. Discourses of empire and critiques of socialism, emanating primarily from bourgeois and elite interests, derailed the FPU’s efforts to push for progressive political goals. Here too, the oral tradition can be marshalled to help us navigate how Irish Catholics and others interacted with the union with the onset of war and the deeply unpopular conscription policy, which the FPU officially supported against the wishes of fishermen.

By 1919, another general election was finally called after the wartime interregnum. This is a well-trod period, usually focusing on the failure to regulate the fishery. However, 1919 was another election in which the union was ensnared in the politics of ethno-religious tensions. By this point, events in Ireland fuelled rhetoric in local politics. In one Liberal-aligned newspaper clipping during the 1919 campaign, an unidentified author recounts how “Sinn Feiners” from the Star of the Sea Association,

4 McDonald, To Each His Own, 59.
5 Cadigan, Death on Two Fronts (2013).
who were said to have backed People’s Party politicians John C. Crosbie and Michael Patrick Cashin, interrupted and caused chaos at a meeting of St. John’s Liberals.6 Although Patrick Mannion has amply covered Newfoundlanders’ responses to events in Ireland from 1916-1923,7 the animus against locals who had been typecast by labels that emphasized their Irishness and rebelliousness is an interesting development. Analyzing the FPU’s responses to this issue could reveal how the politics of fisheries unionism intersected with ethno-religious identities and tensions that were taking new shape as Newfoundland’s settler communities monitored the increasingly acrimonious events in Britain and Ireland. What recourses, if any, to “Anglo-Celtic unity” and inter-denominationalism did the FPU adopt in this era?

This thesis focused primarily on the actions of men. Coaker ensured that only men were candidates for union membership. However, women’s involvement in the union was complex and is poorly understood. Courtney Penney, drawing primarily on the Fishermen’s Advocate as her source base, has unearthed important information that spells out how women perceived the FPU and how the union spoke to women as well.8 Furthermore, women’s orientations and attitudes towards the union likely were formed and shaped by their varying experiences in the fishery. Catholics predominantly prosecuted an inshore fishery in the southeast, where women were heavily involved in household production and shore work. Barbara Neis’s research into the varying support bases of the FPU suggests that English Protestants in the northeast tended to carry out fisheries in a highly competitive, waged environment,9 one which was likely more conducive to the male breadwinner model. Complicating matters further, however, Marilyn Porter has emphasized that women in the northeast, mostly English Protestants,

6 By this point, the Liberal–Unionist alliance had morphed into the Liberal-Reform Party, and the Union Party stopped running its own slate of candidates, instead opting to back Liberal leader Richard Squires, though Coaker and other union members also ran in the 1919 election. In 1919, the union entered the halls of power as never before, as Coaker was appointed Minister of Marine and Fisheries; “Crosbie ruffianism rears its head in St. John’s city,” undated pamphlet, 1919 election file, 2.01.002, Sir William Coaker Collection, COLL-009, CNS.
were heavily engaged in household production as well, and Willeen Keough’s research has looked at Irish-Catholic women’s role in household production in the southeast. The full extent of women’s displacement from household production as a result of the relative over-capitalization of the northeastern fishery remains to be told. The FPU’s varying popularity throughout Newfoundland is certainly aided by gendered differences in how the fisheries were conducted. It is conceivable that women resisted the union in the southeast because it did not allow female membership and was connected with fisheries that did not require women’s labour to the same extent. However it may also have been the case that women would have viewed men’s membership in the FPU as better for the financial standing of the family. In any case, much of women’s histories in the union remains invisible and would benefit from oral historical work in particular.

Documentary and oral sources also reveal that attitudes about the FPU were mediated through competing concepts of masculinity between Irish-Catholic and English-Protestant fishermen. Howley’s circular letter of March 31, 1909, for example, projected anxieties about perceived Protestant stereotypes of Catholic un-manliness, articulating an apparent perception among Protestants at the time that Catholic men were feminized by their church: “You ought to throw aside this yoke [priestly advice] and act as men!” Howley responded with his own articulation of an idea of masculinity more in keeping with familial and collectivist notions of Catholic fraternity. He went on:

It has always been the proud boast of Newfoundland Catholics, that they stood loyal and true to [their Priests] through all the trials and troubles of life. They poured the blessed waters of Baptism on their heads when they were children. They stood by them, through childhood, through youth, through manhood, and when the last hours were approaching, and the dark and unknown passage of death opened before them, the Priest stood by their bedsides.

