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The Shortage of Fish in the United Kingdom and the Practicability of Obtaining a Supply from Nfld.

By Mr. H. C. Thomson, in a Lecture delivered in Grenfell Hall, Oct. 11.

Provost Malcolm Smith, the Provost of Leith, who is greatly interested in the possibilities of the Newfoundland waters, gave me an introduction last year to Sir J. Wrench Towse, the clerk to the Fishmongers' Company, who kindly arranged a meeting with the Chief Inspector of Billingsgate market to discuss the practicability of obtaining such a supply from Newfoundland.

They were both of the opinion that large shipments of 2,000 or 3,000 tons of frozen fish brought over in the same way as frozen meat, a proposal which had been under contemplation, would not meet the necessities of the case at all—what is wanted are weekly or bi-weekly shipments of from 200 to 300 tons of ice, and not frozen fish, so that the fish-mongers and costermongers could be kept in constant employment, as well as the fried fish shops.

I afterwards brought the matter to the notice of the National Sea Fisheries Protection Association but they did not see how at that time any action could be taken.

The fish friers, I may mention, find it difficult to fry frozen fish, but before the war they depended in the main upon the fish brought in ice from the White Sea, Iceland and Morocco by the deep sea trawlers. Each trawler carries a quantity of crushed ice and as the fish are caught they are thrown into the hold with alternate layers of salt and ice, and handled in this way are brought to market in quite good condition. A few of these trawlers are still at work, but the prices they obtain put their fish out of the reach of the poor altogether. One White Sea trawler, for instance, sold one catch this summer for £4,500, whilst an Iceland trawler got £3,200.

It is only reasonable to assume that, in like manner, fish could be landed in perfectly good condition from Newfoundland and Labrador, which are no further off than the White Sea. It is true it has never yet been done, but it is because it has never yet been tried. I had a talk with one of the biggest of the London fish dealers, and he said if we were going to bring over frozen fish he would not touch it at all, but that he would take as much iced fish as we could give him, provided it was in good condition and he went on to say, "I have never been able to understand why fish is not brought from Newfoundland in the same way as it is brought from other distant fishing grounds."

Nevertheless, a considerable demand has grown up in certain markets for frozen fish, and large contracts have been made to supply the Canadian troops with it from Canada. Gen. Sir Sam Hughes in a recent interview given to the Halifax Herald stated that the British Government propose to use it for the British troops and to take approximately half a million dollars worth of Canadian fish weekly, if they can obtain it in proper condition; that the cost per lb. as a food ration is estimated to be upwards of 8 cents to 10 cents per lb. less than Argentine beef. General Hughes also stated that both the French and the Italian Governments are considering the question of employing this frozen Canadian fish. Why should not Newfoundland compete for these immensely lucrative markets? She could supply both frozen fish and iced fish, whichever was called for; but she can do nothing without cold storage facilities. If these were provided her fisheries are just as great and not so far distant as those of Canada, and could be drawn upon just as those of Canada are, not in competition but in co-operation. I have discussed the possibility of this with Major Hugh Greene, who is the driving force in this Canadian fish business, and there seems no reason why it should not be done.

Mr. Maurice, the Assistant Secretary of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries has taken a warm interest in the matter and appreciates fully the possibilities of the Newfoundland fishing grounds though he recognizes the many obstacles which stand in the way of their being utilized for the British markets.

There are several points which will have to be settled before anything definite can be done.

1. Are the fish present in sufficient quantity?
2. What kinds of fish are available and at what times?
3. Would it be possible to organize the catching, collecting and storing of the fish so that a constant supply could be relied upon?
4. Would there be any opposition in Newfoundland to a fresh fish industry

on the ground of its possible interference with the trade in salt and cured cod, the staple commodity, or would the people of Newfoundland welcome it and be willing to co-operate?

5. Would there be opposition to outside trawling, or would it be advisable to depend entirely upon the catch by the Newfoundland fisherman?

