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The Society of Masterless Men

Seaweed

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When I began thinking about outlaws and outlaw history I realized that if outlaw just means one who breaks the law, then I could write about the lives of nearly every citizen. So I define outlaw as one who not only breaks the law, but who survives by breaking the law or essentially lives outside of it. And the more I delve into Canada's past, the more outlaws I discover, and many of them are worthy of our attention. As an introduction to Canadian outlaw history, here is the story of a group of Newfoundland rebels who survived without masters for half a century.

The story of the Society of Masterless Men, which included women and children, began in the 18th-century settlement of Ferryland, in Newfoundland. In order to colonize Newfoundland, The British Empire created plantations. These were settlements of primarily Irish indentured servants, many of them very young - thus their name - the Irish Youngsters, abducted from Ireland either by force or guile and brought to the South Shore of Newfoundland where they were literally sold to fishing masters. Their price: \$50 a head. In 1700's Newfoundland, the British Navy wielded its authority over its seamen with zero compassion and nothing but discipline enforced by abuse and violence. Because there wasn't a

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local police force, they also helped reinforce the authority of the local fishing masters. These masters were essentially the Lords and Ladies of the villages, living in luxury and security while surrounded by dozens, even hundreds, of indentured servants who fished and labored in the camps processing the catch. These village plantations were primarily set up by consortiums and cabals of wealthy merchants in England. British frigates were stationed in the harbors and marines patrolled the town. The workers in these fishing villages were barely a step up from slaves. Corporal punishment was routinely used and everyday life was harsh and brutal. In the small settlement of Ferryland, for instance, there were a gallows and three whipping posts, in separate regions of the town. When a man was sentenced to be flogged for stealing a jug of rum or refusing to work for one of the fishing masters, he was taken to all three posts and whipped so the whole town would have an opportunity to witness the punishment as a warning.

The settlement of Ferryland was founded by Sir George Calvert around 1620, and was also partly intended as a “refuge for ...Catholics.” I’m not sure if this meant strictly for the Catholic servants or if there were any “free” Catholics as well. This was a time of penal law in Britain and at least some Irish Catholics voluntarily came to the New World to escape persecution. Unfortunately the laws in Newfoundland were the same as in the Old World. The orders given to the governor from 1729 to 1776 were: *You are to permit a liberty of conscience to all, except Papists, so they be contented with a quiet and peaceable enjoyment of the same, not giving offense or scandal to the government.*

This order wasn’t always strictly followed but around the mid 1700’s there was a crackdown on Catholicism. In 1743 the governor of the time, Smith, wrote to the magistrate in Ferryland, John Benger, instructing him to be mindful of the “Irish papists” in the area. William Keen, the chief magistrate of St. John’s, was killed by a group of Irishmen in 1752. Following this penal laws were strictly enforced for the next thirty or forty years. Court documents from

The story of The Society of Masterless Men is exceptionally inspiring because they succeeded. A group of people voluntarily joined together in common cause and broke free from their masters, most never to be captured or to return to their work prisons.

There is a lot of land out there. It isn't nearly as overflowing with abundant wild life as at one time, nor are there as many skilled aboriginal people waiting to teach us essential skills. But a group of people with a similar world view could perhaps leave the brutal, empty world of the civilized behind and live their lives according to principles of voluntary association and mutual aid, supported by subsistence ways.

Sources:

Alexina Reid from The Newfoundland and Labrador archives

Newfoundland by Harold Horwood

*SECRET MASSES AT MIDNIGHT: The Legend of the Grotto in Re-
news, Newfoundland* by Tammy Lawlor

The Canadian Encyclopedia, Hurtig Publishers

The unshackled society by Paul Butler, Originally published in *Saltscapes Magazine*

the Renew area (the nearest settlement) show there was growing fear among the authorities of an insurrection. In fact about fifty years earlier the French war ship *Profound* attacked Renew where there were seven 'residents' and 120 servant fishermen, many of whom were Irish. These servant-slaves were recorded as not caring who owned the place, that is they didn't jump up to protect their masters from the attack.

Life wasn't much better for those in the Navy. Food rations were slim and flogging was common. For instance keelhauling – dragging a seaman on ropes under the keel of a ship, thereby shredding his flesh on the sharp edged barnacles – was still a legal punishment even though it frequently resulted in death.

