

## RESEARCH NOTE / NOTE DE RECHERCHE

# The Truck System in the Cape Breton Fishery: Philip Robin and Company in Chéticamp, 1843–1852

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### Introduction

FOLLOWING THE WORK OF HAROLD INNIS and others, historical studies of the cod fishery of the Maritimes and Newfoundland and Labrador have often presented the industry as having been highly exploitative and as having had a retarding effect on local economic development.<sup>1</sup> In one effort to move beyond merely accepting these assessments as givens, Rosemary Ommer set out to examine how the merchant firms that controlled the fishery in the 19th century operated their system of debit and credit and what effect this system had on the local inhabitants working for these firms.<sup>2</sup> As a data source, Ommer selected the ledgers and letter books of Charles Robin and Company (CRC), the Jersey merchant firm which dominated the industry in the Bay of Chaleur region of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Among her conclusions, she suggests that, while fishermen may have been forcibly tied to the company through indebtedness prior to 1800, by the first part of the 19th century, the relative isolation of these communities and the formidable cost of outmigration meant that the fishermen “were probably stuck there anyway.”<sup>3</sup> Further, while acknowledging

1. Harold Innis, *The Cod Fisheries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, rev. ed., 1954) and Gerald M. Sider, “The ties that bind: Culture and agriculture, property and propriety in the Newfoundland village fishery,” *Social History* 5, 1 (1980): 1–39.

2. Rosemary E. Ommer, “The truck system in Gaspé, 1822–1877,” *Acadiensis* xix, 1 (1989): 91–114.

3. Ommer, “The truck system in Gaspé,” 112.

that a form of truck economy, in which store credit was tied to production, operated in the fishery, she emphasizes that “the system was more complex than the mythology about it has acknowledged to date; the reality was far from monochromatic.”<sup>4</sup>

Further research has provided more detail on the mechanics of the merchant credit system as it operated in the fisheries in Newfoundland and the Gaspé,<sup>5</sup> but very little work has been done on the activity of merchant firms in the fishery in Cape Breton during the 19th century. Ommer’s choice of CRC is fortuitous in this regard, in that the associated firm of Philip Robin and Company (PRC) was operating during this same period in Cape Breton. Consequently, this research note offers a preliminary exploration of the application of the merchant credit system in the Cape Breton fishery in the middle of the 19th century, with a particular emphasis on PRC operations in Chéticamp. The short-term objectives of the research were to identify the existence of any significant differences in the financial operations between CRC and PRC, as well as to gain some appreciation of the relationship between the company and the Acadian people in Chéticamp. The evidence suggests that PRC tolerated a much higher level of client debt than CRC and that the relationship between the company and the local population was an integral component of the Acadians’ determination to remain in Chéticamp. The longer-term project will entail a more thorough examination of the source material in order to more adequately substantiate these initial findings and contribute to a broader understanding of the merchant credit system and the role of merchant firms in local economic development.

As Stephen Hornsby explains, the economic history of Cape Breton up to the end of the 19th century was basically one of a long-established and largely foreign-owned and operated staple industry (fishing for cod) being replaced in later years by another staple industry, again characterized by foreign ownership and control: coal mining.<sup>6</sup> French and Basque fishermen had operated a

4. Ommer, “The truck system in Gaspé,” 107.

5. See David Lee, *The Robins in the Gaspé, 1766 to 1825* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1984); Roch Samson, *Fishermen and Merchants in 19th Century Gaspé: The Fisher-Dealers of William Hyman and Sons* (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, Parks Canada, 1984); Rosemary E. Ommer, *From Outpost to Outport: A Structural Analysis of the Jersey-Gaspé Codfishery, 1767–1886* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991); Robert C. H. Sweeny, “Accounting for change: Understanding merchant credit strategies in outport Newfoundland,” in *How Deep is the Ocean?* James E. Candow and Carol Corbin, eds. (Sydney, NS: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1997), 121–138; Rosemary E. Ommer, “One hundred years of fishery crises in Newfoundland,” *Acadiensis* xxiii, 2 (1994): 5–20, and the conference papers assembled in *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective*, edited by Rosemary E. Ommer (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 1990).

