

The Basque Whaling Establishments in Labrador 1536-1632 — A Summary

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Contrary to the spurious claims of writers on the history of whaling who have based their findings on secondary evidence, the Basques never, at any point, chased whales further and further out into the Atlantic until they collided with North America. This ridiculous legend must be laid to rest once and for all.

Basque whaling was essentially coastal. The Basques had practised whaling along their own coasts from at least the twelfth century and probably before. It is clear that during the sixteenth century the Biscay whale was still by no means exterminated, and well into the seventeenth century Basques continued to send small whaling crews out to Asturias and Galicia for shore-based whaling operations. However, by the 1540s, simultaneously with this winter whaling along the Cantabrian coast, there had been established along the southern shore of Labrador a far more important Basque whaling industry.

The commercial skills required for the organization of transatlantic fishing voyages had originally developed among Basques from the fitting out and victualling of pilchard- and hake-fishing (and trading) expeditions to the Irish Sea.¹

Similarly, the whaling techniques that Basques brought to Labrador were those they had already perfected in European waters. It was their expertise in these skills and techniques that allowed the Basques to create a highly successful monopoly of the whaling enterprise in Labrador.

However, the geographical positioning of the new North American whaling establishments was not entirely due to Basque enterprise. Previous Breton voyages² had pioneered the Strait of Belle Isle for cod-fishing, and gradually French Basques, following the Breton lead, appear to have brought back reports of fabulous whaling grounds. This area was soon to become known as the Grand Bay, a narrow strait with several deep-water harbours along the north shore which opens into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The cod-fishing is still excellent in the strait. In the sixteenth century vast numbers of whales migrated regularly past these capes and islands on their way in and out of the gulf.

We know that Bretons had sent the earliest voyages (prior to 1536) to this region, not only from the documentary evidence but also from the toponymy. Early cartography shows the

