

Appendix 2

The If and Her Captains

On the eleventh day of September 1794, a Thursday, Charles Robin walked over to his shipyard on the *barachois* of Paspébiac. He stood and watched somewhat apprehensively as his shipwright, James Day, supervised the launching of a new ship. Robin was apprehensive because the slips on which the vessel had been built were fixed only in the red sand of the beach. The slips were not attached to solid ground but they held as the ties were released and the ship slid safely into the surf of Chaleur Bay. It was an important day for Charles Robin for he had lost three vessels to the French that spring and desperately needed another ship to carry his annual complement of fish to Europe. This was the second vessel which his men had constructed at Paspébiac; the first, the *Fiott*, had been among those captured by the French in the spring. He called his new ship *If*, but never revealed why. It would be delightful to discover that it was an acronym for *ipse fecit*, "he did it himself".

The *If* was a ship specially designed to carry fish to market. She had a burthen of 194 tons and required a crew of only twelve men. Each crew member, then, "served" 16.1 tons of burthen. This is a high ratio of "tons served per man" and would indicate to a naval architect a very efficient ship.¹ She was capable of carrying 4000 quintals of dried cod at one time; there was little room for passengers, as she was a cargo ship. The *If* had two decks, and soon Robin's men would install three masts. She was 86' 6" long and 23' wide (outside measurements), and there was 4' 6" between the two decks. Unlike so many ships of her day, she carried no figurehead or decoration on her prow — she was a ship built in the abstemious style of Charles Robin and Company.²

It had taken two years to build the *If*. The work had begun in the autumn, following the launching of the *Fiott*. Before the snow fell, James Day went into the woods behind Paspébiac and selected trees for his men to cut. There was little oak in the Gaspé, but other trees answered well. For the bottom timbers and planks, Day used black birch; for the upper woodwork, he chose cedar and juniper; the trunnels were also made of juniper. There was abundant pine for masts and spars.³ Some of the timber chosen was three or four miles from the shipyard, and Day had had his men cut logging trails through the forests. Charles Robin by this time had obtained six oxen. In the spring and fall they were employed in ploughing the Company's vegetable gardens but their most important use was to drag the large ship timbers out of the forests to the shipyard in the winter. Some of the wood was then sawn into planking and some of it hewn into heavy beams. Robin imported sails and cor-

dage, etc., from England and Jersey but he manufactured many marine products at Paspébiac. For example, he brought in sheet iron from the forges of St. Maurice, near Trois-Rivières, and had them worked by his own blacksmiths into nails, braces and other fittings. Work on the ship continued in all seasons, and she was launched only a couple of weeks later than Robin had hoped.

After the *If* was launched, there was no time for a shakedown cruise. Many things had to be done before the waters of Chaleur Bay froze and prevented her departure. There was no real harbour at Paspébiac, so the *If* was simply moored in the roadstead. There was no danger in this, however, for the holding ground for anchors is excellent at Paspébiac and the *barachois* protected ships from most of the storms which hit Chaleur Bay. Even while James Day was raising her tall masts and attaching her rigging and square sails, Robin had his men loading codfish below the decks. On her first voyage she could not carry a full cargo because the sides of the hold were not prepared for the friction of a cargo which was apt to shift in high seas. For the first voyage a thick layer of dunnage matting had to be stowed under the cargo to prevent damage to the sides of the hold; as a result Robin loaded her with only 3286 quintals of fish. Ships carrying fish always required some dunnage, however, to insulate the cargo from moisture.

The finishing touches and loading were not completed until 24 November. On that day her master, Captain Philippe Béchervaise, and his crew of twelve men went aboard. The captain carried with him the Mediterranean Pass which Robin had obtained for him. Great Britain had signed treaties with the Barbary pirates of the Mediterranean Sea guaranteeing safe passage to British vessels. The pass certified that the *If* was a British ship, so Robin did not have to worry about sending her to Italy or Spain. It also noted that the *If* carried no cannons and that her crew were "all His Majesty's Lawful Subjects".⁴ Charles Robin paid £2.15.3 for the Pass, but it was not until 1803 that the *If* sailed on the Mediterranean.

Contrary winds delayed the *If*'s departure for four days. For these four days Charles Robin paced nervously up and down the *barachois* because the temperature was below freezing, and every morning the ice around the ship grew thicker. On board ship the cold was causing "great Hardships" to the crew; they were impatient to set sail, for they were headed for the warmer weather of Portugal. Finally, on 28 November, the winds changed and the *If* set off. Another few days and the ice would have prevented her departure until the spring break-up. It would have been a great financial blow for Charles Robin.

When he had boarded the new ship, Captain Béchervaise had been handed his instructions by Charles Robin. Béchervaise was a veteran of several years' experience with Charles Robin and Company. Indeed, to have

been given command of a new, untried ship built of lumber which was not fully cured, he must have been one of the Company's most experienced captains. Béchervaise, like all of Charles Robin's captains, was a Jerseyman; he spoke the Norman patois of Jersey and probably no English.

