

“THY REAL FRIEND
GEORGE SKEFFINGTON:” QUAKER
AND SALMON FISHING PIONEER IN
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY
NEWFOUNDLAND

George Skeffington, a cooper from Ringwood, Hampshire, arrived in Newfoundland shortly before or at the turn of the eighteenth century.¹ When he appeared at a Quaker meeting in Philadelphia in 1700 and requested ‘a Certificate from us to friends, where he may have occasion to travel,’ the minutes identify him as ‘George Skeffington late of Newfoundland’ who had ‘been travelling upon the service of Truth in these parts.’² That he settled in Bonavista, then an active commercial centre in Newfoundland’s Bonavista Bay, was no accident. His fellow Ringwood compatriot Samuel Shambler lived there as well,³ and the Trinity Bay communities of Bay de Verde and Trinity had become centres of early Quaker mercantile activity from the West Country, as the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century names Jefferey, Taverner and White indicate. Before that, the female Quaker missionaries Esther Biddle and Mary Fisher had visited Newfoundland as early as the 1650s.⁴ Esther Biddle, a visionary, who at one time visited King Louis XIV of France, went, according to George Fox, in 1656 for the first time ‘to the new founde lande:’⁵ In the same year intelligence from Lisbon to Secretary of State John Thurloe speaks of ‘an English shipp come in here from Newfoundland. The master hath beene on board of us. There is not, they say, one person in the shipp, officer or marriner, but are all Quakers.’⁶ A letter of the Puritan divine Richard Blinman from Feryland on Newfoundland’s Southern Shore in 1659 confirms a subsequent trip of Esther Biddle and Mary Fisher, the future wife of the Baptist Quaker convert William Bayley, a merchant from Poole engaged in trade to Newfoundland and the West Indies. The preaching of these two women in St. John’s was successful enough to convert ‘2 or 3 masters of ships’ and initiate counter measures by the rest, including the invitation to Blinman to come to St. John’s, which according to his letter to Governor John Winthrop Jr. he was prepared to do.⁷ Newfoundland remained also on the list of support-worthy Quaker missionary endeavours in England. On 25 February 1660 a

collection was recommended for Quaker missionary activities at the annual meeting in Skipton, which listed Newfoundland among the countries where such activity was taking place.⁸ Little if anything is known about the religious life of these early Friends in Newfoundland. They appear in the colonial records only when they touched military or economic history. So it is also with George Skeffington, one of the most prominent among them. The traces he left in the extant archival sources do not permit one to write a full biography, but they invite, nevertheless, a sketch fuller than those previously drawn.⁹

Colonial documents record Skeffington's name first in 1705, when the French under Auger de Subercase sought to suppress the English settlements and fortifications, which had sprung up since Iberville's 1696 raid on St. John's. In the spring of 1705 de Subercase laid siege to St. John's, and the experienced Testard de Montigny, with the support of Abenaki Indians, pressed on to take the English settlements in Conception Bay and Trinity Bay.¹⁰ George Skeffington was at the time an agent for the London merchant house of James Campbell in Bonavista. Whether he acted on his Quaker convictions or followed the insight that armed opposition was futile is not certain, but he sought to secure relief from the invading troops by paying them a ransom of £450. The agreement, which was later interpreted as a lack of patriotism, stipulated that the French 'desist from Hostility during the remainder of that ffishing Season.' But the troops returned and, according to Skeffington's testimony,

committed several barbarrity's in Trinity bay, killing 9 men there calling them out one by one, of ye house th[at] they were kept in, & killing th[e]m as they came out, att Buena vsta they kill'd 9 men & 2 children...¹¹

The Quaker himself was transported with his confrere Arthur Jefferey and several others to Placentia and from there to France. At Dinant he met Colin Campbell, a brother of his employer and himself an agent in St. John's.¹²

It may well be that Campbell secured Skeffington's release, for in March of 1706 he was back in England, where he took sides in the quarrel between the garrison commander of St. John's, Thomas Lloyd, and Lieutenant-Colonel John Moody, who had successfully defended the fort against the French. Skeffington like other 'Northern planters ... especially those of Bonavista' preferred Moody over Lloyd for the assistance he had received from him and wished to see him as Newfoundland's commander in chief.¹³