6. Stephen J. Hornsby, “Staple trades, subsistence agriculture, and nineteenth-century Cape Breton Island,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 79, 3 (1989): 411–434, and Stephen J. Hornsby, *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992).

seasonal cod fishery since the early 16th century, with the French establishing a more permanent fishery in the early part of 18th century at Louisbourg and on the islands on the southern coast. After the British defeat of the French, British merchant firms quickly moved in to take advantage of the lucrative fishery. During the transition from fish to coal, a large number of Scottish immigrants attempted to establish an agricultural economy, but it never amounted to much more than subsistence farming, with many of the Scots emigrating out of Cape Breton to other locations in Canada, the Eastern United States, and Australia. Despite this, the population of the island grew from about 2,500 in 1801, to 35,000 in 1838, almost 55,000 in 1851, and about 87,000 in 1892.<sup>7</sup>

Two events that had a significant economic impact on the island occurred in the middle of the century. First, the Reciprocity Treaty of 1854 granted Americans the right to fish in Canadian waters.<sup>8</sup> While Ommer observes that this political change had no lasting effect on CRC operations in the Gaspé, primarily because the treaty was abrogated in 1866, she does indicate that the level of debt increased during this period.<sup>9</sup> The treaty's impact on PRC operations in Cape Breton is not known. Second, between 1845 and 1849, a potato famine in Cape Breton meant that many farmers abandoned their land, while others were forced to mortgage their properties in order to afford food and other supplies for survival.<sup>10</sup> The famine's impact, if any, on PRC and the fishery has yet to be adequately explored.

The Acadian people of Cape Breton are descended from the original French settlers of the Atlantic region, who were deported by the British in the 1750s, but who made their way back to the island over the subsequent decades, after spending time in the Gaspé, Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, the Magdalen Islands, and St. Pierre and Miquelon. The earliest French settlements had been situated along the south coast of Cape Breton, at Louisbourg, Gabarus, and Isle Madame. While explorers and seasonal fishers had visited the Chéticamp area on the north coast since at least the 16th century, the history of Chéticamp as an inhabited village begins in the 1780s with the arrival of the first settlers.<sup>11</sup> The geographic isolation of this area was further compounded by ethno-cultural homogeneity and intermarriage among the original families.

7. Hornsby, "Staple trades," 418, 422.

8. Ommer, "The truck system," 93. See Marilyn Gerriets and Julian Gwyn, "Tariffs, trade and reciprocity: Nova Scotia, 1830–1866," *Acadiensis* xxv, 2 (1996): 62–82.

9. Ommer, *From Outpost to Outport*, 124.

10. Hornsby, *Nineteenth-Century*, 111–120. See Rusty Bitterman, "The hierarchy of the soil: Land and labour in a 19th century Cape Breton community," *Acadiensis* xviii, 1 (1988): 33–55, and Robert J. Morgan, *Early Cape Breton: From Founding to Famine* (Wreck Cove: Breton Books, 2000), 136–152.

11. Anselme Chiasson, *Chéticamp: History and Acadian Traditions* (Wreck Cove: Breton Books, 1998), 11–21.

The story of the Robin family's involvement in the Atlantic region's fishery begins with three brothers: Philip (1738–1821), John (1740–1793), and Charles (1743–1824).<sup>12</sup> Even though the Cape Breton branch of the firm would be known as PRC until the late 1880s, there is no evidence that the oldest brother ever made the voyage across the Atlantic. Rather, along with retaining the family store in St. Aubin, Jersey, Philip's primary role was that of business manager, coordinating the production, finances, and marketing of the global operation.<sup>13</sup> John, having risen to the position of ship captain at a young age, with experience transporting fish from Newfoundland to Spain, set out in 1765 to evaluate the commercial potential of the old French fisheries on Isle Madame. After a few years, he left Arichat and spent his remaining years at sea. The Cape Breton operation was left in the hands of hired managers and would remain so until the early 20th century. In 1766, John had sent Charles to the Gaspé to evaluate prospects around the Bay of Chaleur, and within a decade, CRC dominated the fishery in that area. Charles would remain in direct control of the company until 1802, at which point his nephew Philip, son of his older brother Philip, was put in charge until 1814, when he also retired to Jersey.

By 1825, CRC had established operations along the Bay of Chaleur at Bonaventure, New Carlisle, Port Daniel, Nouvelle, Newport, Grande-Rivière, and Percé, with its headquarters at Paspébiac.<sup>14</sup> Even though the Cape Breton operation was originally established at Arichat on Isle Madame, partially as a consequence of significant competition in that area,<sup>15</sup> by the early 1770s, PRC had expanded its operations to Chéticamp, initially with a seasonal fishing station, followed in the mid-1780s with a permanent facility.<sup>16</sup> The company would have no substantial competition in that area until the end of the 19th century. Despite their common heritage and circumstances, CRC and PRC operated as regionally distinct business entities, both reporting back to the managing partners in Jersey. Family interest in the companies declined steadily during the middle of the 19th century, finally ceasing when the family was forced to liquidate its assets, following the failure of the Jersey Banking Company in 1886.<sup>17</sup> The Robin store, then part of Robin, Jones and Whitman, operated in Chéticamp until 2005.

