

# "Le Profit et La Gloire": The French Navy's Alliance With Private Enterprise in the Defense of Newfoundland, 1691-1697

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[See table of contents](#)

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# “Le Profit et La Gloire”: The French Navy’s Alliance With Private Enterprise in the Defense of Newfoundland, 1691-1697<sup>1</sup>

JAMES PRITCHARD

THE NINE YEARS’ WAR in Newfoundland was a minor affair in the great struggle between France and members of the Grand Alliance, but it does not deserve to be ignored or held in such casual disregard as is common in most historical accounts. The few historians who bothered to consider the subject frequently failed to get the story right and fewer still offered any insight into its significance, either for the future development of Newfoundland or the growing imperial struggle for America. Daniel W. Prowse referred to an unsuccessful French attack on St. John’s in the early summer of 1696 which never occurred.<sup>2</sup> As for the French attack that finally came in November that year, he gives the number of Canadians involved as 625 when only 125 participated. Though his chief source for these events was the journal kept by the chaplain of the French expedition, Abbé Jean Baudoin, Prowse’s late Victorian Protestant francophobia showed too obviously in his references to the author as “this bloodthirsty little Recollet father” who spied on his superior officers “in accordance with French usage.”<sup>3</sup> The most recent account of the same events is permeated with the same sense of Victorian melodrama with references to the senior Canadian military leader as “the Arch demon,” and to Indians baying for blood.<sup>4</sup> The distinguished historian of the Royal Navy, William Laird Clowes, confused both the time and objective of the most important naval squadron sent to Newfoundland during the war. Clowes assigned the expedition of Captain John Norris to the spring of 1696, and identified its chief object as the recovery of English “settlements” in Hudson Bay!<sup>5</sup> Additional errors appeared in subsequent studies. Ralph Lounsbury muddled the events of the 1690s further by referring to a non-existent Charles Norris and restricting his discussion of the British fishery during the 1690s chiefly to the impact of New England competition. He only

acknowledged the existence of war during a later discussion of St. John's defenses when, like Clowes, he incorrectly claimed the French captured the port by a sea borne assault.<sup>6</sup> Gerald Graham, who wrote three essays on the history of the defense of Newfoundland and a book devoted to the contest of empire in the North Atlantic, repeated many of these old errors and added others, confusing Louis Pastour de Costebelle with his better known brother, Philippe, who reached Placentia only in 1692.<sup>7</sup> Even the late Keith Matthews contributed to the confusion, placing the French overland attack on St. John's from Plaisance in the fall of 1695 rather than 1696, and claiming that the arrival of a British fleet forced the French to withdraw from the English shore, though the French never intended nor attempted to occupy the said shore.<sup>8</sup>

Confusion is not confined to English-speaking historians of Newfoundland, the cod fishery and the navy. French historians are equally guilty of not trying very hard to achieve even a minimum degree of accuracy. Graham's error concerning the Costebelle brothers probably owed its origin to the distinguished French naval historian, Charles de La Roncière, who also confused the identity of the governor of Plaisance, referring to Saint Ovide de Brouillan, when he meant his hot-tempered uncle, Jacques-François de Mombeton de Brouillon.<sup>9</sup> Though Joseph de Mombeton de Brouillan, also called Saint-Ovide, served with distinction at Plaisance from 1692, he never became governor of Terre-Neuve.<sup>10</sup> Charles de La Morandière, historian of the French cod fishery in North America, not only confused the same names, he also often confused dates. And though his inclusion of lengthy extracts from original sources (including much that follows) enhances his work, the rambling account of Placentia during the war lacks any analytical framework, nor does it contain any interpretation of events.<sup>11</sup>

Reexamination and reappraisal of the Nine Years' War in Newfoundland is long overdue on historiographical grounds alone, but there is also a case to be made that French conduct during the war has been misunderstood because historians have failed to recognize the existence of an alliance between private entrepreneurs and the French navy for the defence of Newfoundland. Consequently, accounts of events at Newfoundland during the war are distorted, the role of the French state and its military agents greatly exaggerated, and the significance of the wartime experience for both the future development of the French position in Newfoundland and the growing imperial struggle between France and Great Britain in America remain unconsidered.<sup>12</sup>

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In the spring of 1691, two years after the outbreak of hostilities between England and France in what became known as the Nine Years' War between 1689 and 1697, the French position in Newfoundland was extremely precarious. Plaisance, hereafter referred to by its English name, Placentia, like other French colonies, was far

down the list of French naval priorities. The late minister of marine, the Marquis de Seignelay, who believed that colonies should defend themselves as well as produce economic benefits for the metropolis, paid no attention to Placentia.<sup>13</sup> In the meantime, Governor Antoine Parat abandoned his post in September 1690 after members of a large party of English freebooters from Ferryland tortured him and pillaged the French outpost in the late winter and early spring and following an outbreak of sedition among Basque fishing captains in August and quarrels with the military commander of the tiny garrison and with the inhabitants over his oppressive conduct. Furthermore, the English attackers had destroyed everything they could not carry off, leaving the resident fishermen without goods and chattels, including fishing gear. The incomplete fort was left defenseless, and its garrison was completely disarmed.<sup>14</sup>

