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# The French Shore as a Neuralgic Point of Anglo–French Relations – A Contribution to the History of One Rivalry.<sup>1</sup>

Le French Shore comme point névralgique des relations anglo-françaises – Une contribution à l'histoire d'une rivalité

**Marcela Hennlichová**

## Abstract

This article provides an overview and analysis of the context of the Newfoundland fishery problem (1713–1904) and its importance for the signing of the Entente Cordiale, which is often overlooked by historians dealing with the Anglo–French rapprochement. This paper expands and complements the author's dissertation thesis on the Entente Cordiale and focuses on the role of Newfoundland in the process of the negotiation of the convention.

**Keywords:** Entente Cordiale, Newfoundland fishery, Anglo–French Relations, Théophile Delcassé, Paul Cambon, Robert Bond

## Résumé

Le but de cet article est de donner un aperçu et une analyse du contexte du problème de la pêche terre-neuvienne (1713–1904) et de son importance pour la signature de l'Entente cordiale, qui a été souvent ignorée par les historiens du rapprochement Anglo–Français jusqu'à présent. Cet article développe et complète la thèse de l'auteur sur l'Entente cordiale et se concentre sur le rôle de Terre-Neuve dans le processus de négociation de la Convention de 1904.

**Mots-clés :** Entente cordiale, Pêcheries terre-neuviennes, Relations franco-anglaises, Théophile Delcassé, Paul Cambon, Robert Bond

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## Introduction

In January 1899, the new French ambassador to London, Paul Cambon, met Lord Salisbury in an attempt to discuss several points at issue between France and Great Britain. When Cambon broached the question of Newfoundland, Salisbury promptly rejected the continuation of such a discussion, stating that “it has been discussed for sixty years and since the Newfoundlanders would like to take part in the discussion, it becomes a triangular duel... which could last a long time” (Cambon, 15; 54). He then repeated this argument in every debate in which the matter was discussed. The French fishing rights at Newfoundland were a precarious legacy of the previous centuries, and during the 19th century, this legacy attained explosive potential. What started as a pure commercial privilege from the British point of view, developed into a long-standing international problem (Korneski, 47).

## Historical background and the origins of the legacy

The Anglo–French dispute over the fishing rights had probably the deepest roots among the other points at issue between France and Great Britain. It first appeared when France ceded Newfoundland to England in 1713, because she retained the seasonal fishing rights in the waters of Newfoundland, specifically along the large coast from Cape Bonavista to Pointe Riche. France had always seen these not as a concession but as a continuation of her old privileges which had already existed for centuries and which she thus preserved. In 1763, French rights were renewed by Article V of the Treaty of Paris and France even gained St. Pierre et Miquelon (Cf. Hiller 1996, 1; Bracq, 583; Cazeils, 57).

Britain insisted that France could neither fortify the islands nor erect any buildings except for those that were of a strictly temporary character and merely for the convenience of the fishery. They could keep a guard of only fifty men to police there and, despite the above stated restrictions, they gained an important base which comprised both the offshore and the inshore fishing (C. 6044, 12 June 1884, 2). According to Janzen: “as long as there was no direct contact between English and French fishermen, there was no problem” (Janzen, 158). That was unfortunately not the case by the late 18th century. In 1783, the limits of the French Shore were altered to “prevent the quarrels which have hitherto arisen between the two nations of England and France” (C. 6044, 12 June 1884, 2). France gained access to the Western Coast, where she established her new French Shore, emphasizing her exclusivity and requiring that all local settlements there should be removed. King George III issued a special Declaration which served the French as their main argument for claiming



their exclusivity on the Shore, while the British believed that their rights were concurrent (Bracq, 584; C11C).

From 1789 to 1815, the French could not profit from the above-mentioned declaration. When the route to Newfoundland was freed again, the geopolitical context differed a lot. In the meantime, “numerous English colonists had established themselves on the French Shore” and their presence later led to new conflicts (Loture, 52–53).