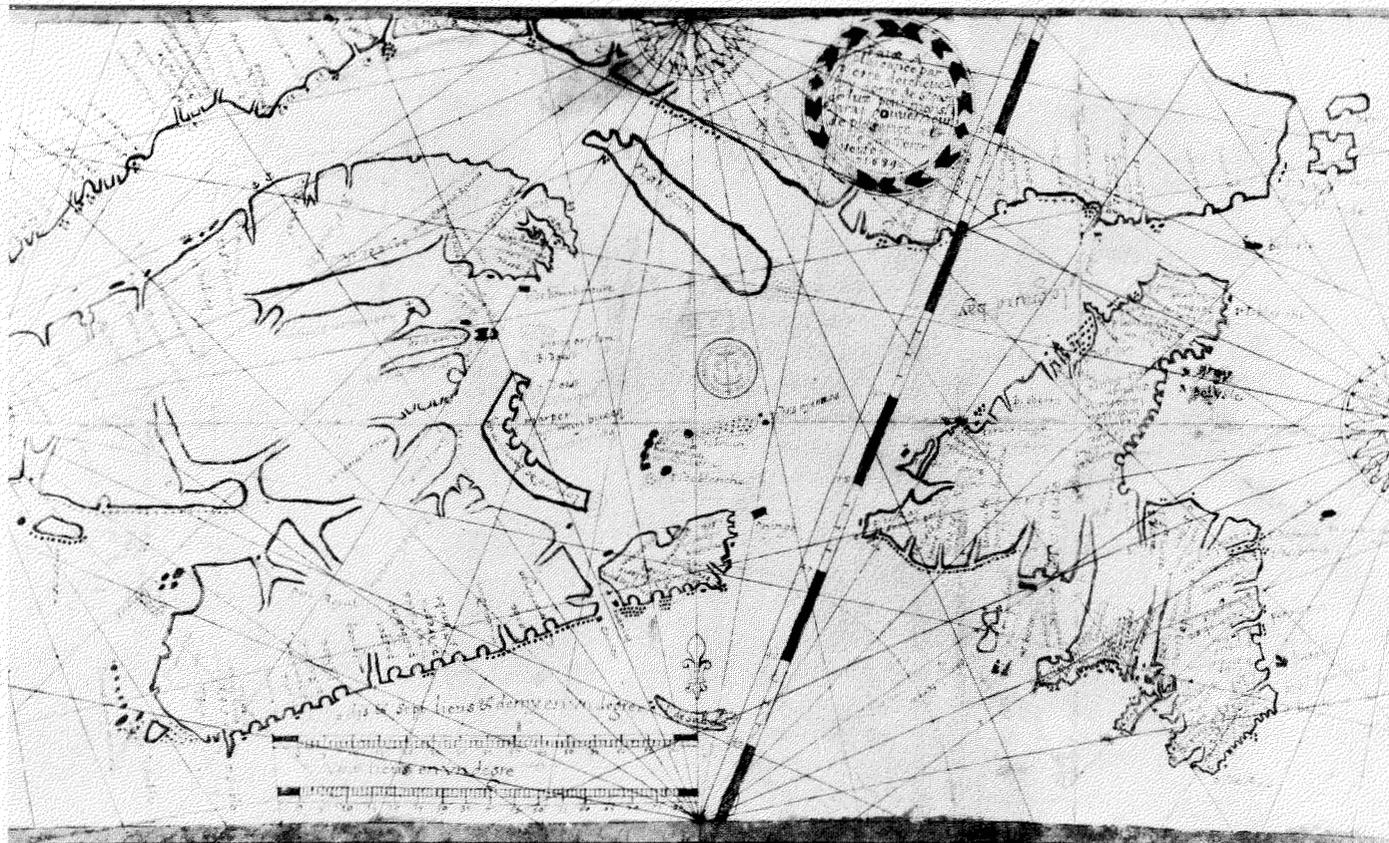


FIG. 1. Detcheverry Dorre's 1689 map of Newfoundland and Labrador. (Courtesy of National Map Collection, Public Archives of Canada.)

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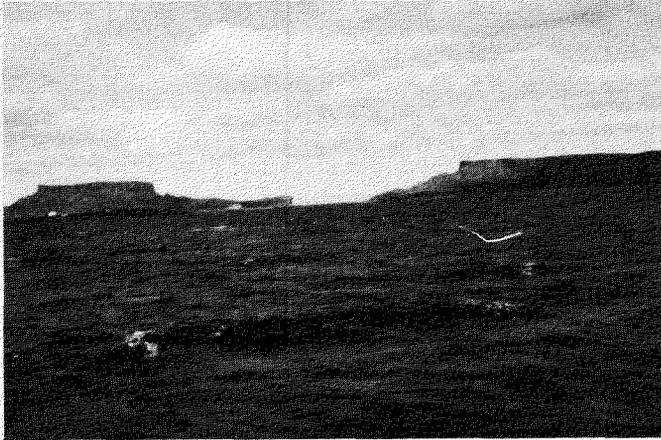


FIG. 2. Chateau Bay, the entrance between basaltic rock formations which gave the harbour its name. (Photo: S. Rowley.)

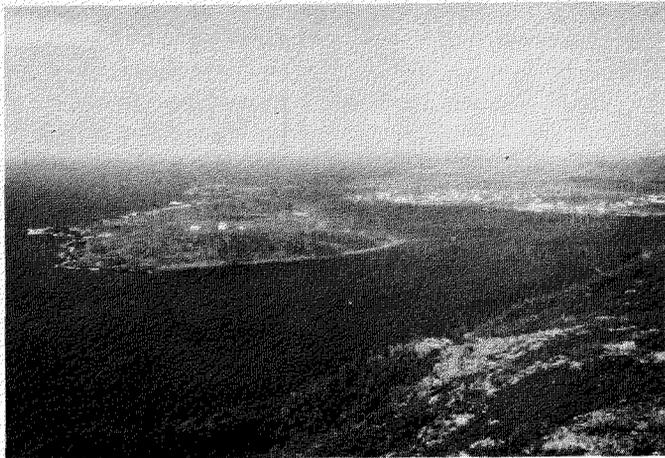


FIG. 3. The entrance and harbour of Red Bay. (Photo: M. Barkham.)