Recently, Erna MacLeod has examined PRC's letter books from around 1890, a time when advances in communications and transportation technologies were altering the way of doing business, and the people of Chéticamp were

12. See Lee, *The Robins*, 12–15.

13. See Rosemary E. Ommer, "A peculiar and immediate dependence of the crown: The basis of Jersey merchant triangle," *Business History* 25, 2 (1983): 107–124.

14. Lee, *The Robins*, 90.

15. See Hornsby, *Nineteenth-Century*, 5.

16. See Chiasson, *Chéticamp*, 48.

17. Lee, *The Robins*, 98.

seeking greater economic independence, both inside and outside the fishery.<sup>18</sup> While MacLeod's study is focused on the dynamic interplay between PRC and the people of Chéticamp, as they balanced their respective demands and expectations in light of these changes, very little research has been carried out to describe company operations or the economic condition of the local inhabitants, earlier in the century.

The data for this preliminary study was gathered from the ledger books for PRC that are part of the Robin, Jones and Whitman collection in the Beaton Institute, at Cape Breton University, in Sydney, Nova Scotia.<sup>19</sup> The collection consists of 445 volumes of letter books, ledgers, cash books, day books, mortgage books, waste books, and other materials, covering the period from 1823 through to 1955. More specifically, financial data was gathered from the approximately 6,000 pages of accounts in the ledgers for the ten years from 1843 to 1852.<sup>20</sup> Regrettably, the letter books for this period are missing from this collection.

The decision to focus on this particular decade reflects a number of considerations. First, it coincides with the central years of Ommer's study, during which the number of CRC clients with a negative balance on their accounts declined steadily, leading to the obvious question of whether a parallel trend was taking place in Chéticamp. Second, it represents a period prior to the establishment of the Reciprocity Treaty and therefore avoids the problem of trying to determine the highly localized economic impact of this regional event. Finally, it coincides with the potato famine in Cape Breton and thus provides an opportunity to evaluate the economic impact of this local event on PRC operations.

## The Truck System

GEORGE HILTON DEFINES THE TRUCK SYSTEM in general terms as "a set of closely related arrangements whereby some form of consumption is tied to the employment contract."<sup>21</sup> In the current context, clients exchanged fish in various forms, from freshly caught to fully cured, for food, clothing, fishing gear, and much of whatever else they needed to live.<sup>22</sup> From a business perspective, the truck system can be seen as a hybrid between a barter-based

18. Erna MacLeod, "The letterbooks of Charles Robin-Collas & Company: Changes and challenges in Cape Breton Island's cod fishery, 1886–1895," *Acadiensis* XLII, 2 (2013): 27–50.

19. Robin, Jones and Whitman papers, MG 14, 55, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University.

20. MG 14, 55 B12–B24.

21. George W. Hilton, *The Truck System including a History of the British Truck Acts, 1465–1960* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1960), 1.

22. Chiasson, *Chéticamp*, 35, notes that, while proximity to the sea seems to have inhibited the large scale cultivation of grains, the soil was good enough to support growing vegetables and raising a small number of livestock.

and a cash-based economy. Like a barter economy, the system is based on the direct exchange of goods. Like a cash economy, the value of goods is assigned in monetary terms. In what might be viewed as ideal situations, companies have both a monopoly and monopsony, acting as sole provider and sole purchaser. From an economist's point of view, the genuine form of both of these market conditions is predicated on the ability to prevent clients from either purchasing goods from other suppliers or selling their product to other customers. As David Galenson points out, reflecting on Ommer's analysis of CRC, neither of these conditions was actually obtained in the case of CRC.<sup>23</sup> Rather, as a consequence of isolation, access to alternate purchasers or suppliers was extremely limited, creating *de facto*, if not *de jure*, monopolistic and monopsonistic conditions. At the same time, it is a mistake to conclude from this that the relationship was one-sided. As David MacDonald states in his analysis of the operation of Newman and Company in Newfoundland: "If the relationship between merchant and planter continued, it was because each felt a continuing need for the other's services."<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in his study of the fishery in Conception Bay, Newfoundland, Sean Cadigan observes that

there is little to substantiate that any merchant in the Newfoundland fishery of the first half of the nineteenth century pursued a debt-led strategy to secure fish supplies, or used unequal exchange with planters by fixing fish prices relative to the price for supplies given out on credit for the fishing voyage. All that can be said for sure is that truck consisted of merchants exchanging capital goods, supplies and provisions in return for planters' fish and oil.<sup>25</sup>

