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The Atlantic Canada Shipping Project: A Retrospective and Rejoinder

ERIC W. SAGER

A RECENT ISSUE OF *Newfoundland Studies* brought a small surprise: a review article about the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project!¹ I was startled for two reasons: I did not know that our series of workshops could still attract scholarly attention, six years after the last one was held; and I did not know that there were more than a few people at Memorial University who still attached much importance to the Project, or even remembered it. Surprise soon gave way to queasy discomfort, as both C. Knick Harley and Yrjo Kaukiainen offered praise for work that was preliminary at best, and went on to plead that the work be completed. I simply cannot agree that those papers, written between 1977 and 1982, are a "major contribution" in which "data analysis is presented with definitive thoroughness" (Harley), or that there was "a high degree of sophistication" in both our methodology and theoretical approach" (Kaukiainen). And when pleading for the promised "final volume," our reviewers seem unaware that the collaboration intended to produce that book no longer exists. Our reviewers are working with outdated information and unfinished research. The fault is not theirs but mine, and that of other Project members, because we have allowed errors and jejune interpretation to stand unrevised. At the very least, I hope that Harley and Kaukiainen have given me an opportunity to offer the readers of this journal a brief report on further research, and a few reflections on the fate of Memorial University's largest research Project in maritime history.

Harley's comments need delay us only briefly. We did not ignore the links between shipowning and shipbuilding: the importance of these links

we acknowledge in a long essay in the last conference proceedings.² Having accepted the importance of shipbuilding, I still think it misleading to suggest that *shipowning* in the first half of the century was “temporary ownership of ships built as speculation for the British market.” Ships were built both on speculation and by contract, and for sale to owners in the Maritimes and Newfoundland, as well as for export to Britain.³ Harley proceeds to tinker with our own inadequate method for estimating profits — a method I abandoned six years ago. His reestimates raise a series of unanswered questions. If there were no profits to be made in 1871, why should Maritimers have continued to invest in ocean-going sailing ships through the 1870s, so that their fleets were about 63% larger in 1881 than in 1871?⁴ Is it possible that Nova Scotians were unable to distinguish profits from losses, or that they were content to run ships at a loss? And how would Harley explain the commonplace view of contemporary shipowners that it was possible to make very good profits with sailing ships?⁵ And if Norwegians could make profits with sailing ships, why not Nova Scotians?⁶ The answer, of course, is that Maritimers did make profits with sailing ships in the early 1870s, as subsequent research has shown.⁷

On the subject of the decline of the industry, Harley misses the interpretation we offered in the last conference proceedings, and substitutes a speculation of his own.⁸ “Ship managers in Atlantic Canada moved their base of operation to Britain,” he suggests. Owners were separated from information, and from management and control of their assets. Thus shipping ceased to be an attractive investment. No evidence is offered for these statements. There is a distinction here between management and ownership which I cannot understand, since management was normally entrusted to a “managing owner” who held shares in the vessel. The crew agreements tell us that the overwhelming majority of managing owners for Atlantic Canadian vessels lived in Atlantic Canada, along with other owners. Only a tiny minority moved to Britain. And in the age of the telegraph, what information did these owners lack? Why would they need to move to Britain in order to obtain information about the freight rates and commodities from eastern United States ports (these were the rates in which they were most interested, after all)? There is simply no evidence that these shipowners were increasingly separated from management and control of their assets. In the last half of the century other national fleets grew, some very rapidly, without moving to Britain, and the United Kingdom’s share of world tonnage declined.⁹ Why then should Atlantic Canadians find themselves peculiarly disadvantaged? Were they, as ancient myth and survey texts in Canadian history would have it, insular and backward colonials, forever doomed to life on the periphery?

My questions are less a critique of Harley than they are a gloomy comment on the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project and its meagre impact.

Our conclusions of the early 1980s were so unpersuasive and so incomplete that in 1988 a leading expert on the economic history of 19th century shipping, as Harley certainly is, must resort to flimsy speculation about the decline of our shipping industry. And Harley is not alone, for I have had this experience before, in reading the works of Canadian students of shipping for whom the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project might never have existed.¹⁰ If there are lessons here, they lie somewhere in the history of the Project itself, and in the story of its long-delayed completion.