place names along the north shores of the Strait of Belle Isle, from the island of Belle Isle to the St. Paul River, to have been almost entirely based on Breton toponymy — for instance, such typically Breton place names as Brest, Blanc Sablon, Crozon or Croddon, and St. Maudet (Fig. 1).³ Curiously, one of the exceptions to this rule seems to have been the Labrador harbour known in the sixteenth century as “*Les Buttes*”, and now called Red Bay, which derives both its old and new names from the red granite bluffs (Fig. 2) that stand out as a landmark halfway along the coast between Chateau Bay and Blanc Sablon.⁴

Red Bay (Fig. 3) is the harbour for which we have, at the moment, the largest quantity of whaling references, including piracy documents in the 1550s, records of a disastrous wintering in 1576-77, and a will written shortly thereafter for a dying Basque, the first known Canadian will. There are references to Basques on this coast from 1536 onwards, but the majority of the documentation concerns the years between 1548 and 1588; the last known Basque wintering in Red Bay was in 1603. It was also in Red Bay that in the autumn of 1565 the galleon *San Juan*, from the harbour of Pasajes, was sunk with nearly a thousand barrels of whale oil already stowed aboard. Documents found in Valladolid and Oñate led to the location of this galleon by a Parks Canada diving team nearly three years ago.

This has been of intense interest to underwater archaeologists since it is the earliest wreck to have been located in Canadian waters to date.

The site has also been of interest to biologists, as the remains of whale skeletons have been found in association with the wreck. For biologists the stretch of harbour known as the Tracey shore (Fig. 4) is probably of the most vital interest, since it represents a form of whale cemetery or ossuary where the Basques apparently disposed of the majority of carcasses in order to keep the working areas of the harbour clear of piles of bone. But whale bones and baleen are not the only tangible evidence for large-scale Basque activity. Vast quantities of curved red tiles (Fig. 5) are to be found in all the places used by Basques as establishments for processing and boiling down whaleblubber. They were used to roof both the ovens or furnaces (Fig. 6) where the heavy copper cauldrons were apparently kept boiling night and day, and the cooperages or cabins where the coopers often made up well over 1000 barrels per voyage for storing the whale oil.

Since anywhere from 6000 to 9000 barrels of whale oil would have been sent back to Europe every year from Red Bay during the peak period of exploitation, with another 8000 or 9000 barrels from St. Modeste, Chateau Bay, and other harbours, it is not surprising that later travellers to Labrador reported finding considerable debris left over from this

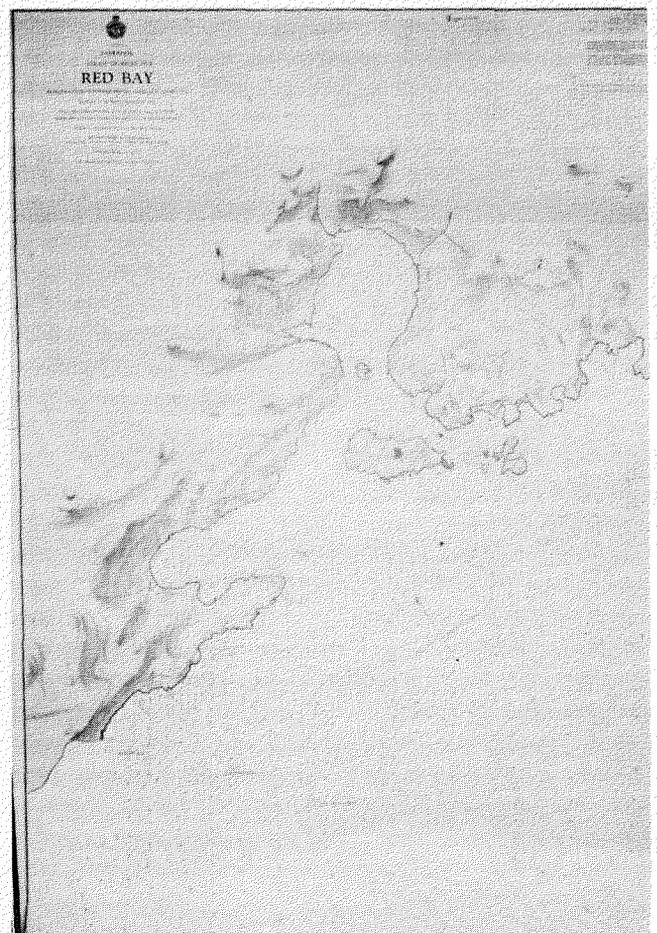


FIG. 4. Hydrographic survey map of Red Bay.