## Nineteenth-century conflicts

From the 1820s, the number of English migrants continued to grow, and the presence of French fishermen on the Shore annoyed them. In 1835, the Legislature of Newfoundland was established and started to support its constituents. London was in a precarious situation, since it could either respect the international treaties and hinder the local subjects, or support them against the French. Facing this massive immigration to the Shore, the French could not stay passive, so they addressed the first protests (Cf. Hiller 1995, 83; Morandière, 87–88).

The quarrel intensified in 1844, so both governments had to appoint their special commissioners to report upon the question. The British urged that “fishermen of both nations should be kept separate and distinct in their fishing places” (C. 6044, 12 June 1884, 5). In 1846, the problem was discussed again without success, because the Colony refused any compromise. In 1857, another major crisis flamed up and resulted in the signing of an Anglo–French convention, confirming the French seasonal exclusivity in the area from Cape St. Jean to Cape Normand and exclusivity in five harbours in the zone from Cape Raye to Cape Rock (Loture, 61). Furthermore, they could buy bait on all the southern coast of Newfoundland and also on St. Pierre et Miquelon, without any restrictions. That was important because the main bait, herring, was to be found in small numbers in the waters of St. Pierre et Miquelon and the French depended on purchasing herring – purchasing that was mediated by the local people of southern Newfoundland. The Colony, which had acquired its own government and the status of Dominion in the meantime, was alarmed by such a decision and thus the contract of 1857 caused severe protests. The long-standing dispute in Anglo–French relations attained a new dimension (Loture, 62; Hiller 1995, 84).

From the 1860s, the local government tried to get the Shore under its control. The French position there was becoming complicated and finally even untenable because the local population started to settle there and complained about the French presence and behaviour in the area. On the one hand, the importance of the French fishery on the Shore steadily declined, but on the other hand the French offshore fishery became



gradually more important, and St. Pierre expanded as a significant fishing base and trading centre. This only worsened the relations. France viewed the issue as an internal problem of the Imperial Government and expected it would settle the problem to eventually meet its international commitments. Another series of negotiations followed in the 1860s and in 1880, when special conferences were held to solve the problem. Any attempt to conclude a reasonable agreement led to severe protests on either the French or the British side. When a consensus was reached in 1884, the intransigence of Newfoundlanders caused its failure. The fact that any convention had to be approved by the Parliament of Newfoundland further complicated the issue (Cf. Hiller 2007, 77–78; Hiller 1995, 84; Loture, 63).

By the late 1880s, the problem of who had the right to continue the fishery on the Shore was at its peak. The French insisted that Newfoundlanders had no right to fish, settle, farm or mine there, and this delayed the development of the local political representation and government, and prevented the colonial government from granting the land. France insisted that their citizens were not subject to the local law, which also worsened the relations (Hiller 1995, 84).

## The Bait Act

The only source of livelihood for the Newfoundlanders was fishing. Because of various financial incentives in the United States and in Europe, the French were able to sell lower quality product for a higher price than the Newfoundlanders, who were therefore not able to compete; unaided, they could not survive. Thus, in 1886 and 1887, the British decided to apply the Bait Act to force the French fishermen to buy bait from the locals. According to Loture, its purpose was to annihilate “the French cod fishery in Newfoundland waters, on the banks as well as on the shore. It was especially directed at the bank fishery, much more the important at this period,” since while the coast fishermen were using nets and did not need any kind of bait, the bank fishers depended on them (Loture 64). Discussions about any compromise were completely suspended and Anglo–French tensions increased. According to the Act, selling fresh bait at the island of St. Pierre was illegal. The French finally found their way out of this difficulty, because instead of traditional fresh bait they started to use whelk, which was available in large quantities around Newfoundland. The impact of the Act was thus negligible.