11 Circular letter from Archbishop M.F. Howley, St. John’s, March 31, 1909, 106/19/1, also 106/9/6, ARCA/MHArc.
12 Circular letter from Archbishop M.F. Howley, St. John’s, March 31, 1909, 106/19/1, also 106/9/6, ARCA/MHArc.
The Archbishop did not dispute stereotypes about Catholic subservience to priests. In fact, he re-articulated them to assert a variety of masculinity that rebuked liberal-Protestant notions of independence-as-manliness. Howley was trying to paint a picture of the priest or bishop as not a tyrant but a guardian of Catholic identity. Catholic men’s masculinity, to him, was not infringed upon by their obedience to authority, but, rather, was found within it.

Though Howley worried about Protestant perceptions of feminine, unmanly Catholics, it was likely that he was responding to those same perceptions among Catholics themselves, as shown by the “free and independent” fishermen in the southeast who challenged the archbishop’s anti-union directive. There was an element of brotherhood among Irish Catholic fishermen of the southern Avalon Peninsula whose brief membership in the FPU is suggestive of a cohort of men whose internal group membership rested on shared Irish Catholicism as well as their collective concerns as fishermen. Catholic fishermen, however, sometimes faced these decisions alone, and sometimes with considerable discomfort. Bill McNamara’s 1999 interview, described in Chapter Four, illustrates such a moment when his decision to join, influenced in part by his father, resulted in a belittling, Protestant hazing ritual that caused him considerable discomfort as an Irish-Catholic man. These instances all point to the diversity of ways in which men, within and outside of the union, drew upon their variously gendered conceptions of themselves in order to navigate the union issue.¹³

While this thesis analyzed Catholic participation in and opposition or ambivalence to the FPU, Newfoundland’s English-Protestant fishermen constitute an equally fascinating ethno-religious group in the story of the FPU. Much more work needs to be done to account for the attitudes of the congregants in the Church of England, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Salvation Army churches. What differences and similarities existed among them? Sources as diverse as Elinor Senior’s thesis on the history of the Orange Order in Newfoundland and Calvin Hollett’s recent detailed study on the rise of Methodism among outport fishing families all constitute

¹³ I presented parts of this section as a paper titled “‘Take heed to yourselves, and to the whole flock’: Catholic and Protestant masculinities and the union idea in Newfoundland’s fisheries, 1908–1934,” Qualicum History Conference, Parksville, BC, January 30, 2016.
starting points for a larger investigation into the overlap between Protestantism and class mobilization in the fisheries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{14} Documents belonging to the Society of United Fishermen (SUF), now archived and digitized at Memorial University,\textsuperscript{15} await exploration. The SUF, as Chapter Two described, initially opposed the FPU. But Protestant opposition was apparently limited compared to that of the Roman Catholic Church and seems to have largely dissipated. Membership in the FPU, the SUF, the Orange Order, or even the Masonic lodges, overlapped for some English-Protestants in the fishery. There are further entanglements to unwind there.

Finally, while Irish-Catholic–English-Protestant tensions were sparked with the rise of the FPU, denominational tensions in fisheries union organizing declined over time. By the 1960s and 1970s, divisions either dissipated or became sites of worker solidarity. Roy Dwyer of Tilting situated the establishment of a non-denominational school on Fogo Island at that time in the context of fisheries and other reforms made under the threat of government resettlement of Fogo Island’s residents.\textsuperscript{16} Meanwhile, a new fishers’ union, the Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers’ Union (NFFAWU), the predecessor to the present-day FFAW under the Unifor umbrella, had also been established with Catholic involvement and leadership, including that of lawyer and former Liberal MP, Richard Cashin, and a Catholic priest and activist, Father Des McGrath.\textsuperscript{17} At some point between the days of the FPU and the emergence of fisheries unionism under the NFFAWU, the “Catholic Question” no longer seemed relevant. The story of how this came to be so, and what had changed between the days of the FPU and the FFAW, remains to be told.


\textsuperscript{16} Roy Dwyer interview, August 2, 2014.

\textsuperscript{17} Gordon Inglis, More Than Just a Union: The Story of the NFFAWU (St. John’s: Jespersion Press, 1985).
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