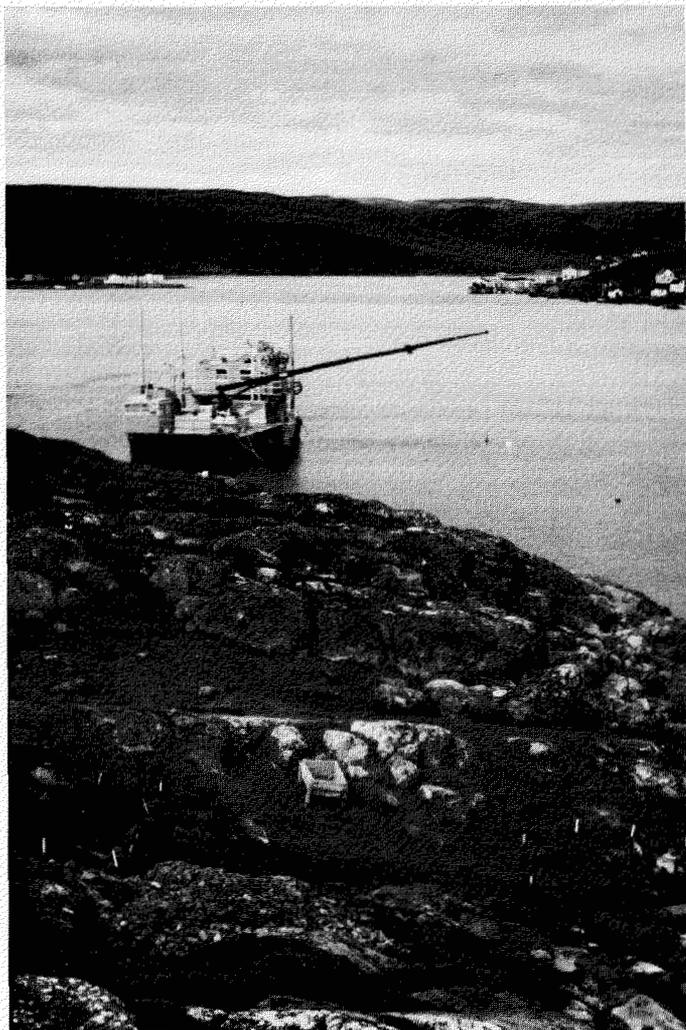


FIG. 5. View over archaeological site to the barge used by underwater archaeology team. Note pile of Basque roofing tiles in foreground. (Photo: M. Barkham.)

energetic production, although few people recognized that this was the remains of a *Basque* whaling industry. Sir Joseph Banks, for instance, thought that the tiles and whale bone he saw on an island in Chateau Bay had been left there by Vikings (Lysaght, 1971:131).

The certainty that these finds both underwater and on land are genuinely Basque is due to the available documentation. Among the items taken over on two 1566 voyages by two captains from Deva, Miguel de Cerain and Ynigo de Ybartola, were 6000 tiles, earth or clay for lining the ovens, 18 axes for chopping down trees, and "nails for the cabins". There are explanatory references in the documents for nearly all the items that are currently being excavated at Red Bay, and there are often explicit descriptions in lawsuits which throw light on the daily life of the Basques in Labrador.