With respect to the notion that the merchant credit system hampered local economic development, Ommer succinctly captures the spirit of what was taking place:

The purpose of the Jersey enterprise at Gaspé was not to bring wealth or development to the colony, but to bring profit to the firm and wealth and development to Jersey through the creation of a complex commodity exchange in which codfish was the prime mover.<sup>26</sup>

Rather than being a concern of the merchant firms, the responsibility for local economic development was in the hands of local residents. That being said, the extent to which these people had the opportunity, or the necessary resource base, to build an economy was minimal. As Hornsby points out, with respect to Cape Breton, the development of agriculture as a viable enterprise was

23. David W. Galenson, "Commentary," in Ommer, *Merchant Credit*, 74.

24. David A. MacDonald, "They cannot pay us in money: Newman and Company and the supplying system in the Newfoundland fishery, 1850–1884," in Ommer, *Merchant Credit*, 114–128, 128.

25. Sean T. Cadigan, *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay: Merchant-Settler Relations in Newfoundland, 1785–1855* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 116.

26. Ommer, "The truck system," 113.

Table 1: Client Account Status, 1843–1852

Year	Client Owing (%)	Company Owing (%)	Break Even (%)	Total
1843	238 (75.8)	28 (8.9)	50 (15.9)	314
1844	232 (73.9)	28 (8.9)	54 (17.2)	314
1845	251 (74.0)	41 (12.1)	47 (13.9)	339
1846	291 (70.3)	37 (8.9)	86 (20.8)	414
1847	245 (71.8)	38 (11.1)	58 (17.0)	341
1848	280(73.3)	39 (10.2)	63 (16.5)	382
1849	276 (75.4)	45 (12.3)	45 (12.3)	366
1850	287 (79.1)	40 (11.0)	36 (9.9)	363
1851	282 (75.0)	44 (11.7)	50 (13.3)	376
1852	292 (81.1)	41 (11.4)	27 (7.5)	360

inhibited by poor soil conditions, inclement weather, and the inability to reach markets for export.<sup>27</sup>

What was the situation in Chéticamp? Was PRC pursuing a debt-led strategy to control a captive workforce? Table 1 presents a summary of client account status for the decade.

The average number of accounts for the period was 357, with an average of 267 (75 per cent) accounts owing balances to the company, 38 (11 per cent) being owed amounts by the company, and 52 (14 per cent) in an even financial position. Ommer indicates that the number of negative accounts at Percé declined from 45 per cent in 1838, to 12 per cent in 1856, and at Paspébiac, from 73 per cent in 1829, to 25 per cent in 1846.<sup>28</sup> There is no indication of a parallel trend developing in Chéticamp. Rather, this table shows that a fairly consistent level of indebtedness persisted throughout the decade, with the high percentage of negative accounts suggesting that the economic situation facing the local inhabitants was quite precarious.

The year 1846 stands out because of the large increase in the number of accounts for that year (a 22 per cent increase over the previous year) and for the fact that a relatively large number of clients finished the year in a breakeven position. This year coincides with the second year of the potato famine, and it is possible that a number of individuals who would otherwise have made their living from farming were able to find work with the Robins in order to maintain their existence.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, these new clients would not have started

27. Hornsby, *Nineteenth Century Cape Breton*, 21–23.

28. Ommer, “The truck system,” 96.

29. See Hornsby, *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton*, 111–120.



out with cumulative negative balances on their accounts, thereby increasing the possibility that they could finish the year debt free. The fact that the client numbers declined in the following year suggests that the majority of the individuals concerned did not view their participation in the fishery, or their relationship with PRC, as a long-term solution to their plight.