By the last third of the 19th century, the most valuable part of the fishery business was the lobster fishery, which became the object of the most acute animosity between the French and Newfoundlanders since the Bait Act. The French requested mainly the creation of lobster canneries on the Shore, which would entirely hinder the cod



fishery. But the British refused France the right to fish lobster and build canneries. The canning of lobster served as a pretext for the next conflict in Anglo–French relations, known as the Lobster War. Moreover, canning was an important source of income for the French fishermen in the coastal fishery, which declined progressively, and such a development was in sharp contrast to the bank fishery. The presence of French fishermen and especially the profit they could make without the contribution of the local population irritated the locals (Loture, 64). The case of a certain Mr. Lemoine, who ran a lobster factory in St. John's, was used as a pretext for the next round of haggling, resulting in the closing-down of all the French lobster factories (Loture, 65).

The Newfoundlanders then aimed at restricting the fishing on the Shore. France of course protested that “international treaties could not be limited by local decrees” (Thompson, 94). The affair became gradually more complicated and neither side was willing to give way. By 1886, the local government was convinced that the French had to leave the Shore entirely (Thompson, 98). The lobster issue worsened not only the relations between France and Britain, but also between the Colony and the Imperial government. The local government was not willing to make any compromise and Salisbury was annoyed: “The Newfoundlanders must either legislate to facilitate fulfilment of the treaties or Britain must decline all responsibility for seeing them executed and withdraw her ships” (Cf. Morandière, 89–90; Thompson, 93–94).

A *modus vivendi* had to be found, despite the opposition on both sides (Thompson, 103). New factories that were to be built after 1 July 1889 were to be permitted only if jointly agreed upon by naval officers based on factory for factory – i.e. one French one for each local one (Thompson, 93–94). But this led to new controversies, which worsened the relations between the Newfoundlanders and the French and threatened to worsen the mutual Anglo–French relations profoundly. The situation became further complicated when France decided to protect her exclusivity on the Shore. In 1893, the Council of St. Pierre et Miquelon introduced a special fee for anyone who wanted to fish on the Shore. The Newfoundlanders reacted by selling the bait in advance to fishermen from Canada and America, so no more was left at a reasonable price for the French, who, despite the use of whelk, still depended on it (FO 881/8036, 3 November 1902, 186). Such was the “policy of pinpricks” in Newfoundland.

The above-mentioned *modus vivendi* was not the final solution, because the Newfoundland Parliament required the legislation to be authorized every year. Its existence irritated both London and the Colony, which was not ready to allow the French the right of free purchase of bait in the southern bays of the island. In May 1902, the *modus vivendi* was about to be renewed and the Newfoundlanders opposed it. Chamberlain, the Colonial Secretary, warned them that if it was not re-enacted, the Imperial government would have no power to carry it out. He advised that the Colonial Parliament should postpone passing such legislation. Lord Lansdowne



shared his opinion too (Hiller 2007, 78; FO 881/8036, 4 January 1902, 1–2). The attitude of *Quai d'Orsay* complicated the mutual relations, because, as F. F. Thompson observed, Paris based its principles upon the treaties of 1713 and 1783 and “proceeded to establish claims tantamount to sovereignty [...] whenever compromise was discussed, the slightest move from this position was considered a concession which must be compensated” (Thompson, 93). By the turn of the century, the situation was untenable.

## The path to the Entente

According to J. Hiller, the French knew that “their position on the Treaty Shore was becoming increasingly anomalous and untenable as a growing colonial society became established there, and as the French coastal fishery declined into insignificance” (Hiller 2007, 78). The progressive decline of the French fishery was dramatic – from 100 ships at the beginning of the 19th century, there were just 7 or 8 in 1904 (Morandière, 91). Nevertheless, only the fishery on the Shore was in decline; the bank fishery was still prospering (Loture, 67). However, diplomats at the *Quai d'Orsay* argued that the situation might change in the future and thus no concession was possible.

The Colony was heavily indebted, and the French rights imposed “an insuperable barrier” for the future development of Newfoundland and “a very serious impediment to any industrial development of the Colony” (FO 881/8036, January 1902, 3). While on the one hand the matter of French rights represented for France rather a matter of national pride and a legal claim that needed to be properly compensated for if it was to be renounced, on the other hand, for the Colony, it was a question of the utmost importance.