At a time when many Europeans lived a marginal existence and severe famine was not unknown, it must have been a happy surprise for the Basque crews to find that the New Land which Cartier had unflatteringly described as "the land that God gave Cain" (Biggar, 1924:22) was, in fact, abundant in fish and game, and that a diet based largely on cod and salmon,



FIG. 6. Excavated retaining wall for ovens or furnaces. (Photo: A. Robertson.)

with an occasional piece of caribou or a wild duck, was healthy and satisfying. Very large quantities of cider, wine, and ship's biscuit were taken to the Grand Bay aboard Basque galleons; the local food supply was supplemented by an average of two-and-a-half to three Bordeaux barrels of cider or wine and at least three to four quintals of biscuit, for each member of the crew. Dried peas, beans, chickpeas, olive oil, mustard seed, and bacon added variety to the diet.

It is evident that for a 450-ton Basque ship carrying 100 or more men, a normal provision for a Labrador voyage would have included approximately 300 hogshead of cider and wine plus 300-400 quintals of ship's biscuit as well as other dry provisions. It can be seen from the extent of supplies for just one whaling voyage that the merchants who invested in these large-scale expeditions were in a different category from the backers of small-scale cod-fishing voyages of 14-30 men. The merchants who organized the Labrador whaling enterprise were men with a solid financial background and a good deal of experience both in money-raising and in the insurance industry. Without extensive financial backing and a well-organized insurance industry, these voyages would have been impossible. The efficiency of mariners and fishermen had to be matched by the intelligent operations of Basque "money-men", owners of Basque iron foundries, and ship-builders.

There were four major financial centres in the Basque country that were directly connected with maritime activities — Bayonne, San Sebastian, Bilbao, and Vitoria — while several smaller inland towns provided a good share of the capital for Terranova ventures. Marquina, Elorrio, Eibar, Elgoibar, Azpeitia, Vergara, and Oñate were only a few of the small manufacturing towns whose wealthy merchant families invested in whaling and cod-fishing voyages.

It should be pointed out that long before the sixteenth century began the Basque country was the pivotal centre for export of Castilian wool northward to Flanders, and for export, mainly southward, of Basque iron and a variety of manufactured items such as nails, horseshoes, and iron hoops for barrels, arquebuses, machetes, pikes, and axes. With the opening up of the Spanish and Portuguese empires in the East and West

Indies, larger and larger quantities of these iron products from the Basque country were shipped down and re-exported from Seville and Lisbon. Moreover, it is important to realise that the majority of ships on the Seville-Caribbean run were built in the Basque country. This participation in the "Carrera de Las Indias" gave Spanish Basque shipbuilding an added incentive. The newly-launched galleons often did just two or three voyages to Terranova, and were then sold at a profit in Seville.

Sixteenth-century French Basques normally built much smaller ships, but they were equally expert mariners and entrepreneurs. They had certainly sent experimental whaling expeditions to Labrador before Basque merchants on the Spanish side of the frontier became interested in the new whaling enterprise. By the 1540s, when the earliest available Spanish documents on Labrador whaling were written, the expeditions were no longer experimental. They were a resounding financial success from their inception. Not only was there an appreciative market for "lumera", as the whale oil used for lighting purposes was called, but also "sain" or "grasa de ballena" was needed for mixing with tar and oakum for caulking ships, as well as in some textile industries. Large cargoes of whale oil were being delivered to Bristol, London, and Flanders by the end of the 1540s, and in spite of an outbreak of piratical attacks between French and Spanish Basques during the 1550s, deliveries to England and Flanders continued.

When peace was established, after the Valois marriage, an era of intensive whale exploitation began in the Strait of Belle Isle. If we consider the quantity of oil brought back from Labrador by an average of 15 ships per year (although there were at least 20 ships participating in the exploitation during the peak years), and if we consider 1000 barrels per ship as an average cargo (although a few ships could carry as many as 2000 hogsheads weighing 400 lb. each), then we are faced with a minimum average production of 15 000 barrels per year. There are reports of whales that yielded anywhere between 50 and 140 barrels of oil, but taking the lowest figure as the safest figure, at least 300 whales were killed annually in the Strait of Belle Isle, an average of about 20 per ship. Along with this annual catch there was also a considerable wastage of whales, those that had been harpooned and badly wounded but had escaped to die higher up in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and those that were referred to in the 1570s as "thousands of carcasses" floating in the strait. The quotation, from a 1575 lawsuit, is presumably a poetic exaggeration.