Ommer indicates that, in any given year between 1828 and 1862, CRC never owed its clients a total of more than £4202 at Paspébiac and £1712 at Percé.<sup>30</sup> During the same period, clients owed the company as much as £7615 at Paspébiac and £3623 at Percé. By way of comparison, for the year (1849) with the highest percentage of accounts (12.3) ending the year with a positive balance, PRC owed clients a total of £183. Similarly, for the year (1852) with the highest percentage of accounts (81) owing PRC, the total amount owed was £4736. The average number of clients at Chéticamp was about 70 per cent of the number in the Gaspé.<sup>31</sup> Comparing the two locations, the amount owed to clients by PRC was only 3 per cent of that in the Gaspé while the amount owed to PRC was 42 per cent of that owed to CRC. These values reflect the fact that the number of clients with a negative balance remained high in Chéticamp throughout the decade. At the same time, they demonstrate that the actual amount of long-term debt was significantly lower at Chéticamp than in the Gaspé.

In an effort to show how the truck system affected individuals, Ommer examines the accounts of a random set of clients, as well as the accounts of an extended family. Her analysis demonstrates not only that there was a tremendous variety among clients in terms of year to year status, but that in any given year, not everyone fared equally well or equally as badly.<sup>32</sup> She also points out that in those cases where an individual owed the company amounts in the range of about £40, over a period of five or more years, they were cut off and not allowed to incur more debt.<sup>33</sup> Table 2 contains the yearly balances for twelve randomly selected individuals who had accounts with PRC continuously through the decade.<sup>34</sup>

One of the more remarkable aspects of this table is the extensive range in values it reflects, from Simon Doucet's positive balance of £10,19,10 in 1851, to Simon Cormier's negative balance of £109,6,9 in 1852. On an individual basis, irrespective of the overall magnitude of the debt, most accounts appear to have stayed within a fairly narrow range of year to year fluctuation, perhaps

30. Ommer, "The truck system," 97.

31. Ommer, "The truck system," 96.

32. Ommer, "The truck system," 107.

33. Ommer, "The truck system," 107.

34. To construct this sample, I went through the spreadsheet of account data selecting every fiftieth individual and, if they were not on the books for the entire period, I selected the closest individual meeting that criterion.



Table 2: Account Balances for Select Clients, 1843–1852

	1843	1844	1845	1846	1847	1848	1849	1850	1851	1852
Pierre Aucoin	11,8,4	12,9,8	10,13,3	12,6,3	11,6,1	17,11,5	11,9,9	9,8,3	7,14,2	34,10,8
James Butler	23,3,8	27,10,5	29,15,7	25,16,3	23,5,0	31,24,3	30,7,2	32,12,5	31,12,4	40,14,3
Thomas Chiasson	<b>5,13,10</b>	2,2,0	<b>2,11,3</b>	16,12,9	2,0,11	35,15,9	26,1,11	26,7,7	17,0,11	21,5,10
Simon Cormier	92,12,2	85,4,3	75,16,0	80,10,0	72,5,2	65,3,10	84,3,4	103,14,6	95,15,6	109,6,9
Charles Desveaux	27,17,4	29,16,6	32,2,9	31,17,6	37,18,6	38,13,10	36,10,8	40,9,1	53,8,10	67,2,10
Simon Doucet	<b>7,6,7</b>	<b>1,7,2</b>	<b>2,8,2</b>	1,19,1	<b>0,17,8</b>	<b>6,14,10</b>	<b>4,12,0</b>	3,18,7	<b>10,19,10</b>	2,15,2
Joseph Godel	21,6,9	24,4,3	23,15,8	22,8,11	23,17,3	28,9,5	14,16,10	14,16,10	15,15,2	17,2,4
Simon LaRade	27,18,5	29,15,7	31,3,4	34,0,0	30,19,4	32,14,1	39,11,1	39,0,9	42,18,11	48,5,0
FrancoisLeFort	20,4,3	20,23,4	21,19,6	19,3,8	24,11,3	31,7,9	28,17,5	26,13,4	19,7,9	25,16,2
Angus McKinnon	2,11,10	3,9,8	6,1,2	0,2,11	1,17,3	<b>0,8,1</b>	0,12,4	<b>1,2,0</b>	<b>0,0,3</b>	10,4,0
Moise Poirier	10,13,1	26,19,8	20,18,3	13,18,7	14,5,0	11,11,11	5,18,10	16,0,8	0,14,2	24,19,4
Pierre Roche	12,19,2	15,8,7	16,13,1	18,4,7	20,7,2	27,15,4	29,17,3	27,17,9	29,0,0	34,7,10