By December 1902, as a result of the broader diplomatic context, London and Paris were ready to consider a rapprochement. The Anglo-French rapprochement of 1903–1904 was enabled by several factors, including the resignation of Lord Salisbury and the alienation of Great Britain and Germany. The entente concerning Newfoundland was finally possible only because it became part of a much larger question, which later in 1904 allowed the Entente Cordiale (as a whole) to be concluded (Hennlichová, 253–255). The French fishing rights were an inseparable part of the bundle. The British, however, had to face the very stubborn opposition of the uncompromising Newfoundlanders. The administration of Robert Bond, who became the Premier of the Colony in March 1900, later proved to be willing to reach a deal, although he was perceived as “vain, obstinate and unreasonable.” Still, he “did not want to be associated with failed negotiations” (Hiller 2007, 78–81).



It was Cambon in London who broached the issue of the fishing rights in March 1901, when he suggested to a surprised Lansdowne that the French could renounce their rights in Newfoundland in return for territorial compensation in Gambia or Morocco. Both Lansdowne and Monson were shocked by such a proposal. While Monson believed that Cambon was only testing the ground, Lansdowne was not ready to deal with such a complex issue. Joseph Chamberlain reminded the Foreign Secretary that the Moroccan issue was a complex one, because it included not only the interests of Britain, but of Germany and Spain too (FO 800/124, 22 March 1901, 83).

In February 1901, Bond and his companion E. P. Morris arrived in London to discuss important questions including the French Shore and the fishing rights. In March, they met Lansdowne and Chamberlain and their negotiations lasted until May. Bond came up with an unacceptable idea. He proposed that the “French could buy bait if they left the Treaty Shore and handed over St-Pierre et Miquelon to Britain in return for monetary compensation” (Hiller 2007, 81). Should this be rejected, he suggested arbitration, or separate negotiations related to the question of the baits. He insisted that substantial modification of the French bounty system was a *sine qua non* to any agreement. Chamberlain remarked that “the idea was ridiculous” and that “Mr. Bond was even less reasonable than Mr. Cambon” (Hiller 1994, 21). Despite Chamberlain’s judgement, the proposals were presented to Cambon. The reaction was predictable: “The French Government ... firmly and finally decline to enter upon any discussions of the question of bounties, which they regard as one of purely domestic arrangement, and unless, therefore, your Ministers are prepared to accede to the demand of the French for a right to the free purchase of bait, which they make an indispensable condition of any arrangement, it will be useless for His Majesty’s Government to pursue the negotiations” (FO 881/8036, January 1902, 3).

In mid-1901, Lansdowne suggested that “if France dropped or modified its demand for territorial compensation, the British Government would pressure the Colony over bait” (Hiller 2007, 82–83). The discussion on searching for an alternative to the *modus vivendi* ended in a deadlock again. The British opposed the territorial compensation and the Newfoundlanders did not want to give way on the bait issue. In January 1902, Chamberlain warned the Colonial Governor, Charles Cavendish Boyle, that unless “the people of Newfoundland are prepared to allow the French fishermen on the Banks a right to the free purchase of bait in the southern bays of the Colony,” the British Government cannot encourage “any hope of an arrangement with the Government of France” (FO 881/8036, January 1902, 3). In the meantime, the British led an inquiry into the real state of the fish market and concluded that “the principal competitor of the Colony in the markets of Europe” was Norway and not France. Thus, they concluded that the Bait Act was not successful and there should be a new proposal for a settlement, “based on the premise that there would be no territorial compensation,





and that the colony could not expect that all the sacrifices should be made by Britain” (Cf. FO 881/8036, January 1902, 3; Hiller 2007, 83).