It would be unwise to speculate on the total number of whales killed during the 1560s and 1570s until more complete data have been collected. However, by the 1580s there were signs of depletion in the whale stocks, as ships were returning half-empty. Since the 1580s also coincided with a period of depletion in the number of Spanish Basque ships available for the Terranova whaling voyages, due to destruction of ships in the King's armadas, there is some possibility that the whale stocks had a chance to recuperate slightly during the 1590s and early 1600s, but there are also indications that the number of French Basque whaling vessels increased when the Spanish Basque whaling industry was on the wane.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, apart from de-

mands by the King for Spanish Basque ships there were three new factors that led eventually to the total disintegration of the Basque whaling industry in Labrador. The first major factor was the opening of the Svalbard fisheries. According to the *Histoire du Pays nommé Spitsberghe* (published in Amsterdam "a l'enseigne du Carte Nautique" in the autumn of 1613), it was during the summer of 1613 that a disastrous confrontation between the English and the Basques occurred in Spitsbergen. Yet in spite of the fact that both French and Spanish ships received appalling treatment from the English that summer, there were several documented attempts on the part of Basques to whale in "Norwegian" waters and in "Frisland" during later years of that decade. Basque efforts in Northern European waters appear never to have been very successful. However, the fact that such attempts were made at all appears to indicate that Labrador whaling was beginning to lose its attraction, which leads us to the second factor that apparently influenced its decline.

There is evidence that southward movement of the Inuit population from northern Labrador made the peaceful prosecution of the whale fishery more and more difficult. If the account of the Basque historian Lope de Isasti, written in 1625, is to be even partially believed, the new opposition came from men "called Eskimaos, who are inhuman, because they suddenly attack our men with their bows and arrows (with which they are very dextrous) and kill and eat them". While the Montagnais Indians were apparently helpful and warned the Basques of the approach of the "Eskimaos", it is certainly true that there are at least three separate references in parish records kept between 1575 and 1618 to several Basques being killed by "savages", and there are published references by Jesuit priests underlining the fact that Inuit were militantly opposed to the presence of European fishermen on the Labrador coast.

It is still unclear to what extent these Inuit incursions are to be blamed for the Basques' abandonment of their traditional whaling grounds, or whether growing competition from Dutch and English traders and pirates influenced the Basque move; first into the Gulf of St. Lawrence and then on up the St. Lawrence River. Nevertheless, this last factor, the piratical attacks of English and Dutch ships on Basque fishermen, is well documented. It is logical to suppose that when a Basque vessel from Motrico, with Agustin de Yturribalçaga as captain, was found in 1632 sailing up the west coast of Newfoundland from St. George's to Ferrol, (apparently fitted out for both cod and whale) that the ship's route was indicative of a new trend which was certainly not in vogue when Martin de Hoyarsabal's *routier* was first published in 1579.

By 1632 Basques were finding it safer to fish in more remote parts of the gulf, the whalers at the "Côte-Nord" establishments such as Mingan and Escoumins (and near the Saguenay) and the cod-fishers around the Gaspé Peninsula, off the island of "Capusall" (now called Bonaventure Island), or at places such as Paspébiac, Shippegan and Caraqueet. There, until the end of the seventeenth century, they were relatively free from human predators — whether native or European.

Gone were the days of the 1560s to 1580s, when well-armed Basque ships of up to 600 to 700 tons dominated the Strait of

Belle Isle, and when marauders would have been swept away with several rounds of cannon. Later, during the eighteenth century, there were French Basque whaling ventures to Labrador, often based at Louisbourg, and large tracts of southern Labrador were granted as seigneuries to Québec merchants, but that is a very different story. By then neither cod-fishing nor whaling was of prime importance to Basques on the Spanish side of the frontier, though Spanish Basques looked enviously across the border at their more fortunate cousins.