Louis Phélypeaux, Comte de Pontchartrain, who succeeded Seignelay as the minister of marine, was not familiar with his ministry and its responsibilities but he was not without insight and intelligence. He acknowledged that Placentia had been abandoned and recognized that it had to be resupplied and defended, despite its low priority and scarce naval funds. Placentia was too important to be abandoned. It contributed to navigation, the employment of sailors and the utility of commerce. Moreover, wrote an anonymous official in the naval ministry, in order to support Placentia, "His Majesty will have only very little expense to make."<sup>15</sup> A Nantes merchant could easily be encouraged to supply and transport all the pay, provisions and munitions, together with the new governor, additional recruits and 25 Basques for the fishery in one of his own ships in return for a loan of two of His Majesty's ships, a frigate and an armed naval transport, freshly careened, fully rigged and equipped for the voyage. The same merchant could even be persuaded to feed and pay the king's sailors. In return, the merchant would be free to employ these royal ships as he chose, to fish, to trade or to engage in privateering, to carry all his fish to France, and an added perquisite, all prizes taken by the two royal vessels going and coming, would belong to him alone.

During the seven years between 1691 and 1697, inclusive, the chief French fishing base at Newfoundland was wholly supported by a number of merchants and merchant groups from three different seaports in alliance with the ministry of marine. The existence of this arrangement between the French state and private enterprise throws an important light on the nature of Louis XIV's wartime government and its policies. It shows, first, how expediency forced the government to adopt flexible policies towards colonial defense, and second, that monopolies granted to French merchants trading in the colonies were fiscally rather than economically driven. Evidence for the commercial-military alliance between Pontchartrain and private merchant-entrepreneurs remains incomplete, but enough is known to clarify these activities and place them in a broader context that may increase our understanding of what went on during the war and to consider their greater significance for the future.

Seignelay appointed Jacques-François de Mombeton de Brouillan governor of Placentia and Newfoundland on 1 June 1690, and three weeks later he recalled the incumbent, Parat, but then he appeared to forget about Placentia. It was Pontchartrain who accepted the terms of the aforementioned naval report and issued instructions to the new governor. Earlier, in December 1690, he ordered naval commissary-general André Ceberet at Lorient to prepare a small frigate, *Le Joly*, 24 guns and 60 men, for delivery to a Nantes merchant.<sup>16</sup> In mid-February, with preparations well under way, Pontchartrain instructed Brouillan to travel to Nantes, where the frigate was being fitted out by a merchant who had contracted to carry forty soldiers, munitions, arms, equipment and provisions to Placentia. Fourteen or sixteen of the ship's guns were to be removed and mounted in defense of the port, which the governor was commanded to begin rebuilding immediately after reaching Newfoundland.<sup>17</sup>

The merchant, who bore all the costs of fitting out the ships, hiring the troops and workmen, and buying provisions and stores, received two ships from the king and furnished one of his own. His name was Joachim Descazeaux du Hallay; he had assumed direction of the House of Descazeaux only two years before. His father, Pierre, had been one of those merchants on whom Colbert had counted, formerly holding municipal office at Nantes and associating with others in the whale and cod fisheries. At the beginning of the war he had abandoned both his trade and his debts to his son, but thanks to the family's close membership in the group of Basque merchants at Nantes, Joachim was able to pay off more than half his father's obligations and was rapidly rising in wealth and influence when he undertook to provision Placentia.<sup>18</sup> In the words of the naval report recommending Descazeaux to the minister, "the family has been the most attached to this colony's commerce."<sup>19</sup>

The first venture proved successful. Governor Brouillan reached Placentia in June and immediately set about reorganizing its defenses, building a redoubt and mounting new guns. The presence of spoiled biscuit or hardtack in the provisions was blamed on a Nantes baker rather than on Descazeaux, whose ships returned safely to France in November with their crews in perfect health.<sup>20</sup> But success created its own problems, attracting competitors from other seaports. Pontchartrain briefly considered listening to a "more advantageous offer" from Saint-Malo merchants, but naval commissary Bigot de Gastines persuaded him to stay with Descazeaux.<sup>21</sup> After some hard bargaining during which the Nantes merchant threatened to abandon the entire enterprise to the Malouins, Descazeaux again agreed to supply Placentia. Details of the second contract provide a clearer picture of what the navy demanded.

The contract required Descazeaux to recruit and transport at his own expense 20 soldiers and 20 workmen including a gunner, armorer, blacksmith and fishermen, and to purchase munitions, arms, provisions, tools, clothes, trade goods and all things necessary for the garrison to complete the fortifications and allow the

inhabitants to fish. In return, the king granted him free of charge, *Le Joly*, frigate, *La Cloche Verte*, flûte, while the merchant fitted out *La Samaritaine*.<sup>22</sup> The minister also allowed Descazeaux a levy of 150 Basque sailors and 10 carpenters from the *pays de Labourd*, there being very few of either available in the Nantes maritime department. But the naval commissary at Bayonne sought to obstruct the levy and also threatened Descazeaux's monopoly at Placentia by allowing two large vessels, each of 250 tons burden, to depart from Bayonne on the pretext of sailing to the Grand Banks.<sup>23</sup> In return for assuming all costs of supporting and defending Placentia, including paying the wages of the governor, his staff and the garrison, Descazeaux was to enjoy the right to fish, trade, and engage in privateering. Late in April his three ships departed Nantes. Commissary-general de Gastines estimated the whole enterprise had cost the merchant more than 35,000 écus or more than 100,000 livres, an enormous sum at the time.<sup>24</sup>