According to Hiller, Chamberlain then put heavy pressure on Bond, since he “indicated that cooperation on the French question was a precondition for reciprocity negotiations with the USA, one of Bond’s highest priorities” (Hiller 2007, 83). By mid-1902, Bond was “willing to continue renewing the treaty enforcement legislation and to concede bait privileges” (FO 881/8036, 6 May 1902, 80). The Newfoundlanders, however, were not ready to sacrifice the Bait Act. The British had to turn attention to the issue of the Colonial Conference of 1902 then, so any further discussion of the troublesome issue of the French fishing rights was put aside for a while (Hiller 2007, 84).

## The Negotiations of 1903

A viable consensus on Newfoundland fishing rights was still a long way ahead. The issue was discussed by Delcassé and Lansdowne in July 1903, when Delcassé admitted “the question of the supply of bait [...] had most importance for France; the considerations which had to be taken into account by the French Government were, however, largely of a sentimental character” (Gooch, Temperley, 294). He added that although the value of fisheries on the French Shore was in decline, “the fish ... might someday return there, and any surrender of French rights would be resented unless it could be shown that sufficient compensation had been secured” (ibid.). Lansdowne concluded that the main obstacle was the bounties, which were ruinous to the fishermen of Newfoundland while protecting those of St. Pierre et Miquelon, and he suggested the withdrawal of the French fishermen from the Shore in return for financial compensation, while the French would receive facilities for obtaining a free supply of bait on the coasts of Newfoundland. Lansdowne obviously counted on the consent of the Colony in this matter.

Cambon had previously suggested that France was entitled not only to financial compensation, but also to territorial compensation. Lansdowne rejected Gambia while admitting that territorial compensation could be found elsewhere. Delcassé then observed that the bounties were a matter of domestic concern to the French Government, so they could not be cancelled, but he admitted they could be amended. He said that any favourable solution of the Newfoundland issue depended on British attitude towards the problem of French interests in Morocco (Gooch, Temperley, 295). It was evident that the core of the negotiations was Egypt and Morocco. Unless France and Great Britain came to a consensus on those matters, the Newfoundland issue would not be solved, since both sides were obstinate about making any concessions.



Delcassé emphasized he needed some tangible concessions, otherwise the Assembly would never agree to concessions in Egypt and Newfoundland (PAAP 211, 21 July 1903, 72).

On 29 July, Cambon suggested three measures to be adopted in Newfoundland: indemnities, territorial concessions and a guaranteed right to catch or buy bait. Lansdowne did not refuse the indemnities, but he was not willing to give consent to the concessions. He believed territorial compensation could be “executed in the event of a satisfactory arrangement being arrived at in regard to the other points at issue”. He doubted the real value of French fisheries, which according to the British had “a sentimental rather than a substantial importance” to France, while it represented a real albatross to the Colony. While France still hoped to get Gambia, Lansdowne refused this and suggested that an area of Sokoto in the vicinity of Niger River could be an option (Cf. GB 14, July 1903, 113; *Ibid*, 1 October 1903, 181; Gooch, Temperley, 314–315).

In August, the Colonial Office received a secret note on the matters discussed by Lansdowne and Cambon. They refused to consider concessions unless the French would agree to reduce the export fishery bounty to a reasonable figure or unless they restricted it to the metropolitan fishery, excluding from it the fishery of St. Pierre et Miquelon. The British decided that if France persisted in her attitude, the Colonial Government would need to get rid of the main source of trouble with Newfoundland: the French right to dry fish on the Shore, which limited the further development of the Colony. The British once again argued that such a French right was of no practical value and they suggested that France accept at least the same rules as the United States, whose fishermen could dry the fish, but only on unoccupied parts of the coast. Since many French establishments existed on the French Shore, the British suggested those needed to be removed, with their owners financially compensated (CO 885/8/17, 469–470).