Note: Amounts in this table are given in pounds, shillings, and pence, rounded to the nearest pence. One pound consisted of twenty shillings, and one shilling was made up of twelve pence. Pence were further divided into four farthings, and entries in the ledger books, especially for individual items, often include fractions of pence. The same convention holds for subsequent tables, with negative amounts in brackets. For this table only, bolded numbers indicate positive balances. All other amounts are negative.

best exemplified by the account of Angus McKinnon. The table also shows that individuals experienced years that were exceptionally good (Moise Poirier's debt shrank from £26,19,8 in 1844 to £20,18,3 in 1845, and to £13,18,7 in 1846), or exceptionally bad (Simon Cormier's debt grew from £84,3,4 in 1849 to £103,14,6 in 1850). The final year (1852) examined appears to have been an exceptionally bad one, with every client ending the year in a much worse financial position than had been the case in 1851, and all but one client (Joseph Godel) ending the decade at a higher level of indebtedness than they had at the start.

To get some idea of the relationship between the volume of purchases and payments made by individuals in any given year, Table 3 contains the value of goods purchased, the value of products supplied and the opening and closing account balance for the year 1847, for the same set of individuals listed in the previous table.

The year 1847 was selected simply because it is in about the middle of the decade and appears to be fairly typical with respect to the rest of the decade. Purchases ranged from a low of £5,17,9 (Pierre Aucoin) to a high of £46,6,4 (Simon Cormier). Similarly, payments ranged from a low of £4,2,1 (Pierre Roche) to a high of £61,9,7 (Thomas Chiasson). The sample is evenly split (6–6)

Table 3: Account Summary for Select Clients, 1847

	Opening Balance	Purchases	Payments	Closing Balance
Pierre Aucoin	(12,6,3)	(5,17,9)	6,17,11	(11,6,1)
James Butler	(25,16,3)	(13,12,1)	16,3,4	(23,5,0)
Thomas Chiasson	(16,12,9)	(42,15,11)	61,9,7	(2,0,11)
Simon Cormier	(80,10,0)	(46,6,4)	54,11,2	(72,5,2)
Charles Desveaux	(31,17,6)	(10,8,7)	4,7,6	(37,18,6)
Simon Doucet	(1,19,1)	(34,6,9)	37,3,6	0,17,8
Joseph Godel	(22,8,11)	(7,10,6)	6,2,1	(23,17,3)
Simon LaRade	(34,0,0)	(9,4,1)	12,4,9	(30,19,4)
Francois LeFort	(19,3,8)	(18,17,9)	13,9,2	(24,11,3)
Angus McKinnon	(0,2,11)	(13,5,6)	11,11,2	(1,17,3)
Moise Poirier	(13,18,7)	(29,1,8)	28,15,3	(14,5,0)
Pierre Roche	(18,4,7)	(6,4,8)	4,2,1	(20,7,2)

with respect to whether payments exceeded purchases or vice versa. In terms of extreme differences between purchases and payments, Charles Desveaux's purchases were more than double his payments, and Thomas Chiasson's payments were about 44 per cent higher than his purchases.

Some of the variance in the range of these accounts can be attributed to the different life and work circumstances of the individuals. Not all clients would have been part of the fishing enterprise, and among those who were, there were many different occupational categories. Land ownership and family size could also be factors. So, for example, from an examination of the payment side of the accounts for 1847, we learn that McKinnon's income was in the form of salary from the company. The ledgers do not indicate what service he provided. Similarly, the accounts show that all of Godel's payments came from providing birch bark (used for covering the fish flakes) while Roche's payments came from birch bark, as well as small quantities of butter and potatoes. Three of the individuals (Aucoin, Butler, Doucet) supplied uncured and whole cod while four individuals (Chiasson, Cormier, LeFort, Poirier) supplied processed cod (both market and inferior grades). All of Desveaux's payments were for seal blubber while LaRade provided both seal blubber and salmon.

Another factor contributing to the variance is differential treatment by the company. Whether clients were charged different amounts for the items they purchased is difficult to ascertain without a more thorough analysis of the purchase side of the accounts. What is clear from a cursory examination, though, is the similarity across these accounts in terms of items purchased (e.g., sundries, rum, flour, clothing, lamp oil). The most obvious difference reflects the frequency of purchases and the amounts purchased. The payment side of the accounts, however, provides more definitive evidence. Chiasson, Cormier, and Poirier received fifteen shillings per quintal for market cod and twelve shillings per quintal for inferior cod while LeFort received fourteen

shillings per quintal for market cod and eleven shillings per quintal for inferior cod. Combined with variation in products being offered as payment, this finding highlights the need to make the distinction between planters and fishers, among other categories of client. It also points to the multi-faceted nature of the relationship between the company and its clients, and therefore of the nature of the truck system more generally.