Success did not reward Descazeaux's second venture. In July, *Le Joly* was wrecked on an island about twenty leagues from Placentia, and the loss of the ship's entire cargo, including the minister's dispatches to Brouillan, was a serious setback, leaving the settlement with only six months' provisions and the garrison nearly naked.<sup>25</sup> Governor Brouillan had few resources to face his first challenge from the enemy, when, in mid-September Commodore Francis Williams appeared with a squadron of five ships which anchored before Placentia and began a sharp cannonade, testing Brouillan's newest defenses. Fortunately for the French, about a week after arriving the English departed as suddenly as they had arrived, having accomplished nothing.<sup>26</sup>

In the wake of his own lack of success in 1692, Descazeaux did not renew his supply contract for the coming year. In November, a senior naval official at Nantes, Inspector-general Desgrassières, contracted with other Nantes merchants, Sieurs Hardouin and Danguy, to send two ships containing stores to replace those lost in *Le Joly*, and to provision the colony in 1693, but the ships were months late in departing from Nantes and reached Placentia only late in the spring.<sup>27</sup> The 22 fishing ships that reached Placentia before Hardouin's storeship carried no extra provisions or stores to relieve the habitants' misery. Fitted out for voyages of up to half a year's duration, fishing vessels scarcely carried sufficient victuals for their own crews amidst the piles of gear and cargoes of salt that filled most of the space on board.

Hardouin and Danguy had contracted to provision Placentia under much the same conditions as Descazeaux enjoyed. They fitted out three ships and were permitted a levy of 80 classed seamen. In May the ships departed from Saint Nazaire and reached Placentia on 20 June, but the merchants seem to have taken less care than their predecessor and left much resentment in the colony over their deliveries.<sup>28</sup>

At the year's end a group of merchants, identified as Sieurs Danguy, père, Bouchard, Laurancin and Company and Hardouin, La Place and Company, who may have been the 1693 contractors, offered to renew the contract for 1694 by fitting out four ships. They requested two ships of 300 tons each from the king and

offered to fit out two more of their own.<sup>29</sup> Though their offer was virtually identical to the contract signed the previous March, Pontchartrain did not accept it. Instead, he turned to a group of Basque merchants from Bayonne and St. Jean de Luz. Dissatisfaction with Hardouin and Danguy's deliveries and the appearance of an influential patron behind the Basques, together with the attractive possibility that private entrepreneurs could be prevailed upon to wage offensive warfare in Newfoundland probably account for the change.

Governor Brouillan had earlier proposed an overland attack on the English settlements of Newfoundland and asked for two frigates to support the expedition.<sup>30</sup> But the French navy's funds had been so severely reduced that Pontchartrain could not grant either his permission or even one frigate for the venture.<sup>31</sup> He initially announced that he was contracting with a company of Saint Malo merchants to make war on the English along the Avalon peninsula.<sup>32</sup> But whether negotiations broke off, became lost amidst the worsening financial crisis, or were superseded by new and better offers, by the beginning of 1694 the minister had turned to Basque merchants to support Placentia and make war on the English. He gave as his reason the inadequate quality of provisions supplied from Nantes, but the influence of the duc de Gramont, lieutenant-general and governor of Bayonne, just as likely proved decisive.<sup>33</sup>

Early in January the king granted ten Bayonne and St. Jean de Luz merchants two flûtes and a 30-gun frigate and a levy of 130 Basque sailors. Pontchartrain also contracted with a group of Bayonne privateers associated with naval administrators in the port to make war on the English on the east coast of Newfoundland.<sup>34</sup> In December the naval commissary at Bayonne, Louis-Hyacinthe Plomier de La Boulaye, proposed to Pontchartrain that several ships recently returned from a remarkably destructive and highly profitable raid on the Dutch whaling fleet at Spitzbergen be employed on a similar distant operation in northern seas, namely the destruction of the English cod fishery at Newfoundland.<sup>35</sup> The Spitzbergen raid had also been sponsored by the duc de Gramont, who convinced Louis XIV and Pontchartrain to grant the merchant-privateers three of the king's ships to be joined by three strong, privately owned Malouin privateers. In the wake of their success, Gramont, who prided himself on being the "director" of the Basque "corsariat," had no difficulty in obtaining several of the same warships to attack the English overseas cod fish trade at Newfoundland rather than in the Irish Sea, which had been the location of previous attacks.<sup>36</sup> Command of the squadron composed of *Le Gaillard*, 54 guns, *Le Pélican*, 50 guns, *L'Aigle*, 36 guns, a Malouin privateer, a fire ship and a smaller ship rigged as a bomb ketch, was given to one of Gramont's proteges, Capitaine de vaisseau Pierre de Saint-Clair, who invested 1,000 écus in the expedition.<sup>37</sup> The other captains were also investors.