On 7 October 1903, Lansdowne suggested a limited settlement without any territorial compensation. Cambon rejected this. From the fall of 1903, the British pushed France to accept their suggestions while both Delcassé and Cambon wanted to push through all their claims. Thus, the Anglo–French negotiations were transformed into a carefully played strategical game (Hennlichová, 172). That is why, in late October, Cambon claimed Gambia again. Lansdowne warned that insisting on such an unreasonable claim would foredoom the negotiations to failure. Cambon stayed still on the matter of Newfoundland because he felt the French position there was a solid one. Lord Cromer openly admitted it too: “In Morocco, Siam and Sokoto, the French want various things which we have it in our power to give. In Newfoundland and Egypt, the situation is reversed. In these latter cases we depend to a greater extent on the goodwill of France” (Cf. GB 14, 23 October 1903, 218; Gooch, Temperley, 299).



However, Lansdowne firmly believed that Gambia could never be surrendered and since Paris was obstinate on the matter of Egypt and Morocco at the same time, he concluded that unless the French were ready to make some concessions, the path to any entente was barred (DDF, 28 October 1903, 69). Cromer believed that the Newfoundland issue was “the most serious thing ahead” and that “cession of Gambia in return for French Indian possessions and a satisfactory solution of the Newfoundland question” seemed to him “worthy of considerations” (FO 800/124, 30 October 1903, 108). But Lansdowne was adamant. That is why Cambon decided to present another claim. At the end of December 1903, he concluded that instead of Gambia he would “ask for a substantial part of area around the River Niger” (Cambon, 102–103). That would guarantee to France access to the navigable part of the river, which the British refused them in 1898. Lansdowne refused. Cambon then claimed another portion of African hinterland, the triangle between Niger and Upper Dahomey and the British refused again. Instead, they offered a revision of frontiers in Sokoto. The French were furious, because that area had been offered by Britain in 1898, when Lord Salisbury disparaged as being “an empty land” (Cf. Hennlichová, 205; Égypte 21, 19 January 1904, 75).

In the meantime, Cambon confided to Delcassé that he should claim the area of Boussa again to get time and assured him that “Lord Cromer would then willingly give up both Boussa and Gambia so he could achieve his own goals in Egypt” (DDF, 14 January 1904, 251). And time confirmed that Cambon was right in his prophecy. By the end of February, Cromer urged his government to come to terms with the French as soon as possible: “I am inclined to think that the risk of a breakdown is serious. I need hardly say [...] that it is worth some sacrifice to avoid this. In any case I recommend settling this matter quickly” (FO 800/124, 20 January 1904, 162).

## Conclusion

Under these circumstances and with the vision of a threat of being drawn into the war in the Far East, on 12 March 1904 London presented an offer Paris could finally accept. Three days later it was already incorporated into a draft. French fishing rights between Cape St. Jean and Cape Raye were to persist in the summer season. Both French and British fishermen were to be subordinated to the legislature of the Colony. As for the Shore, the French fishermen renounced their buildings and establishments in the area in return for financial compensation. The British Government could officially send their representative to the islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon and the French Government could have its consular representative in St. John’s (Cf. Hennlichová, 225; GB 15, 15 March 1904, 137–138). The territorial compensation offered by the



British was quite generous, since the French received not only the compensations in Nigeria and Gambia, but also Los Islands, which were strategically important due to their location opposite Conakry.

When these concessions were incorporated into the Entente Cordiale of 8 April 1904, the long and thorny controversy in Anglo–French relations finally ended. But another one appeared – controversy in the relations between the British and the Colony, which received the final text four days after the signing of the entente and refused to comply to it. According to Hiller, “the Government of Newfoundland was not consulted over the wording of the final text, probably deliberately, in order to avoid further (and inevitable) complications” (Hiller, 2007, 89). The Newfoundlanders refused to ratify the convention. The British were furious and sternly informed St. John’s that “the power of ratification rested with the Crown” and that the British Empire “cannot have the fate of the other parts of the Empire involved trembling in the balance or hang up an internal part of the readjustment with France, until the Colony has been pleased to legislate” (Hiller 2007, 89). Bond and Morris defended the convention, which was finally approved by the Colony, and the issue eventually ceased to be a sore point in Anglo–French relations.

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