The Atlantic Canada Shipping Project, which began at Memorial University in 1976, was a research project in history with a large archival and “document collecting” component. From the very beginning there was an unresolved tension between research and archival priorities, and the lesson for others who might embark on a large historical project is that such priorities must be worked out clearly, and on paper, before an application is submitted. Outsiders were often baffled, and Harley repeats a common misconception: one of the “major contributions” of the Project, he says, was to obtain and preserve the crew agreements for the British Empire. But acquisition of these documents preceded the Project by several years, and continued after the formal six-year term of the Project. Acquisition, preservation, indexing and housing these documents was never a contribution of the Project, but of the Maritime History Group and its archival successor in the 1980s, the Maritime History Archive.¹¹ Acquisition of the British Empire crew lists stands as one of the major archival achievements at Memorial University. It is not to be credited to the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project.

Ambiguous as the relations between archival and research priorities may have been, the Project’s own “document collecting programme” was related to specific research goals, and successful completion of the Project would depend upon achieving those research goals.¹² Although revised and expanded in scope, the main goals remained intact, even as funding for the Project was extended from five to six years (the last full year of funding was 1981-82).¹³ The “stream of publications anticipated under the programme” included, among other things, published monographs on each of three major ports (Yarmouth, Saint John and Halifax), a series of articles, a collection of papers from “the Maritime History Group Workshops,” and, at the conclusion of the whole, the “integrated volume,” scheduled for writing in Year 6 (1981-82) and intended for external publication.¹⁴

Behind all of this were the broader aims, more often spoken than written. We would “pick this industry clean” (David Alexander’s words) and perhaps even connect the industry to the bigger story of economic development in Atlantic Canada. We would transcend what Fernand Braudel called *l’histoire artisanale* — the solitary craft of traditional pen-and-ink history — and show that truly collaborative and interdisciplinary research was possible, yielding a single, coherent intellectual product from the

contributions of several minds. We would work, play and think together for years, and pick the brains of visiting scholars from many disciplines and many countries, until we melded theory with technique, antiquarian knowledge with computerized data bases, and international maritime history with regional history.

If we judge the Project by these original goals, the record contains a few important successes and many unfulfilled promises. Creating such a large, mainly computerized data base was heroic work for which a number of people deserve great credit.¹⁵ The empirical foundations built by 1982, and the lively ferment of those workshops, were essential to any further results. But monographs on Yarmouth and Saint John were never completed, in published or unpublished form. Of the eight port monographs which were eventually promised, only four were completed. None has been published.¹⁶ A number of articles appeared, but the majority of our publications appeared in six conference proceedings: to these volumes Project members contributed reports on work in progress but no definitive conclusion, whether it be about the rise of the industry, the decline of the industry, productivity and profits, the connection with shipbuilding, the labour force in shipping, or any other aspect of the shipping industry in Atlantic Canada. These volumes are of interest to specialists in the history of 19th-century shipping; they have proved of little interest to others, and it is little wonder that about 750 volumes remain unsold.

By the time the Project's funding came to an end, Memorial University had very large archival and computer resources in maritime history, but more of that university's research and writing in maritime history was going on outside the Maritime History Group than within it.¹⁷ Since 1983 the unfinished research collaboration, intended to be the work of six people, had become the work of two, only one of whom — Gerry Panting — was employed at Memorial University. Although Panting's contribution remains of enormous value, there was, I think, a wholly unnecessary consequence of all this: the largest funded project in maritime history ever undertaken in Canada has been brought to a fragmentary and belated completion, with most of the fragments assembled, not in Newfoundland but in British Columbia.¹⁸ Eighteen years after the first Crew Lists came to Memorial University, and thirteen years after the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project began, we are still waiting to see whether anybody at Memorial can complete a monograph on the history of Canadian or British shipping. There would be nothing puzzling about this, but for the fact that Memorial University professes to specialize in maritime studies and possesses the largest archive of shipping documents in the English-speaking world.

The future of maritime history at Memorial lies very much with younger faculty who came after the Shipping Project.¹⁹ Among the many magnificent opportunities before them, there remains the opportunity to build upon

the Project's foundations and existing archival resources to pursue a collaborative, interdisciplinary social and economic history of a maritime-based people — the people of Newfoundland. When I urged this option upon the Maritime History Group in 1982 and 1983, they rejected the idea. The opportunity remains, and it is, in part, a legacy of the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project.

My greatest concern about the mixed outcome of the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project is that it will encourage the antiquarians and luddites in our profession. Many humanists in Canada remain skeptical about collaborative projects sustained by large grants, and the success of the first volume of the *Historical Atlas of Canada* has not silenced them. There are those who will label the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project a failure — which would be unfair and incorrect — and conclude that such projects are seldom appropriate in our discipline. There are those who will say that the craft of history is more art than social science, and hence too personal, to allow the kind of coauthorship and synthesis which happens so often in the social sciences and the natural sciences. How often is a single major book the work of two minds, let alone four? Collaboration, they will say, may build huge data banks, but history itself, that complex mix of theory, evidence, and creative imagination, must in the end fall to the solitary thinker.