Despite great expectations, however, the expedition met with little success. After reaching Placentia and receiving intelligence and advice from Governor Brouillan, the ships attacked a well-fortified Ferryland (Forillon) on 10 Septem-

ber.<sup>38</sup> There *L'Aigle* ran aground at the harbour's entrance; part of the crew mutinied and fled in the ship's boats to Placentia.<sup>39</sup> After refloating the frigate, Captain Saint-Clair set a course for St. John's, but he found a chain or cables stretched across the entrance, declined to attempt an attack from seaward and sailed to Placentia.<sup>40</sup>

The sea borne offensive by private enterprise failed totally to advance French interests in Newfoundland, and on 13 October Saint-Clair sailed for France escorting 34 merchantmen.<sup>41</sup> The merchants who supplied the fishing post had also been found wanting. Casks of salt pork weighed between 150 and 180 livres rather than 200 livres as called for in the contract and similar short weights were reported in the brandy and molasses. The Basques had also furnished a lot of "trash cod" in place of "good hardtack," which left Placentia with insufficient provisions until ships arrived in the new year.<sup>42</sup> Not surprisingly, the minister turned back to Sieur Hardouin at Nantes, signing a new supply contract with him on 13 February 1695.<sup>43</sup>

By then the supply contract, termed "l'entreprise de Plaisance", had become standardized, varying only in the total quantities to be shipped each year as the garrison grew. Hardouin fitted out three of his own ships in addition to the two the king loaned him.<sup>44</sup> In addition, Pontchartrain commanded Governor Brouillan to give Hardouin preference in assigning beaches for fish drying, to allow the two warships to begin fishing as soon as they arrived and to provide the entrepreneur with "all the protection and assistance he will need."<sup>45</sup> Finally, the king ordered each fishing ship fitting out for Placentia to embark a mason or four barrels of lime to be used for mortar in the fortifications. Whether this was a form of punishment for the Basques' inadequate performance the previous year remains unknown, but the idea cannot be ruled out. Brouillan later received orders to punish one merchant who refused these new terms of access to the fishery by placing him last in the order for fishing and levying a fine to the value of the undelivered lime.<sup>46</sup>

Faced with a continuing shortage of funds following the major social and economic crisis that struck France in the wake of two failed harvests during 1693 and 1694, there was little else that Pontchartrain could do but make terms even more attractive to private enterprise. Following a new regulation issued in October 1694, the king's ships were to be handed over fully equipped and provisioned, and lessees would no longer be responsible for replacing consumed stores and victuals or for damages sustained from peril of the sea or war. In return for one-fifth of the value of all prizes after costs were deducted, the king would absorb all expenses.<sup>47</sup> In short, the state insured private merchants against losses in order to encourage increased private participation. This new regulation became the basis for a number of squadrons that were fitted out during the following year and subsequently until the end of the war. Among them was the proposal from a Saint-Malo merchant to attack English settlements in Newfoundland in 1696.

Governor Brouillan sailed to France in the autumn of 1695 to propose another sea borne assault on St. John's in the wake of Captain Saint-Clair's failure. Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville was also in France promoting a land attack on the English



settlements. Pontchartrain decided to combine the two proposals and turned to Noël Danican, Sieur de L'Espine, Saint Malo's leading privateer-entrepreneur, to carry out the attack. L'Espine-Danican, as he was known, agreed to arm, provision and man six frigates, including *Le Harcourt* and *Le Diamant*, formerly HMS *Diamond*, commanded by his brother, Sieur du Rocher, each of 50 guns, to which the king added *Le Pélican*, also of 50 guns.<sup>48</sup> The land army was to be partially recruited in Canada and commanded by Le Moyne d'Iberville, who sailed independently to New France in the spring in command of *Le Profond*, *L'Envieux* and *Le Wesp*. Private enterprise was also involved in Iberville's venture. As the first two royal ships could carry only five months provisions, Pontchartrain accepted the Acadia Company's offer to feed and pay their crews from the ships' arrival at Placentia until their return to France in return for the grant of a ship of 200 tons to carry provisions and drink for Iberville's Canadian recruits to be employed in Newfoundland.<sup>49</sup> This was how *Le Wesp*, 32 guns, joined the expedition.

L'Espine-Danican's ships reached Placentia early in September. The lateness of the season and scarcity of provisions on board led Governor Brouillan to depart Placentia without the king's ships commanded by Iberville. Not knowing their whereabouts and nearly three months after their expected arrival, Brouillan decided to sail without them, even though it had long been acknowledged that the privateers were not sufficiently strong to take St. John's.<sup>50</sup> The squadron comprised ten ships: *Le Pélican*, *Le Phélypeaux*, *Le Diamant*, *Le Comte de Toulouse*, *Le Harcourt*, three corvettes and two fireships. Dead calm prevented them from entering St. John's on their first try and currents defeated efforts to tow one into the harbour with the ships' boats. The French remained off the entrance from 17 to 21 September but frustration only mounted and the privateers turned to Bay Bulls, which Brouillan's men took in a combined land and sea assault. Afterwards they returned to St. John's, but again they failed, and Governor Brouillan lost whatever influence he had over the Malouin sea captains. After demanding that Sieur Du Rocher explain his conduct, he received a brusque retort that "these ships did not belong to the king and he did not wish to risk them" in action.<sup>51</sup> According to Brouillan, the Malouins were brave, but undisciplined, and "the leaders almost always appear to seek their own profit rather than the King's glory".<sup>52</sup> Brouillan was quite correct. These merchant entrepreneurs were conducting a high risk business venture in which they sought to minimize risk and maximize profit rather than advance the state's interest. On 1 October, the privateers and soldiers took Ferryland and a few days later captured Renew's, Fermeuse and Aquafort. But many English ships slipped away as the Malouins refused to obey Brouillan's commands. Though some 30 merchantmen were captured and a 32-gun frigate, HMS *Saphire*, was destroyed along with many other small ships, homes and fish drying stages, Brouillan returned to Placentia in mid-October frustrated and angry. Soon after his return Iberville appeared along with recruits from Canada and during the next five months they finished what the Malouin privateers had begun, laying waste the English settlements in Newfound-

land. St. John's was burnt before Christmas and by 1 May 1697 the French had destroyed all but the settlements in Conception Bay and on Carbonear Island. English losses amounted to 200 killed, 700 prisoners and 200,000 quintals of cod.<sup>53</sup> Iberville's winter campaign may have had some more lasting effects, but beyond inspiring the English to begin seriously to fortify St. John's, little can be observed.<sup>54</sup>

