

THE NEWFOUNDLAND SEAL FISHERY.

THIS second edition of my book on the Newfoundland Seal Fishery, containing more valuable statistics and other data than were embodied in my first edition, will be found much more explicit and satisfactory in every particular.

The Seal Fishery, which has been such a prolific source of wealth to this Colony for the past eighty years, was first prosecuted by very crude and imperfect methods. The Cod Fishery has always been rightly regarded as the great staple industry of the Island, the backbone of the Colony's commercial life, and in the early ages of its history scarcely any other business or occupation was regarded as feasible. The abundance of codfish swarming around the coast, in summer time, and the facility with which large harvests could be taken from the sea with but little outlay and no risk whatever, induced the people to give their undivided attention to this industry. There can be no doubt that one reason why the seal fishery developed and expanded very slowly was because it was realized that the enterprise could not be engaged in without great risk and hardship.

Every year the vast icefields that drifted southward brought immense herds of seals almost to the doors of the resident population, and yet the teeming mammals with their affectionate progenitors were left in their icy habitat, undisturbed by the ruthless and daring hunter with knife and club and gun. The evolution, however, went on; the industry developed from one stage of progress to another, though very slowly, until the scene became all changed, and the thousands of intrepid sealers engaged in the enterprise since then simply endeavour to rival each other in the mighty carnage, crimsoning the immense ice-packs with the blood of their slaughtered victims.

Seals were first captured by the use of nets which were set, or moored at right angles with the shore. The seals moving southward in the early part of the winter, and northward in the latter part of winter to meet the icefloes upon which to have their young, would instinctively go in shoal water in quest of fish food and this would sometimes lead to their capture, but in very limited numbers. Historic records inform us that previous to 1763 English fishermen took seals in this manner, and the same method is still employed on the northern shores of the Island and on Labrador. It has sometimes happened in the past that young seals, in very large numbers, have been taken from the shore. This circumstance invariably occurred when there was a prevalence of easterly wind pressing the ice, with its abundant harvest of "whitecoats," in on the land, where vessels could not reach them. A remarkable instance of this occurred in 1894 when it was estimated that 120,000 seals were taken by residents along the coast from ice contiguous to the northern bays and headlands. On such occasions as this men, women and children with dogs and catamarans display great fearlessness and activity, sometimes even risking their lives in pursuit of the coveted spoil presented to their vision.

The progress of the seal fishery in these early years is shown by the returns furnished the Board of Trade by the admirals commanding on the Newfoundland Station. These returns refer to seal oil as an article of export for the first time in 1740, when its value for the year was put down at £1,000 sterling. In 1767 the seal oil exported had advanced in value to £8,832, and in the following year to £12,664. In 1772 the value of seal oil exported was £13,406. The largest export mentioned in these returns was that of 1773, when its value reached the sum of £26,388. During the following years these returns indicate that the yield of seal oil was unsteady, sometimes going down to £3,000 and only once exceeding £11,000 in value. The last of these returns was for the year 1792 when the value of the seal oil exported was £11,920.

The next method adopted for taking seals was that of shooting them from large boats which sailed on their voyage about the middle of April, when the seals had taken to the water. This was a hazardous and not by any means a successful method. As late as 1795 the whole annual catch only numbered 5,000.

Then came a new advance and a new era of prosperity. The hardy toilers of the sea became more daring by their frequent visits to the icefields. At length large vessels were built with special adaptation for the seal fishery. These vessels increased in number and were made more suitable in construction for contending with the ice-packs from year to year, and soon prosperity abounded. In the year 1840 over 900,000 quintals of cod fish and over 600,000 seals rewarded the industry and enterprise of the people engaged in these fisheries. The seal fishery as carried on by sailing vessels afforded the people of the Island abundant means of employment throughout the months of winter. The procuring of timber from the woods, building vessels, repairing