Some like to refer to the Society of Masterless Men as lore or a traditionally told story, one for which there is little documentary evidence. But there does seem to be a fair amount of facts that *are* known about the Masterless Men. And, as a matter of context, we know a lot about the injustice of the British Empire and of the cruelty of many of its Eichmanns and enforcers. We know that indentured servants were brought to Newfoundland and treated with brutality as were the seamen in the Royal Navy. We also know that one Irish-born Peter Kerrivan was among those young indentured servants and abused seamen. Some say he was a reluctant seaman, having been pressed into service.

Some time in 1750, while Kerrivan's ship was docked in Ferryland, he escaped (historians usually choose "deserted"). Together with two or three escaped indentured fishermen, he helped establish a lookout and base in the Butter Pot Barrens, a wild area of the Avalon Peninsula, for the outlaws to hide.

Hunted by the authorities, the Masterless Men soon learned a way of life based on subsistence and sharing. They came into contact with Newfoundland's aboriginal peoples, the Mi'qmaq and the Beothuk, who taught the rebels survival skills. They learned how to hunt for food based on the caribou herd on the peninsula.

At the time, one could be hanged for running away, but nevertheless many young men escaped from the plantations and took up lives as outlaws. In 1774 for instance, a petition written by Bonavista merchants, justices of the peace and others, and sent to Governor Shuldham complained of a number of “masterless” Irishmen who had gone to live in a secluded cove and “were there building fishing rooms.” But Kerrivan’s band of young companions were among the luckiest and best organized.

Naturally, word of the well-organized free men spread and fresh runaways from coastal settlements came to join them. Eventually their numbers swelled to between 20 and 50 men. There were also women, but their numbers are unknown. The literature I found mention the women simply as “wives”, although I imagine them as strong, rebellious women sickened by the misery and cruelty that surrounded them who also yearned for a freer and better way of life and who joined their outlaw husbands voluntarily.

After a while the group of comrades began trading caribou meat and hides with allies in the remote villages, receiving supplies such as flour, tea and of course bullets. They also organized stealthy raids against the fishery plantations. By this time the British authorities, without a police or militia of their own, were beginning to fear that this group of anarchic rebels would inspire too many others to desertion, and ordered the navy to track the freedom-loving band down and make examples of them.

However some years passed before the first expedition against the Masterless Men was organized and by then the rebels had become skilled wilderness inhabitants. Anticipating the attack or somehow being forewarned, Kerrivan and his comrades cut a series of blind trails which confounded their pursuers. The party of marines sent to capture them often found themselves lost and dumbly led into bogs and impenetrable thick bush. Eventually the navy did manage to close in on the rebels’ camp near their lookout, but they found the log cabins deserted, “ with every rag and chattel removed”. Taking advantage of their pursuers’

confusion, Kerrivan and his friends had moved off towards the north and west. The navy set fire to their little village but had to return to their base without any prisoners. The Masterless group rebuilt their cabins and the navy burned them down again. Over time the navy burned down their cabins three times and each time they were rebuilt.

Two, possibly four, of the rebels were captured and hanged, but the state never did succeed in destroying the Society. In fact the captured young runaways had joined the band only a few weeks earlier and had been taken by surprise away from the main body of the rebels. They were hanged with great dispatch from the yard-arm of the English frigate in Ferryland. No other Masterless Men were ever captured after this incident presumably because this only made the outlaws more cautious. Some of the tracks that had been carved partly to support their wilderness ways and partly as subterfuge became Newfoundland’s first inland roads. In fact their road system had eventually connected most of the small settlements of the Avalon Peninsula.

For more than a generation the Masterless Men roamed free over the barrens! Over time, perhaps as military rule began to relax or for reasons unknown to this author, their ranks began to dwindle. In 1789, 39 years after escaping, four men gave themselves up on condition that their only punishment would be deportation to Ireland, which was agreed upon. Many of the other rebels settled in remote parts of Newfoundland’s coast and survived as independent fishermen. Kerrivan, who was never captured, is said to have had a partner, four sons and several daughters and is believed to have remained on the barrens well into old age, never returning to civilization

The children of the Masterless Men gradually drifted out to the coast and settled down in small coves never visited by the navy. They married the children of other outlaws who had settled there generations earlier and together they raised families.