There is much at stake here, for if the traditionalists have their way, historians in Canada will remain lonely chroniclers writing notes on index cards, while the adjacent disciplines in the human sciences move into the 21st century with automated archives, computerized data banks, vast new sources of knowledge, teams of researchers, and rapidly evolving method and theory. Obviously not all historians require such tools. But our discipline is in peril if we are denied them altogether.

How far the Shipping Project may vindicate such large-scale collaborative research remains to be seen, and I am not the one to pass judgment. But I think there are already a few lessons here, for all who would embark upon such a project. First, when a research project is so well conceived as was the Shipping Project, the foundations will allow others to build, for a long time to come, even if its creators do not live to see the results. The creators of the Shipping Project were David Alexander, Keith Matthews, and Gerry Panting. The tragic deaths of David and Keith ruptured this Project at its very core: but the lesson is that a collaboration so well conceived is greater than the sum of its parts, and will yield partial, unexpected, but useful results even in the absence of two of its three creators.

The second lesson is that any more successful conclusion requires that the execution and completion of such a Project fall to the same individuals who conceived it in the first place, or those who share in its conception and vision. Behind the Project there was a vision, and even if it was not shared equally by all three Principal Investigators, it would have been enough to

drive the work to completion and to success, whatever obstacles and disagreements might have arisen. That vision was most clearly articulated by David Alexander, who was the driving intellectual force in this Project:

the issue is more than an academic one for us, and even more than a strictly historical one. This region of Canada suffers from enormous levels of unemployment, and in Newfoundland, at least, our earned per capita income is less than half the Ontario level. . . . if what happened in Eastern Canada was an inevitable result of technological change, the present and future prospects for the region look dismal. Norway has managed to flourish on the basis of a traditional reliance on the sea. Why have they succeeded where we failed?²⁰

It was a weakness of the Project that those charged with its completion in the 1980s were not its creators, with the sole exception of Gerry Panting.

Finally, I think that the institution which hosts such a Project must share, or at least understand this vision, and in return for granting the funding, resources, and research time necessary for such a large project, the institution has the right to *insist* that work be completed while, of course, respecting the academic freedom of researchers. I worked on contract for Memorial University for four years, and to my knowledge no senior administrator has ever asked whether I fulfilled the terms of my contract or when I expect to complete my share of the book which we promised to write, the research for which was sponsored and cofunded by Memorial University.²¹ In these circumstances it is little wonder that promises remain unfulfilled and books so long delayed.

This story might seem to justify all of David Alexander's deep pessimism about the Shipping Project. But I think not. I never shared his pessimism and I still do not. The Project remains a remarkable testimony to its foundations and to the vitality of the original collaboration. Even when the original builders are gone and other links are weak, the foundations still stand and we may build upon them for years to come.

Notes

¹C. Knick Harley and Yrjo Kaukiainen, "Panel Review: The Atlantic Canada Shipping Project," *Newfoundland Studies* 4, 1 (1988), 87-97.

²Eric W. Sager and Gerry Panting, "Staple Economies and the Rise and Decline of the Shipping Industry in Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914," in Lewis R. Fischer and Gerald E. Panting, eds., *Change and Adaptation in Maritime History: The North Atlantic Fleets in the Nineteenth Century* (St. John's: Maritime History Group, 1985), 5-7.

³In the decades between 1820 and 1860, between 53% and 65% of all newly-registered tonnage was transferred to Britain. But much of that tonnage was used by local owners before being transferred.

⁴If we sum the gross tonnage on registry in eight ports (Saint John, Yarmouth, Halifax, Windsor, Pictou, Miramichi, Charlottetown and St. John's), deducting all vessels of less than

250 tons, and deducting all vessels transferred out of the region within three years of first registry, we have 332,000 tons in 1871 and 541,000 tons in 1881.

⁵Peter Mitchell, a New Brunswick MP and an expert on the shipping business, said in 1878 that "There was no doubt that the Yarmouth ships, for example, made a better return for the money and labour invested in them than almost any industry in the Province." Canada, House of Commons *Debates*, 18 February 1878, 363.

⁶See Lewis R. Fischer and Helge W. Nordvik, "From Broager to Bergen: The Risks and Rewards of Peter Jebsen, Shipowner, 1864-1892," *Sjofartshistorisk Arbok* (Bergen: 1986).

⁷Eric W. Sager and Lewis R. Fischer, "The Pursuit of Profits: An Analysis of the Returns from the Shipping Industry of Atlantic Canada" (paper presented to the Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, Saint John, May 1983). These and other results will appear in the forthcoming book by Eric W. Sager and Gerry Panting mentioned in note 17.