Despite the limited success of Danican's venture and Brouillan's fierce complaints concerning the inglorious conduct of the privateers, Pontchartrain had no choice but to arrange for yet another successful Malouin privateer-entrepreneur to provision Placentia in 1697.<sup>55</sup> In February he contracted with Jean-Baptiste Levesque, Sieur de Beaubriand, a former sea captain and member of a family of shipowners and ship outfitters that had recently moved from Granville to Saint Malo. Two years before, while in command of a privately fitted out naval fourth-rate, *Le François*, 48 guns, in consort with *Le Fortuné*, 56 guns, he had captured three richly laden English East Indiamen. Pontchartrain again loaned him *Le François* for the Placentia enterprise.<sup>56</sup> The articles and conditions granted by the king have survived and indicate what was involved in supporting Placentia at the war's end. They were virtually identical with previous ones with L'Espine-Danican and Hardouin. Beaubriand-Levesque's contract called for him to pay in cash, goods or provisions, 7,100 livres to the governor, officers and staff of the garrison, which now included a surgeon, chaplain, storekeeper, gunner and armorer. He was also to recruit, at his expense, 25 soldiers and pay them for one year at a rate of 9 livres each per month. He also agreed to pay the 75 NCOs and men of the garrison for one year — a sum totaling 11,712 livres. He was to carry at his expense all the munitions and provisions for the garrison. The 6,000 livres cash payment paid to the clerk of the Treasurer-General of the Marine at Rochefort in 1695 was increased to eleven thousand livres. Beaubriand-Levesque also agreed to ship the following goods and provisions to Placentia and to trade them with the inhabitants at four livres per quintal (and others in proportion) above the price they cost on board his ships in France. This represented a considerable reduction from the nine livres the Basques had obtained in 1694.

Table 1: Provisions and Goods for Placentia, 1697

Provisions, etc.	Quantities
Salt	100 charges of 2 tonneaux each
Biscuit	1,000 quintaux (poids de marc)
Flour	40 quarts, 200-300 livres each
Molasses	100 quarts or demi-barriques
Wine	40 barriques, Bordeaux measure

## 170 Pritchard

Brandy	20 quarts, La Rochelle measure
Pickled Beef	30 barils
Salt Pork	30 barils
Beans	20 barriques, 5.5 boisseaux St. Malo measure
Butter	300 livres
Olive Oil	400 livres
Candles	600 livres
Clothes, shoes and other small goods	

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Source: Colonies, B 19, ff. 136v-40.

In return, Beaubriand-Levesque received from the king *Le François*, 50 guns, currently at Rochefort, and the flûte *L'Européen*, 28 guns, at Lorient, completely fitted out, careened and ready to sail on 1 March. He paid only for the provisions and wages of the crew. In addition, he was permitted to fit out six ships of his own to fish, trade or engage in privateering at Placentia, Isle St. Pierre and Newfoundland as he wished, his captains all to be provided with commissions of war. He also had preference in levying crews for all eight ships to the number of 650 "classed" seamen. Finally, he was to have "complete and full freedom" to conduct his commerce without any interference from the governor or any other king's officer at Placentia. His ships might remain at Placentia for as long as he liked and return to any port in France of his choosing with the exception of *Le François* which must return to Rochefort. The king also granted Sieur de Beaubriand "the preference of shallops[,] a beach[,] and the stages named La Perche et La Cosselette", and commanded the governor to allow him peaceful enjoyment of them. And, in order to avoid contentions between them, all inspections of recruits, provisions, stores and merchandise transported to the colony in lieu of payments to the garrison were to be made at Rochefort. The governor of Placentia was obliged to accept them without protest. Finally, no other French ship that had completed dry fishing was permitted to return to Nantes on penalty of confiscation of cod and the ship.<sup>57</sup> After receiving news of Iberville's success in Newfoundland and intelligence of a probable English counter attack, Pontchartrain ordered that 8,136 livres of the sum Beaubriand paid to the Treasurer-General's clerk at Rochefort be used to maintain a third infantry company to be sent to Placentia.<sup>58</sup>

With the signing of the Treaty of Ryswick later in the year, the immediate threat to Placentia came to an end. The navy's alliance with private enterprise had ensured the survival of the French colony in Newfoundland in ways that a purely military presence could not. Moreover, Placentia was far stronger in 1697 than it had been seven years before, when its continued existence had been in question. But the alliance between private enterprise and the naval ministry raises a more interesting question, for if French colonies could be successfully defended by a

combination of private enterprise and local military forces — and events elsewhere in the Americas showed that Placentia was not an isolated case — did the French navy have an obvious role in colonial defence?