On the assumption that the primary characteristic of the truck system is the indebtedness of the clients, the preliminary evidence presented here suggests that PRC operations in Chéticamp provide an example of such a system. The fact that such a high percentage of accounts carried a negative balance throughout the decade suggests that the relationship between PRC and its clients remained fairly stable. The company was clearly generating enough of a profit from its business to maintain its operations in Chéticamp, and the local inhabitants must have been viewed as sufficiently permanent to justify this highly leveraged position. As Ommer indicates, the price paid for cod remained fairly stable and well below the fluctuating market price received by the company.<sup>35</sup>

## People of Chéticamp

TRADITIONALLY, FOURTEEN FOUNDERS (*quatorze vieux*) are identified as constituting the first group of settlers to establish permanent residence in Chéticamp, based primarily on the fact that these individuals were granted 7,000 acres of land on 27 September 1790.<sup>36</sup> As part of the agreement, each signatory was required to keep at least 50 acres under cultivation, or they would have to forfeit their land. The settlers involved were: Pierre Bois, Pierre Aucoin, Joseph Boudreau, Joseph Gaudet, Paul Chiasson, Basile Chiasson, Joseph Deveau, Gregoire Maillet, John Chiasson, Lazare Leblanc, Raymond Poirier, Anselme Aucoin, Joseph Aucoin, and Augustin Deveau.<sup>37</sup> These Acadians, or in some cases their parents, had lived in Cape Breton prior to deportation in the 1750s, and it remains a contested question whether they were lured back by the promise of employment or whether they chose to return of their own volition and only coincidentally found employment with PRC. The fact that this group petitioned for, and was granted, land suggests that the Acadians had every intention of settling down, irrespective of the presence of the Robin Company.

By contrast, in her study of settlement in the Strait of Belle Isle, Patricia Thornton observes that the first year-round residents of the area, who formed the basis for permanent settlement, were the so-called winter men – crews

35. Ommer, *From Outpost to Outport*, 134–135.

36. Chiasson, *Chéticamp*, 19, 251–254.

37. Chiasson, *Chéticamp*, 261.

left behind by the English merchant firms, to care for their facilities, as well as engage in an off-season venture hunting seals and trapping furs.<sup>38</sup>

Father Francois Lejamtel (1757–1835), a missionary responsible for tending to the whole of Cape Breton Island,<sup>39</sup> carried out a census of the Roman Catholic families in Chéticamp in 1809.<sup>40</sup> There were 53 families located in four areas: Grand-Étang, Le Platin, Petit-Étang, and Chéticamp Island. Of the 121 males listed (heads of households and male children), fully 72 per cent (n=87) of these were listed in the PRC ledger books for the period 1843–1852. In seven instances (Joseph Godet, Pierre Bois, Jean Romard, Jean Chiasson, Gregoire Maillet, Simon Cormier, and Germain Chiasson), it was the widow of the original male head of household who was listed in the census. Of these seven, only two (the widows of Joseph Godet and Simon Cormier) were listed in the ledger books. The fact that so many of these families were represented in the ledgers by one or more members of the household, as well as across generations, clearly suggests that there was a strong tie between the Acadians and PRC.

The generational ties can be seen another way. For the decade being studied, 676 distinct individuals had accounts, with 39 of these individuals appearing in the ledgers for only a single year. There were 173 distinct surnames represented in the ledgers, with 105 of these being represented by a single individual, and the most prominent surnames (n>25) being: Chiasson (n=64), Leblanc (n=48), Desveaux (n=38), Aucoin (n=35), Poirier (n=28), and Doucet (n=26). The most prominent non-Acadian surnames (n>10) were: McDonald (n=16), Gillis (n=15), and McLellan (n=14).

Consistent with the predominance of certain surnames, there were several instances where individuals within these extended families had the same or similar given names. Consequently, the company clerks had to devise various means to differentiate between them. So, for instance, there were six Jean Chiassons, four of them listed as: son of Jack, son of Lorains, son of Firmien, son of Bazil, and then two from the next generation listed as: of Jack and of Lorains, meaning Jean, son of Jack's son Jean and Jean, son of Lorains' son Jean.