⁸Eric W. Sager and Gerry Panting, "Staple Economies and the Rise and Decline of the Shipping Industry in Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914," in Fischer and Panting, *Change and Adaptation*, 1-46.

⁹In 1850 the U.K. had 39.5% of world tonnage; in 1900 the U.K. had 35.5% of world tonnage. See Sarah Palmer, "The British Shipping Industry, 1850-1914," in Fischer and Panting, *Change and Adaptation*, 90.

¹⁰I think particularly of a manuscript which I assessed a few years ago on an aspect of Canadian shipping, which repeated without question the old explanation that eastern Canadian shipping collapsed because wood and sail were obsolete. I thought we had disposed of this technological determinism years ago.

¹¹The Maritime History Archive is now in the capable hands of Heather Wareham.

¹²In what follows I refer to the initial application for programme funding submitted to the Canada Council: "The Maritime History of Atlantic Canada" (Maritime History Group, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1975).

¹³The initial application, for instance, called for three port monographs only: a Yarmouth monograph, presumably by Principal Investigators; and monographs on Halifax and Saint John, by post-doctoral fellows. After the project began, and with the hiring of a third post-doctoral fellow (or Research Associate) in 1978, it was decided that there would be port studies for all major and minor ports (the major ports being Saint John, Yarmouth, Halifax and Windsor; the minor ports being St. John's, Charlottetown, Pictou, and Miramichi). Whether or not these would be published depended on their quality, but publication was agreed to be possible and desirable.

¹⁴In the original application this book appears as follows: "YEAR 6. i) for external publication: *The Shipping Industry of Atlantic Canada in the Late Nineteenth Century*." No explanation is given as to why the title refers only to the "late" nineteenth century.

¹⁵The Project's research assistants were competent and dedicated professionals: Roberta Thomas, Heather Wareham, Olga Prentice, Janet Bartlett, Terry Bishop.

¹⁶Port monographs exist in typescript for Charlottetown, P.E.I. (by Lewis R. Fischer); for St. John's, Newfoundland (by Eric Sager); for Halifax (by Eric Sager and Gerry Panting); for Windsor (by Eric Sager and Gerry Panting).

¹⁷Non-members of the Group who were engaged in historical work on shipping, fishing, or sea-based activity included Shannon Ryan, Rosemary Ommer, Peter Sinclair, Gordon Handcock, Chesley Sanger, Raoul Andersen, and John Mannion, to name only a few. The creation of a Maritime Studies Research Unit and other more recent developments cannot be construed as spin-offs of the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project.

¹⁸The two remaining collaborators were Gerry Panting and myself. The two books are: Eric W. Sager, *Seafaring Labour: The Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989); and Eric W. Sager and Gerry Panting, *Maritime Capital: The Shipping Industry in Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914* (sent to a publisher in 1988). Of course articles have appeared which use the data base created by the Project. See,

for instance, Lewis R. Fischer and Helge W. Nordvik, "From Namsos to Halden: Myths and Realities in the History of Norwegian Seamen's Wages, 1850-1914," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 35, 1 (1987), 41-63; Lewis R. Fischer, "International Maritime Labour, 1863-1900: World Wages and Trends," *The Great Circle; Journal of the Australian Association for Maritime History* 10, 1 (1988), 1-21; Rosemary Ommer, "The Decline of the Eastern Canadian Shipping Industry, 1880-95," *Journal of Transport History* (1984), 25-44. But I know of no other collaborative books on the subject tackled by the Project. It is important to note that intellectual or ideological differences were not so serious as to prevent collaboration. Indeed, when a detailed outline of the "final volume" was planned and accepted in 1983 no such differences appeared. This is not to say that such differences would not have appeared in the course of writing the book. If they had, there was always another option: the volume could have had separate chapters on different aspects of the subject, each chapter having different authors or coauthors. There might have been different emphases or approaches in different chapters. An example is the successful conclusion of the "fish and ships" Project in British Columbia: Patricia Marchak, Neil Guppy and John McMullan, *Uncommon Property: The Fishing and Fish Processing Industries in British Columbia* (Toronto: Methuen, 1987).

¹⁹The appointment of Dr. Valerie C. Burton augurs well for the future.

²⁰David Alexander, in "Discussion," in Keith Matthews and Gerald Panting, eds., *Ships and Shipbuilding in the North Atlantic Region* (St. John's: Maritime History Group, 1978), 256-7.

²¹There is one honourable exception: James K. Hiller, former Head of Memorial's History Department, never forgot the "final volume"; many times he urged us to get it done.