Robin's instructions to his captains were written in French (Robin could speak English, French and Jersiais). His instructions were to head straight for Lisbon where he would contact Joseph Axtell, the Englishman who had worked as a merchant there for many years. He was instructed to consult with Axtell and find out the prices being offered for cod in all the ports of Portugal. He was to spend the winter in Portugal because Charles Robin felt it would be too dangerous to try to sail around France to Jersey. Because he would be there for the winter, Béchervaise could delay selling the fish for several months if he thought that the price might rise. For the return voyage he was to purchase a cargo of salt, one pipe (105 gallons) of olive oil, a barrel of sugar and a barrel of wine. The money from the fish cargo which remained after buying the return cargo was to be remitted by post to the Charles Robin and Company account with the firm of Fiott, DeGruchy and Company, London. At the same time that he remitted the money he was to inform that firm of the details of his return voyage so that the ship and cargo could be insured in Britain. Béchervaise also carried letters (in duplicate) to be posted in Lisbon. Béchervaise's duties were many but he had performed them before and Joseph Axtell would act as a broker (for a commission) to help him sell the fish.

At the beginning of May 1795 a ship belonging to the Janvrin Company arrived at Bay Gaspé from Lisbon. Word was sent to Robin at Paspébiac that the *If* had reached Lisbon safely, but Robin was furious that Béchervaise had not sent him a note by the Janvrin ship. Throughout his many years on Chaleur Bay, Charles Robin worried constantly about his lack of information and news from Europe. The *If* did not drop her anchor at Paspébiac until 24 May 1795, and Robin was angry that Béchervaise had waited so long to leave Portugal. Béchervaise had stopped at Percé to land salt for the Robin operations there, as he had been instructed, but high winds came up and he had had to leave after landing only 16 hogsheads. This was disappointing, but Robin could not blame Béchervaise, for the anchorage was extremely poor at Percé and the winds treacherous. Robin did complain, however, about the quality of the salt. Béchervaise had brought the coarse salt produced at Setubal (St. Ubes) in Portugal. Robin said that the fishermen of Chaleur Bay did not like it and were "too lazy to pound it". Béchervaise, Robin said, should have purchased the finer salt produced at Lisbon.

Captain Béchervaise had little time to sulk over his employer's criticism. His first task was to hurry to New Carlisle to report his cargo to the Customs Officer there. Then he had to hurry back and begin his summer

duties. The duties of a ship's master employed by Charles Robin included more than commanding ships and managing cargoes. The master and his crew were to spend the summer on the fisheries. May and June were the height of the fishing season, hence Robin's dismay at seeing the *If* arrive at the end of May. He needed the salt and he needed the ship's men at this busy season. For the month of June, Béchervaise was probably employed commanding one of the two Company schooners which went out fishing for three or four days at a time on the Orphan Banks, fifty miles distant. As the fishing catches declined in July and the piles of cured fish grew on the shore, Béchervaise used the schooner for other purposes. He would take salt, fishing equipment and provisions (truck) from Paspébiac to the Company stores along Chaleur Bay. Then he would pick up dried fish and bring it back to Paspébiac. He also helped Robin receive fish from the fishermen of Paspébiac, for he was one of the few employees who could read, write and do sums. He might also have taken a small shallop up to a nearby fishing cove to buy more fish. Here he would inspect the fish and cull the "merchantable" grade from the "inferior" or "West Indies" grade; then he would weigh it all and credit the fishermen for a certain amount of truck at the Company store.

In the autumn, Béchervaise's duties changed again, for he had to prepare the *If* for another voyage. He was responsible for the maintenance and repair of the ship, its sails and rigging. There was painting and caulking to be done to the vessel and its yawls. By October, Béchervaise was supervising the weighing and loading of fish on his ship. At the same time he loaded the ship with the supplies he would require for the voyage — provisions, canvas, candles, drinking water and fuel for lamps and stoves. The provisions included fish, of course, but this "victual fish" was usually broken or over-dried cod, as much as four to six quintals of it. Béchervaise was also allowed to set aside a small quantity of merchantable fish, which he could sell on his own account in Europe. This was a reward for good service but, also, an incentive to obtain the best possible prices for the whole cargo. Charles Robin and Company records show that this "captain's privilege" normally averaged 2% to 2.5% of the total cargo.

