

THE BRITISH FISH TRADE

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The British Fish Trade by Spencer Walpole

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SPENCER WALPOLE

**THE BRITISH
FISH TRADE**

International Fisheries Exhibition

LONDON, 1883

THE
BRITISH FISH TRADE

BY

HIS EXCELLENCY

SPENCER WALPOLE

LIEUT.-GOVERNOR OF THE ISLE OF MAN

LONDON

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FEW things are more remarkable in modern politics than the care which is almost everywhere taken to illustrate, by statistics the science of government. In the United Kingdom elaborate arrangements are made with this object. Public officers are employed in enumerating the flocks and herds; in recording the crops which are sown; and in counting every bale of goods which is either imported into, or exported from, the country. The writer, who desires to procure statistical information on almost any subject connected with the growth, the health, the condition, or the industry of the people, is able to obtain it in an authoritative form, and in a convenient and cheap volume. The success which the "Statistical Abstracts" have achieved has induced their authors to extend their scope. The Statistical Abstract of the United Kingdom has been supplemented by statistical abstracts for the Colonies, for India, and for even foreign countries. A vast mass of information of almost immeasurable value has in this way been collected, and the student or the inquirer is able to obtain facts on almost every subject to which either his studies or his investigations may be directed.

Yet the politician or the student, who has had occasion to consult the excellent statistics which are published by the British Government, has probably noticed one remark-

able omission from them. While on every other subject he finds information, which is usually full and which is seldom inexact, on one subject he fails to obtain any information whatever. The editor of the Statistical Abstract does not seem to be aware that a large number of persons in the British Islands are dependent on fishing for their livelihood; that a considerable proportion of the food of the inhabitants of these islands consists of fish; and that one of the most important trades of the kingdom is the trade in fish. The quantity of fish which is imported into these islands from abroad or which is exported from them is included in the statistical abstracts. But on the much greater questions which are connected with the fisheries—the employment which they afford, the capital which they attract, and the wealth which they produce—the Statistical Abstract is uniformly silent.

This silence arises from no fault of the editor of the Abstract. He gives no information on the subject of fisheries, because no full information is forthcoming which is worth publishing. The Fishery Board of Scotland, indeed, annually publishes elaborate and detailed accounts of the Scotch herring fishery. The Irish Inspectors of Fisheries also compile once a year some statistics—which, however, are admittedly imperfect—to illustrate the development, or rather the decay, of the Irish fisheries. But in England itself little information is afforded to the student who wishes to ascertain the condition of the English fisheries. The Inspectors of salmon fisheries are, indeed, required to report annually on the state of the English salmon fisheries. But the salmon fisheries of England and Wales stand in the same relation to the sea-fisheries of the country as Croydon to London, or Rutland to Yorkshire. The state of the more important fisheries has to be ascer-

tained by reference to a number of more or less authoritative publications, and to be inferred, rather than proved, from a number of incidental circumstances. There are no means of ascertaining with any precision such simple facts as the number of boats employed, or the number of persons engaged, in the sea-fisheries of England and Wales.*

This absence of information naturally increases the difficulty of any writer who undertakes to describe the fish trade of the United Kingdom. Instead of moving on firm ground, he is perpetually fearing that the whole basis of his argument may give way as he advances. He is forced to adduce theories where he ought to state facts, and he has to prove elementary propositions which ought to be accepted as readily as axioms. The difficulty with which his task is thus surrounded is his fittest excuse for any imperfections on his part in completing it; and the best service, which he can perhaps hope to accomplish, is to induce the Government to supply some of the information, the publication of which would have made most of his own labours unnecessary.

And, in truth, if there be any subject on which statistical information is desirable, if there be any industry which

* A return is annually published, by the Registrar-General of Shipping and Seamen, of the number of boats, registered under the Sea Fisheries Act 1868, belonging to each port in the United Kingdom. But the return is imperfect for the following reason: "On the 23rd of October, 1877, an Order in Council was obtained by the Board of Trade, exempting from registration, &c., undecked boats, fishing or dredging on the coasts of England, Wales, and Scotland, and the Islands of Guernsey, Jersey, Sark, and Man, and not going outside the distance of three miles from low-water mark along the said coasts." Since the date of this order, which however never applied to Ireland, and from the operation of which Scotland was exempted in 1880, the Registry of fishing boats has become more and more imperfect.

deserves to be illustrated, by figures stamped with the impress of authority, the fisheries and fishermen of this country deserve that recognition. The British Islands, from a fisherman's point of view, enjoy a singular advantage. There are no other waters in the globe so rich in food-producing fish as those of the North Atlantic Ocean ; and there is no portion of this great ocean so fishful as that part of it which surrounds these Islands. If, however, nature has placed the United Kingdom in a pre-eminently favourable position, the hardy inhabitants of its maritime counties have made the best use of nature's bounty. Their veins, still warm with the bold blood of their Saxon and Danish forefathers, the people of Eastern Britain especially have inherited a love for the sea. Few storms are so severe as to drive them from their occupation. Their well-found boats court dangers which other and larger vessels shun ; and, in the roughest as in the calmest weather, the dish of fish, which these bold men have risked lives and fortunes in catching, is procurable, if it consist of what the trade calls "offal," for a few pence ; if it be composed of what the trade calls "prime," for a few shillings in the London market.

Yet it must not be supposed that the inhabitants of all the maritime counties of Great Britain or of the United Kingdom furnish fishermen in equal proportions. It is Eastern Scotland and Eastern England which supplies the majority of British fishermen. Cornwall, Devonshire, and the Isle of Man are almost the only other parts of the kingdom which furnish a class of men who make fishing the sole occupation of their lives. In Ireland, indeed, a movement has, for years past, been in progress to develop the Irish fisheries. But the seas of Ireland are swept by Scotch, English, and Manx boats, and, though Irish craft

are found fishing among them, the Irishmen rarely or never repair in their turn to the Scotch and English seas. In this respect they are not peculiar. The Highlanders and Islanders of Western Scotland, sprung from a common ancestry with the Irish, seldom leave their own lochs, or their own seas; the Welshman like the Irishman rarely, if ever, leaves his own neighbourhood; and Welsh boats are never seen in English seas. The Cornishman is perhaps the only example in the United Kingdom of a man sprung from a Celtic ancestry who follows his fish from sea to sea. In every other case, it may be suspected that the fishermen owe some of their skill and courage to the blood of the bold Saxon and Norse Sea Rovers, who, in the early days of English History, played their part in what the late Mr. Green has called the making of England.*

This circumstance is of essential importance. In the olden time fishing, conducted chiefly in the estuaries of rivers, or on the coasts of the sea, was a trade which required little skill, and perhaps little courage. Our forefathers while fishing did not venture far out to sea, but kept in close proximity to the shore, either in consequence of the frailty of their boats, or of what an early writer has called "the fearfulness" of their minds. Much of the fish which was served up on table was intercepted in passing out to sea with the ebb tide by the dams which any

* How far the Devonshire and Cornish people may owe their fishing propensities to the Conquest of South Western Britain by Egbert in 815 is perhaps doubtful. The Saxons, it is certain, did not succeed in rooting out the Celtic names which still distinguish this part of England. But the Saxon conquerors, in all probability, settled and fused with the Britons in Cornwall, while they only held a strategical position in Wales. No one, at any rate, can look at a Cornish fisherman at the present time, and think that he is descended from the same exclusively Celtic stock as the Welsh.