Last year the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries applied through the Secretary of State for the Colonies to the Newfoundland Government for information as to the Supplies of fish from Newfoundland waters which might be made available for the markets of the United Kingdom and as to the best means for bringing them to those markets, and the Premier, Sir Edward Morris, who as you know, has always been anxious that concerted measures should be taken to develop the latent resources of the fisheries, in a despatch dealing with the subject gave details of the different kind of fish found here at different times of the year, and said that if a proper system of cold storage or vessels properly organized and equipped for the purpose of icing down fresh fish were on the coast at points where the codfish were taken in large quantities there is no reason why the fish should not be collected iced down or cold stored all the year round, but he added "what is really required is that some person thoroughly conversant with the needs of the British market and at the same time having a thorough knowledge of the collection of codfish and herring for cold storage purposes should come here and investigate the matter on the spot."

Now it so happens that there is a man who fulfills all these requirements, and who might be willing to look into the matter in the way Sir Edward Morris suggests. The Board of Agriculture and Fisheries made use of the services of Mr. Thos. Robinson, of Grimsby in the recent purchase by the British Government of the Norwegian catch and he has acted also for the Canadian Government in the distribution of their consignments of frozen fish. If he would undertake the work no one would inspire more confidence, and no one could be found more versed in everything that appertains to the handling and storing of fish, or with a more practical knowledge of the requirements of the British market. He has already been consulted about the Newfoundland proposal and has given some very valuable advice.

With regard to trawling—he thinks it would be better to depend entirely upon the fishermen here—merely to put on rapid fish carriers and let the fishermen do the rest, do all the catching and delivering of the fish.

Mr. Piccott, who always lends a ready ear to anything that may benefit the fisheries, with whom I have discussed the subject several times, concurs in this advice and I have no doubt that it is wise, and that the conclusion arrived at is one with which most people here will agree; but it makes it all the more necessary to be assured beforehand of the good-will and co-operation of the fishermen. Then there is the question of transport. How can the fish best be carried over? There is a proposal originated by Captain James Campbell, with whom I am associated, and in which we have had the assistance of Messrs. Holmwood & Holmwood, which contemplates the putting on of four rapid fish carriers to carry 300 tons of iced fish, equipped with Diesel engines, and to have a speed of 14 knots.

The Diesel engine was regarded in its early days with great distrust just as the turbine was, but during the war it has been extensively used for submarines, great improvements have been made, and it is now a thoroughly reliable marine engine.

The Naval Annual for this year says: "It is significant that in four years the number of sea-going merchant ships with such engines has increased from three to seventy, their dead weight carrying capacity from 500 to 350,000 tons and their collective B.H.P. from 1,200 to 110,000 B.H.P."

There are also distinct manifestations of the progress of the system—at the beginning of this year there were building fifty such vessels of 300,000 dead weight capacity and 100,000 B.H.P. When oil decreases again in price the low consumption of under one half of a pound L. H. P. per hour as compared to 1½ pound for steam machinery, must accelerate the expansion of the system."

For fish carriers the special value of the Diesel engine is that it en-

ables high speed to be obtained with a maximum of hold space.

Capt. Campbell had boats specially designed, according to his own plans for the purpose intended, that is to say for rapid insulated fish carriers. Those who are interested in the subject will find a full description of the first boat in the Canadian Fisherman for last July, taken from the Motor Ship and Motor Boat, published in London. Provisional contracts for the construction of this first boat and of the engine to go with it have been made, and permission has been obtained from the British Government for it to be built as munitions work, necessary for the prosecution of the war, because of the purpose for which it is to be used—for the bringing over of food supplies. But whether the Treasury consent will be accorded, and the enterprise carried through or not, depends in great measure upon whether it is regarded favourably here and upon the nature of the support accorded to it.

So far as I have been able to ascertain not only will there be no opposition to the establishment of a fresh fish industry but it will be heartily welcomed by all classes of the community as well as by the Government.

Sir Edward Morris for years past has urged that some definite step should be taken such as is now under consideration.

Mr. Coaker, too, has been a strenuous advocate of a fresh fish industry as one of the most potent means imaginable for the advancement of the fishermen and he has given an assurance that the F. P. U. will willingly co-operate. He has shown that a fresh fish industry will bring with it all the benefits of a cash business as well as of a winter fishery in many parts of the island where now there is no winter fishing at all.

Mr. Coaker feels so strongly about the beneficial nature of the change which will accrue from a fresh fish trade that he has advocated the giving of a "ten years' bounty for every ton of fresh fish exported."