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The defense of Placentia by private enterprise during the Nine Years' War has been very largely missed or ignored. Yet it was the most significant feature of that defense. The French state relied on private enterprise rather than the navy to maintain its presence in Newfoundland. Finding it possible to defend Placentia indirectly by granting select merchants a monopoly of the colony's trade, the minister of marine contracted with merchant-entrepreneurs to recruit, pay, and provision the local garrison, which he increased during the war, as well as to provide victuals and goods to trade with the resident fishermen at virtually no cost to the navy in return for lending armed naval vessels to engage in fishing and trade as well as privateering. The naval minister also contracted with private merchants and investors to make war. Indeed, no French warship fitted out by the state sailed to Placentia as its primary destination during the entire war.

Several points may be tendered from this state of affairs. First, the governor of Placentia, who was a brave soldier and the king's representative in Newfoundland, was wholly dependent upon private merchants for support, including payment of his annual stipend. He was not in charge of his small world as much as he may have thought and historians have claimed. At the same time, it is not surprising that he engaged in trade and that would-be monopolists complained to the minister about his conduct. Second, merchants pursued their own rather than the state's interests. These were economic rather than strategic or even tactical. Merchants did not seek to ruin the English, but to minimize risk and maximize profits by enjoying a monopoly of trade with resident fishermen and exclusive privileges in the fishery and to beaches and drying stages, and by holding the sole right to ship fish to a major French seaport such as Nantes. Moreover, despite wartime conditions the Placentia enterprise appeared to be profitable. Each year merchants fitted out additional ships of their own in order to develop their market. The monopoly on Placentia's trade in wartime stimulated fierce competition among merchants from different seaports, wherein each group pursued its own agenda as vigorously as character and circumstances allowed. In so doing, however, their very success made it difficult to recognize any special role for the navy in colonial defence. Events at Placentia forecast the future, for during the subsequent half century, when naval finances were severely reduced, colonial defense relied chiefly on local forces and fortifications rather than warships.

The Placentia enterprise also indicates that the minister of marine was not a bureaucratic agent of a central political will, nor was the king's authority arbitrarily exercised, despite being absolute. Not only did the minister act within the law, but

owing to an archaic, unreformed — and unreformable — fiscal system, the naval minister was forced into the strong hands of powerful financiers and private entrepreneurs with whom he constantly negotiated in order to achieve the state's minimal objectives. In a related sense, the Placentia enterprise illustrates how so-called mercantilism, or the French version of it, was really fiscally rather than economically driven. Finally, the history of events at wartime Placentia illustrates the new historical judgment about French absolutism. Far from being rigid, centralized and arbitrary, the history of Placentia in wartime confirms recent assertions that absolutism's characteristics were the opposite, flexible, decentralized, and in a state of continual negotiation with competing interests in order to pursue its objectives.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this paper was presented to the joint conference of the Association for the History of Northern Seas and the Canadian Nautical Research Society held at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, Corner Brook, Newfoundland, between 8 and 14 August, 1999. The author gratefully acknowledges that research for this paper was conducted with support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

<sup>2</sup>Daniel W. Prowse. *A History of Newfoundland from the English, Colonial and Foreign Records*. (Belleville, Ont: Mika Studio 1972), [Reprinted 1895 edition], 211.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>4</sup>Alan F. Williams. *Father Baudoin's War: D'Iberville's Campaigns in Acadia and Newfoundland 1696, 1697*. Edited by Alan G. Macpherson, Department of Geography, ([St. John's]: Memorial University of Newfoundland 1987), 9, 21.

<sup>5</sup>William Laird Clowes. *The Royal Navy: A History from the Earliest Times to the Present*. 7 vols., (London: Sampson Low Marston and Co., 1897-1903), 2: 490-1.

<sup>6</sup>Ralph G. Lounsbury. *The British Fishery at Newfoundland, 1634-1723*, (New Haven: Yale University Press 1934), 197, 210. H.A. Innis. *The Cod Fisheries: The History of an International Economy*. Rev. ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1954 [1940]) simply followed Lounsbury in his account of the period.

<sup>7</sup>See Gerald S. Graham. "Fisheries and Sea Power." *Canadian Historical Association Report, 1941*, 24-31; "Britain's Defence of Newfoundland." *Canadian Historical Review*, 23, 3 (September, 1942): 260-79; "Newfoundland in British Strategy from Cabot to Napoleon." In R.A. MacKay, ed., *Newfoundland: Economic, Diplomatic and Strategic Studies*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press 1946), 254-64; and *Empire of the North Atlantic: The Maritime Struggle for North America*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1958 [1950]), 66.

<sup>8</sup>Keith Matthews. *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland, 1500-1830*. (St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland 1973), 116-7.

<sup>9</sup>Charles de La Roncière. *Histoire de la marine française*, 6 vols. (Paris: E. Plon, Nourrit et cie 1899-1932), 6: 268. See also Jean-Pierre Proulx. *The Military History of Placentia: A Study of the French Fortifications*. History and Archaeology No. 26, (Ottawa: Parks Canada 1979), 27.

<sup>10</sup>Bernard Pothier. "Monbeton (*sic*) de Brouillon, dit Saint-Ovide, Joseph." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, hereafter *DCB*, multi-volumed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1966- ), 3: 454-6. Saint-Ovide was appointed governor of Ile Royale in April 1718 after serving in the French colonies for a quarter of a century.