Some of the individuals were identified as having specific occupations. For example, ship captains (Philip Briard, Pierre Briard, Philip Weary), postmaster (Fidel Leblanc), masons (Hugh Gillis, Alex McDonald, Allen McLellan, Malcolm McNeill), blacksmiths (Donald Gillis, James Gillis, John McLellan,

38. Patricia A. Thornton, "The demographic and mercantile bases of initial permanent settlement in the Strait of Belle Isle," in John J. Mannion, *The Peopling of Newfoundland: Essays in Historical Geography* (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1977), 152–183, 161.

39. Thornton, "Bases of initial permanent settlement in the Strait of Belle Isle," 79.

40. "Bases of initial permanent settlement in the Strait of Belle Isle," 247–251. Census details are also available from <http://www.acadian.org/census1809a.html>.

Edward Mudge), coopers (Alexander Gillis, Donald Gillis, John McFarlan), schoolteacher (Thomas Aucoin, John De Carteret), merchants (Samuel Lawrence, John Leadbetter), and clergy (Julien Courteau, Patrick McKeagney, Alex McLeod). The fact that those involved in skilled trades were not Acadians reinforces the idea that the fate of the Acadian community was directly tied to fishing for PRC.

In still other cases, individuals were differentiated by location. For example, Etienne Chiasson of Petit Étang, Joseph Cornu of Cap Rouge, Alexander Gillis of Margaree and Alexander Gillis of West Margaree, Thomas Handlan of Aspy Bay, Angus McDonald of Lot 27, Allen McEnnis of Lower Margaree, and Donald McLean of Petit Cove. In a few instances, individuals were identified by ethnicity, as in the case of John Chahovee, who was listed as Basque, and Francois Joseph and John Miouse, who were listed as Indians. The existence of these accounts suggests that PRC had at least some linkages outside of the immediate environs of Chéticamp, as well as outside the Acadian and Scottish immigrant communities.

The fact that several Acadian families established permanent residency in Chéticamp in the late 18th century suggests that the notion of a captive workforce as a critical component in the operation of the merchant credit system needs some modification. While the more traditional argument may suggest that PRC operations provided a basis for the establishment and maintenance of the Acadian community, the evidence would appear to suggest that the existence of the Acadians, determined to cease their wandering and settle in Cape Breton, provided a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the Robins to set up business. The dependency relationship worked in both directions, and the history of PRC and the history of the Acadians in Chéticamp are one and the same.

## Conclusion

THIS RESEARCH NOTE HAS PRESENTED a preliminary exploration of part of the operations of the Jersey merchant firm of PRC, in Chéticamp, Cape Breton, during the middle of the 19th century. From an economic perspective, the evidence suggests that the company was engaged in a form of truck economy with the local inhabitants. At the same time, it shows that the close bonds among the Acadian population and their determination to establish themselves permanently in Cape Breton created a reciprocal dependency relationship between the merchant firm and its clients.

Going forward, more empirical evidence will need to be gathered to substantiate the ideas outlined here. Most obviously, the ledgers can provide data on a larger number of accounts, as well as on the specific details of purchases and payments made by clients. Additional data from other company records can provide more detail on specific aspects of the financial transactions, along with contextual data. The absence of the letter books for this period presents

a formidable obstacle in this regard. Of particular importance to interpreting the financial data and providing a firm basis for comparing PRC operations with those of CRC will be data on the quintals of fish caught and processed throughout this period.

Another avenue of approach would be to explore what was taking place in Chéticamp from the perspective of how we understand debt, examining the way in which it constituted, or reflected, a moral economy rather than a strictly financial one.<sup>41</sup> This approach might tie in with a detailed exploration of the socioeconomic history of the Acadians, and their quest to establish a distinct identity. Returning to Ommer's findings, unlike the circumstances facing the workforce in the Gaspé, that might have been "stuck there anyway," the inhabitants of Chéticamp appear to have been determined to stay, in some sense binding PRC to them, rather than the opposite. Further, even with the small sample examined here, it is clear the nature of the truck system was far from monochromatic.

While the history of the Atlantic fishery in Newfoundland and the Gaspé, and the participation of predominantly English merchant firms, has been explored in significant depth, this study demonstrates that there is an important story to be told about what took place in Cape Breton. Adequate records exist to support a broad range of research, not just on the fishery, but also on the evolution of a merchant firm, as it dealt with a variety of local and global changes and managed to maintain a presence in a community for over two hundred years.

41. See David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2012).