It is only fair, however, to say that the evidence given before the Dominion's Royal Commission by the Committee of the Board of Trade is exceedingly discouraging. It is as follows:

"If fish were, in course of time, to become scarce in the Mother Country and remain plentiful in Newfoundland it is easy to conceive that a trade in fresh or frozen fish might be made with the Mother Country to the benefit of all concerned. However, there is an almost unsurmountable difficulty in Newfoundland itself, namely the method of catching the fish. Every fisherman is for himself; he has always caught, cured and marketed his own fish, and it would take a long time to induce him to follow other methods, which would be necessary if a quick collection of fish for these purposes had to be made here."

Well, the contingency contemplated by the Committee has arisen: fish have become scarce in the Mother Country and have remained plentiful in Newfoundland. There is only apparently the opposition of the fishermen to be overcome to the establishment of a trade which would be admittedly beneficial to all concerned and of great imperial value at this time of need.

And, there is every reason to believe, that the fishermen's opposition is growing less as the nature of what the change would mean is becoming clear to them. Wherever I have been I, personally, have found them anxious for the developments such a trade would bring in its wake.

It may take them a little time to get used to the new methods of fishing and of handling fish, but they are all eager to try.

One of them said to me this summer when talking the matter over. "There is progress in all human things and its only reasonable to suppose there should be progress in fishing. We have been at this old salt cod business for quite a spell now, and I think it is about time we tried something else."

There is every reason, indeed, why the fishermen should co-operate for fresh fish, each payment and free competition mean the greater freedom and independence of the fishermen; and now that there is the chance for the change to be made at once, which under ordinary conditions it would take a generation to bring about, it is impossible to believe that they will oppose it or will stand in its way. Nor is there any reason to suppose that it will interfere materially with the salt cod industry. With

prices as high as they now are there is no fear of that. There will always be enough salt cod made to meet the market demand. What the fresh fish trade will do is to give greater steadiness to that in salt cod, to prevent excessive fluctuations in price; at least so I am assured by those in a position to know. They say that they will support the proposal cordially, provided they are satisfied that it is to be established upon a sound basis. A number of one of the leading firms here states this clearly "Any trade development" he writes "which is calculated to increase the demand for, improve the value of and broaden the markets for the products of the Colony deserves the strongest support of all the mercantile houses here, apart, altogether from the Imperial and important consideration of supplying the British Islands with cheaper food at the present time, as well as the desirability of promoting trade within the Empire."

He utters a warning note, however, when he says that the crux of the whole enterprise will be in the management at this end.

That is one of the reasons for my putting it before you now, in its initial stages, to ensure that it shall be carefully thought out and placed upon a sound footing from the very start.

Last, but by no means least, there is the Reid Nfld. Company—what is their attitude to the project? They think highly of it, and are willing to co-operate fully. With refrigerator cars on their line and a refrigerator system in their Bay boats they could build up a valuable freight traffic upon their branch lines; whilst their co-operation, with their far-reaching system of transportation by sea and land would be simply invaluable.

It will be asked, if all classes of the community are favourably disposed, what is the difficulty in the way.

The answer is this, that no one Company or firm or even group of firms, however, powerful, would be capable of dealing, unaided, with the matter sufficiently rapidly and energetically in view of the exigencies of the war. It is an undertaking which will necessitate a substantial outlay and a certain amount of risk and with the depression caused by the war to contend against the great financial and fishing concerns both here and in Great Britain may well hesitate to embark capital in a hitherto untried industry except at the suggestion of the Government concerned and with a certain measure of Government support.

The Treasury are exceedingly chary of allowing any Company to be formed at the present moment, even for the bringing in of food supplies, and in this case they will certainly require to be satisfied that the enterprise has the sanction of the Newfoundland Government, and the approval and promise of co-operation of the Newfoundland fishing interests. But if they can be satisfied that the required permission is almost sure to be given. But, as I have already said, whether the necessary consent will be given, and whether the proposal will be carried through or not depends very largely upon the way it is regarded here, and upon the nature of the support accorded to it.

The Imperial Government cannot well be asked to give financial assistance. They have too great a burden on their shoulders already, nor have they sufficient knowledge of the capabilities of these fisheries to justify their doing so; but if the enterprise had the support of the Government and of the people here it would be sure to obtain the approval of the Imperial Government also, and there would then be no difficulty whatever in obtaining the comparatively small sum required for the building of the boats and the erection of the cold storage plants.

(To be continued.)



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