A few of the 14 Spanish Basque ports that frequently sent galleons to Labrador should be mentioned briefly. First and foremost, the harbour of Pasajes, considered to be the best port on the entire coast between Bordeaux and La Coruña, was the harbour where the vast majority of large Basque whalers discharged their cargoes and where they fitted out for the whaling voyages. Although French Basque ships were occasionally fitted out at Bordeaux, and some Spanish Basque merchants cooperated with ship owners as far west as Santander, Pasajes was the preferred harbour for both French and Spanish Basques because it had a deep-water entrance and afforded excellent shelter from Biscay storms. The small harbours at river mouths such as Orío, Deva, Zumaya, and Lequeitio had dangerous bars which made re-entrance into the rivers difficult except at high tides and under optimum conditions. However, it was precisely on the banks of these and other rivers that the large Basque galleons were built. The shipyards were often 2-3 km upstream so as to be as near as possible to the supplies of oak for shipbuilding.

Though hemp, cordage, and sails for Basque ships often came from Brittany or Flanders, the supply of oak and iron that went into Basque galleons was available locally in copious quantities, and was one of several reasons that during the sixteenth century the great "Biscainers", as the English called the Spanish Basque galleons, were able to dominate both the Labrador whaling industry and the West Indian run. On lintels of doorways in Pasajes, Renteria, Motrico, Orío, and other towns, carvings of these large Basque galleons can still be seen, and there are still shipyards in the Basque country which produce large wooden fishing vessels. The traditional skills of the master carpenter are by no means a thing of the past in places such as Lequeitio on the river Lea.

Indeed, there is a great sense of continuity in these small ports, whether on the Bay of Biscay or on the Strait of Belle Isle. It is extraordinary to think that identical copies of the carpenter's tools which shaped sixteenth-century timbers, found in archaeological sites in Labrador, are still currently being used on modern vessels now under construction in Basque shipyards. . . just as it is salutary, when reading accounts of life as it was being lived in Labrador over 400 years ago, to realize that many of the problems Basque whalers had to face in the sixteenth century are remarkably similar to those being faced by modern fishermen in Labrador today.

NOTES

¹Apart from the documentation in the *Archivo de Protocolos de Guipúzcoa*, in *Corregimiento* archives in Tolosa and in the *Archivo de la Real Chancillería* in Valladolid, there is a good contemporary source of information about Basque maritime ventures: Lope de Isasti, *Compendio Historial de la M.N. y M.L. Provincia de Guipúzcoa*, first published in San Sebastian in 1850 but written in 1625.

²There appears to have been a difference of at least 10-15 years between the first recorded Breton voyages and the first Basque voyages to "les Terres Neuves". For some of the documentation see: Jacques Bernard, *Navires et Gens de Mer à Bordeaux*, S.E.V.P.E.N., 1968, and H.P. Biggar, *Les précurseurs de Jacques Cartier, 1497-1534*, Ottawa, 1913.

³On the coast of Finistère, when approaching the Goulet de Brest and immediately north of Le Conquet, the Anse des Blancs Sablons can be found beside an island called L'Ilette; immediately to the south of Brest lies the peninsula of Crozon, known also as Croddon in the sixteenth century. In Labrador this combination of names, though with transformed spelling, is clear on the Basque map "Faict a Plaiçance par Pierre Detcheverry Dorre de St. Jan de Luz pour Mons^r. Parat Gouverneur de Plesance en lisle de Terre Neufe - 1689 -". Other versions of these names are given in the routier of "Piarres Detcheverry" (or Dorre): *Liburuhauda Jxasoco Nabigacionecoa*, printed in Bayonne, 1677; and also in the original French edition of the routier: *Les Voyages Avantureux du Capitaine Martin de Hoyarsabal, Habitant de Çubiburu*, printed in Bordeaux, 1579. For further explanation see Barkham (1977).

⁴"Les Buttes" appears to have lost its usefulness by 1689 as it does not figure on Detcheverry Dorre's map, although it was described in detail by Hoyarsabal in 1579 and appears on the Petrus Plancius map of ca. 1592: *Nova Francia, alio nomine dicta Terranova*.

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