<sup>11</sup>Charles de La Morandière. *Histoire de la pêche française de la morue dans l'Amérique septentrionale (des origines à 1789)*, 3 vol. (Paris: G.P. Maisonneuve et La Rose 1962), 1: 445, 453. So, too, did Guy Frégault, (see *Iberville, le conquérant*. (Montreal: Guérin 1996 [1944]), 215.

<sup>12</sup>F.J. Thorpe. "Fish, Forts and Finance: The Politics of French Construction at Placentia, 1699-1710." *The Canadian Historical Association, Historical Papers, 1971*. (Ottawa, 1971), 53 is an exception, though it dealt with a later period.

<sup>13</sup>See Geoffrey Symcox. *The Crisis of French Sea Power, 1688-1697: from the 'guerre d'escadre' to the 'guerre de course'*. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1974), 78-102, and for a recent revisionist view of Colbert's son see Laurent Dignli, *Colbert, marquis de Seignelay: le fils flamboyant*. (Paris: Librairie Academique Perrin 1997).

<sup>14</sup>Robert Leblant. "Une sédition basque à Terre-Neuve en 1690." *Revue historique et archéologique de Béarn et du pays basque*. (janvier, 1932): 46-64. Also, Archives des Colonies, hereafter Colonies, (Ottawa, National Archives of Canada, microfilm), Série c<sup>11C</sup> 1, ff. 142-84, eight letters from Louis de Pastour de Costebelle, 30 August to 28 December, 1690.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, f. 188v, "Memoir au sujet de l'Etat de l'Isle de Terreneuve, ..." [c. November, 1690]. One probable author is Jean-Baptiste de Lagny, directeur de commerce in the ministry, who wrote a similar report with the same message on the West Indian colonies about the same time (see Colonies, c<sup>8A</sup> 6, ff. 261-4).

<sup>16</sup>Archives de la Marine, hereafter Marine, (Ottawa, National Archives of Canada, transcripts), Série B<sup>3</sup> 60, ff. 531-3 Ceberet to Pontchartrain, 4 December 1690, acknowledging the order and reporting action taken.

<sup>17</sup>Colonies, B<sup>16</sup>, ff. 19-23. Instructions to Brouillon, 17 February 1691, printed in La Morandière, *Histoire de la pêche française de la morue*. 1: 445-7.

<sup>18</sup>Jean Meyer, *La Noblesse bretonne au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. 2 vols. (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N. 1966), 1: 340-1.

<sup>19</sup>See note 14.

<sup>20</sup>Marine, B<sup>3</sup> 64, 226v-8 Gastines to Pontchartrain, Nantes, 18 August 1691, and *ibid.*, ff. 285-6, same to same, 3 November 1691.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 70, ff. 151-2, same to same, 22 January 1692.

<sup>22</sup>Meyer, *La Noblesse bretonne*, 1: 340-1.

<sup>23</sup>Marine, B<sup>3</sup> 70, ff. 162-5, Gastines to Pontchartrain, 20 January 1692.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, ff. 216-19v, Gastines to Pontchartrain, 24 April 1692. 1 écu = 3 livres tournois.

<sup>25</sup>Colonies, c<sup>11C</sup> 1, ff. 197-9, Brouillon to Pontchartrain, 8 August 1692.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, ff. 201-4 for two accounts, including Brouillon's journal of the events that occurred from 14 to 21 September 1692; Brouillon's signed account is in *ibid.*, ff. 222-3; also La Morandière, *Histoire de la pêche française de la morue*. 1: 450-2. For a vigorous self-promoting account of his paramount role in the defence see Louis-Armand de Lom d'Arce, baron de Lahontan, *New Voyages to North America*. Edited by Reuben Gold Thwaites, 2 vols. (Chicago: A.C. McClung & Co. 1905), 1: 275-9.

## 174 Pritchard

<sup>27</sup>Colonies, B<sup>16</sup>, ff. 128, 128v, three letters from Pontchartrain to Du Gay, Desgrassières and Brouillan, 8 November; and Colonies, c<sup>11C</sup> 1, ff. 232-4, Brouillan to Pontchartrain, 14 July 1693.

<sup>28</sup>Lahontan, *New Voyages.*, 1: 287. For clues concerning the poor provisions see Marine, B<sup>3</sup> 76, f.25, Danguy to Pontchartrain, 10 February 1693; and *ibid.*, 77, ff.154-8, Ceberet to Pontchartrain 6 February 1693. Also Colonies, B<sup>16</sup>, f. 199-201, Pontchartrain to Brouillan, 7 March 1693.

<sup>29</sup>Colonies, c<sup>11C</sup> 2, ff. 11-12, Demande de Srs. Danguy et compagnie 8 December, 1693.

<sup>30</sup>Colonies, c<sup>11C</sup> 1, ff. 230-1, "Projet pour l'exécution sur les établissements des anglois de l'isle de Terre-neuve," 1693.

<sup>31</sup>The level of naval expenditures in 1694 fell precipitously to two-thirds or three-quarters of the level of the previous year, see Henri Legohérel, *Les Trésoriers généraux de la marine (1517-1788)*. (Paris: Editions Cujas 1965), ff. 180.

<sup>32</sup>Colonies, B<sup>16</sup>, ff. 201-2v, Pontchartrain to Brouillan, 7 March 1693.

<sup>33</sup>E.g. Marine, B<sup>3</sup> 86 ff. 90-1v, Duc de Gramont to Pontchartrain, 3 January 1694; *ibid.*, ff. 109-11v, same to same 19 March 1694.