By November, Robin had to decide where he would direct his remaining vessels. On 12 November 1795, he sent off three ships to Portugal. Only the *If* went to Lisbon, however; she carried 3826 quintals of fish. Philippe Béchervaise was again her master but his responsibilities were fewer this year. Charles Robin sent his nephew with Béchervaise on this voyage and Philip Robin Junior sold the fish, bought the cargo of salt and arranged for the insurance. Philip Robin Junior was eager to go to Lisbon, because his brother John had recently begun his partnership there with Joseph Axtell. Charles Robin was happier with the results of this voyage. Firstly, his godson, John Robin, sent him a gift of oranges and port wine from Lisbon. More important

though, Philip Robin Junior brought the *If* back early. Captain Béchervaise dropped Philip Robin Junior off at Percé in a yawl at the beginning of May before continuing on to Paspébiac. He arrived there on 4 May 1796 with the men and salt that Charles Robin needed to get an early start on the fisheries.

The *If* had arrived three weeks earlier than it had in 1795. There were many factors which could account for the different dates of arrival. Charles Robin continually harangued his captains about the need to get an early start on their voyages from Europe to Chaleur Bay. But even with an early departure, the *If* could have arrived late. The Europe-to-Gaspé voyage could take three to five weeks, depending on the winds encountered. Then, as ships approached the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the captains had to worry about icebergs. The slightest contact with these mountains of ice would tear a huge gash in the wooden hull of the *If*, and the icy waters of the Atlantic would pour into the hold. There was little chance of rescue, and between March and May there were thousands of icebergs in the sea lanes that led to Paspébiac. Once in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, ships were often delayed by thick fields of pack ice. Captain Béchervaise had to steer his way around these hazards and, at the same time, keep a close check on his position.

Even at the end of the 18th Century, navigation was still not an exact art. It was only on Captain James Cook's second voyage of discovery (1772-1775) that an instrument for accurately determining longitude (the chronometer) was first successfully demonstrated. Charles Robin's captains seem to have been using chronometers by the 1790s. But the marine charts available to his captains were old and incomplete. The waters of the Gaspé coast had not been charted since Captain Cook's quick reconnaissance in 1758. James Cook became a great surveyor of the sea, but in 1758 he was undertaking his first project and he had only a few weeks to do it. Charles Robin recognized the importance of experience and tried to employ the same captains year after year. Captain Béchervaise probably depended more on his familiarity with the waters of the Gaspé than on his charts to avoid the dangerous reefs along the coast; there were three or four such reefs between Point St. Pierre and Tracadigache.⁵

In 1796, the *If* got a new captain. Charles Robin re-affirmed his confidence in Philippe Béchervaise by giving him command of his third new ship, *Truth*. Captain Jean Alexandre, who had commanded Charles Robin and Company ships for several years, took charge of the *If*. In November 1796, Alexandre left Paspébiac and, after stopping at Arichat for fresher news from Europe, sailed for Lisbon where he sold his cargo of 3768 quintals of dried cod. This time James Robin went along on the ship to direct its business transactions in Portugal.

In succeeding years, the *If* took its fish to either Lisbon or Boston. In 1800, the *If* took 4016 quintals of cod to Boston and then proceeded to London

with a cargo of freight. This was the only time in the nine years between 1794 and 1802 that the *If* visited a British port other than Paspébiac. In all other cases the *If* returned directly to Paspébiac from Lisbon or Boston. Charles Robin was reluctant to allow his ships to go to England or Jersey, because of the French menace in the English Channel. But there was another reason. Neither Robin nor his crews wanted the *If* to touch at any British port for fear of impressment.

In the 1790s, almost every British port had press gangs ready to meet incoming ships. It was not unusual for the gangs to kidnap sailors and impress them into service on one of His Majesty's warships. For many sailors in the merchant marine, this was a fate almost worse than drowning. They dreaded the iron discipline and dangers of war service. On some occasions, crews refused to enter British ports or armed themselves to resist the press gangs. Many sailors deserted their ships upon hearing they were bound for a home port. So great was their dread that there were even cases of self-mutilation (fingers amputated, bones broken) to avoid impressment.⁶

Charles Robin, of course, had to have some contact with England and Jersey. For this purpose, he normally used his tiny brig, *Kingfisher*. This vessel was well suited: it could make the voyage very quickly, yet it was big enough to bring out the manufactured goods Robin needed. More important, because it was so small, it needed a crew of only five or six men. Robin did not use his own ships for voyages to Halifax or Quebec. He got some supplies from these ports, especially food, but he had them freighted on schooners operated by independent shippers. There were press gangs in these British colonial ports but none ever came to Paspébiac. The army had recruited men in the Gaspé in 1793 and 1794 but had not looked for sailors.

The *If* served Charles Robin and Company for nine years. After spending the winter of 1802-1803 in Jersey she was transferred to the Philip Robin Company. War resumed in 1803, impressment continued to be a menace to the crews of merchant ships, and the *If* once again avoided English and Jersey ports. For this reason, the *If* returned each year directly to the safety of the backwater port of Arichat after taking Philip Robin Company fish to such markets as Lisbon, Boston, Gibraltar and Naples.⁷ The *If* served the Robin family for at least twenty years; she was dropped from *Lloyd's Register of Shipping* in 1814.