



INFORMATION DIVISION

DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

OTTAWA - CANADA

No. 44 NEWFOUNDLAND

(Note: This Reference Paper replaces
No. 42, of January, 1949)

The island of Newfoundland virtually spans the mouth of the Gulf of St. Lawrence at the entrance to the inland waterway which extends some 2,000 miles from the Atlantic to the head of the Great Lakes. On the north, the island is separated from the mainland by the Strait of Belle Isle, nine miles wide at its narrowest point. On the south, Cabot Strait is about sixty miles wide at its narrowest point.

Geologically, Newfoundland is an integral part of North America. It consists of the unsubmerged highlands of a now foundered extension of the Appalachian mountain system; the lowlands form part of the "banks" of the North Atlantic which lie off Newfoundland. The general topography of the island is rough and broken. Fertile soil is limited, and the forested area, though extensive, in general bears only small trees. The coast is heavily indented with large bays and fiords.

The area of the island is about 42,000 square miles; larger than Ireland, and about 84% of the combined area of Canada's three Maritime provinces. The sovereignty of Newfoundland also extends to some 110,000 square miles of Labrador on the mainland.

In 1945 the population, which has been increasing relatively quickly, was about 320,000 (including 5,500 in Labrador). Close to 90% of Newfoundland's people live on the coast, in some 1,300 communities scattered along the 6,000 miles of shoreline. About 45% of the population are on the Avalon Peninsula in the south-east, with some 60,000 in St. John's, the capital, and its suburbs. The mining community of Bell Island and the pulp and paper communities of Grand Falls and Corner Brook are the only other settlements with a population of more than 5,000.

With little immigration into Newfoundland during the past century, about 98.5% of the population are native-born and possess a distinctive national character. (In Canada, the percentage of native-born is 82.4%). The principal racial groups are English (about 60%), Irish (25%), French and Scottish. The principal religious groups are Roman Catholic (32.5%), Church of England (32%), United Church of Canada (26.3%) and Salvation Army (6.2%).

Historical Survey

Soon after John Cabot's report of the abundant fishery in 1497, European fishermen began making annual voyages to the rich cod-banks off Newfoundland. The island was formally claimed for England by Sir Humphrey Gilbert in 1583, but British sovereignty was not clearly established until the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, when France renounced her claims in return for exclusive fishing rights on the western and northern coasts.