<sup>34</sup>Colonies, F<sup>3</sup> 54, ff. 345-6v, "Articles et conditions accordées par le Roy ..." 6 March 1694; and Colonies, B<sup>17</sup>, ff. 21, Pontchartrain to La Boulaye 6 January; *ibid.*, f. 23, same to Desgrassières, 6 January 1694.

<sup>35</sup>Colonies, C<sup>8A</sup> 7, ff. 503-7, Memorial of Commissaire de La Boulaye, 7 December 1693 [mistakenly bound in the general correspondence from Martinique].

<sup>36</sup>John Bromley. *Corsaires and Navies, 1660-1760*. (London and Ronceverte: The Hambledon Press 1987), 189.

<sup>37</sup>Marine, B<sup>3</sup> 79, ff. 194-6v, Gramont to Pontchartrain, 18 September 1693; also La Morandière, *Histoire de la pêche française de la morue*, 1: 454-5.

<sup>38</sup>Colonies, F<sup>3</sup> 54, ff 347-8, "Advis donné à Monsieur de St. Clair pour l'expédition de St Jean," (signed) Brouillan, 27 August 1694.

<sup>39</sup>Marine, B<sup>4</sup> 15, ff. 374-82, Information fait contre Sieur Detcheverry et Daspiouette, 15 September 1694. *CSP, Col. Ser., A & W1*, 1696-97, no. 417 gives the date of the attack as 1 August [o.s.] which is a mistake or typographical error for 31 August [o.s.] or 10 September [n.s.]; see also E. Taillemite, "Saint-Clair, Pierre de," *DCB*, 2: 590-1.

<sup>40</sup>Marine, B<sup>4</sup> 15, ff. 379-81v, for several documents including a chart of St. John's and its defenses. For the attack on St. John's see Olaf Uwe Janzen, "New Light on the Origins of Fort William at St. John's Newfoundland, 1693-1696." *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 83, no. 2 (Fall, 1987): 24-31.

<sup>41</sup>Colonies, c<sup>11C</sup> 2, ff. 38-42, (Copy) "Journal de la Route que nous avons tenu depuis Plaisance jusques à Bayonne," (signed) Du Vignau, Bayonne, 17 November 1694.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, ff. 17-17v, anonymous note in the ministry [no place, no date].

<sup>43</sup>Colonies, B<sup>17</sup>, ff, 112v-13, "Etat de distribution de la somme de [6,000] livres qui doit estre payée par le Sr. Hardouin marchand de Nantes en execution du traité fait avec luy le 13e du mois de fevrier dernier ..."

<sup>44</sup>Marine, B<sup>3</sup> 90, ff. 387-9, Du Guay to Pontchartrain, 3 May, 1695.

<sup>45</sup>Colonies, B<sup>17</sup>, ff. 115v, 117v-18, Pontchartrain to Brouillon 30 March and 13 April, 1695.

## French Navy's Alliance 175

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., ff. 156, Pontchartrain to Brouillon, 20 April 1695. See also Frederick J. Thorpe, *Remparts lointains: La politique française des travaux publics à Terre-Neuve et à l'Île Royale, 1695-1758*. (Ottawa: Éditions de l'université d'Ottawa 1980), 188.

<sup>47</sup>Symcox, *The Crisis of French Sea Power*, 174-5; Bromley, *Corsaires and Navies*, 188.

<sup>48</sup>Colonies, c<sup>11c</sup> 2, ff. 103-5, Mémoire sur l'entreprise de Terre-Neuve ..., 15 January, 1696; also La Roncière, *Histoire de la marine française*, 6: 271. See René Baudry, "Mombeton de Brouillon, Jacques-François de", *DCB*, 2: 479 for an alternative view of these events.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., f. 106, naval ministry note (no date).

<sup>50</sup>See note 54.

<sup>51</sup>Colonies, F<sup>3</sup> 54, ff. 358-9, Brouillon to Pontchartrain, 12 October 1696.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., ff. 358, 360v, "les chefs m'ont quasi toujours paru plus portés pour le profit que pour la gloire du Roy".

<sup>53</sup>Alan F. Williams, *Father Baudouin's War*, contains the most recent account of the war. It is chiefly interesting for a unique interpretation of the route followed by Iberville's force to and from St. John's and a translation of Abbé Baudouin's journal, first published by Auguste Gosselin in 1900 as *Journal de l'expédition de D'Iberville en Acadie et Terre-Neuve, par l'abbé Beaudouin; lettres de D'Iberville*, (Evreux).

<sup>54</sup>Williams, *op cit.*, 109-13.

<sup>55</sup>Colonies, B<sup>19</sup>, f. 161, Pontchartrain to Brouillon, 27 February 1697.

<sup>56</sup>Colonies, B<sup>19</sup>, f. 129, Pontchartrain to Bégon, 26 January 1697; *ibid.*, f. 134, same to Bonnaire, 30 January 1697; and *ibid.*, f. 136, same to Brouillon, 6 February, 1697. Also Bromley, *Corsaires and Navies*, 201, 304-5.

<sup>57</sup>Colonies, B<sup>19</sup>, ff. 136v-40, "Articles et conditions accordée au Sr de Beaubriand-Levesque ...," Versailles, 6 February 1697.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., f. 196, Pontchartrain to Bégon, 9 March 1697.