The depositions of 1705/6 testify also to an activity of Skeffington's which would occupy him for a considerable time in Newfoundland, the salmon fishery. The extent of this fishery can be gauged from the damage reports of the day. Among the nearly £2000 of damages sustained in Bonavista through the French raids were '4 salmon ffishery[s] with all Necessarys belonging there to, such as salt, sains, Boats &c vallued at 160 -.'¹⁴ It is possible that the reference of Commander Roope on the state of the Newfoundland Fishery in 1705, which speaks of 'a noble salmon fishery' at Green's Pond and Salmon Cove, had in mind these Bonavista-based operations.¹⁵ The degree of Skeffington's own involvement, whether he was in a partnership with Campbell or merely supervised his operations, can no longer be determined. It is possible that the West Country native had some experience with salmon fishing. Daniel Defoe is a witness of West Country salmon fishing by trap during the early part of the eighteenth century.¹⁶

A later business relationship with the St. John's merchant William Keen, a New Englander who entered the annals of Newfoundland legal history as an agitator for a local system of justice and one of its first magistrates, furnishes more details. In 1718, Skeffington, then a cooper in Indian Bay, entered into agreement with Keen, which aimed at the expansion of his salmon fishery. He had in mind a fishery in the rivers to the north and west of Bonavista, where the Atlantic salmon spawned and hatched and could be caught during its migration to the spawning pools.¹⁷ In a letter of 1719 to William Keen, Skeffington indicates the procedure. The salmon fisherman 'stops the river so yt the salmon can not get up,' and then 'drawing [them] with nets or otherwise' in the pools below the weirs.¹⁸ This operation required considerable personnel and equipment. In a petition of 1720 to the King, Skeffington indicated that he had 'at very great Expence and Labour near fforty miles up the Country cleared Lands of the wood, and the said Rives or Brooks of rocks and stones and other obstructions, built houses, stages, flatts, works and other Conveniences for catching and Curing salmon in said Brooks or Rivers.'¹⁹ A middling dealer like Skeffington, who in 1708 was listed as having '6 servants, 1 boat, 1 skiff, 1 traine fatt, 250 quintals of fish ..., and 1½ tunns of traine oyle,'²⁰ required outside capital to undertake a sizeable fishery. William Keen had this capital. According to the agreement and the letters exchanged between Bonavista and St. John's, Keen advanced £120 in supplies, delivered through the Bonavista merchant Isaac Bonovrier. Under the terms of the contract, costs and profits for the Salmon fishery in Gander Bay near Cape Freels were shared equally by the two partners, with Keen being

responsible for the marketing of the fish and Skeffington with the operations themselves. But counter claims by two other Bonavista residents, Samuel Shambler and William Knight, complicated matters. Keen attempted first to force an uninhibited fishery through an order from Commodore Scott but was later required to take Shambler and Knight into a temporary business arrangement, which Skeffington may have helped to arrange. When profits did not materialise in 1719 as expected and Skeffington later went into partnership with Shambler and possibly Bonovrier to the exclusion of Keen, who had lost his investment of £120, the St. John's business man complained cautiously - so as not to endanger any future involvement - to the Board of Trade and Plantations. But the half-heartedness of his petition and the successful request of Skeffington before the board make it uncertain that Keen ever recovered his losses.²¹ In fact Keen's complaint may have been occasioned by Skeffington's attempt to establish a monopoly for the salmon fishery in the region.²² The Council of Trade and Plantations decided that Skeffington's pioneer effort and commercial promise did not interfere with the existing acts on the fishery and granted him a 21-year salmon fishing monopoly with timber rights 'in the Places called Fresh Water Bay [the Gambo River], Ragged Harbour [Pinsent; a part of Musgrave Harbour], Gander Bay [probably the area of Gander Bay South, known as Georges Point] & Dog Creek [a river, which flows into Dog Bay, west of Gander Bay and just south of Horwood] between Cape Bonavista & Cape John...' The only obligation was that he remain six miles from the sea shore and thus not interfere with the cod fishery.²³

The venture now became quite successful. Commodore Percy reported back to Whitehall that in 1720 Skeffington remained unmolested by settlers and natives and employed 30 servants in the salmon fishery, which that year yielded an export of 530 tierces to Italy and Bilbao, Spain, at a gain of £927.²⁴ Subsequent years, however, saw several disruptions. In 1721 Beothuk Indians were reported to have killed some of Skeffington's workers and destroyed dams and robbed him of nets and provisions.²⁵ He complained again in 1724 about interference by natives, who had killed yet another of his men. The point of conflict was a red ochre location in a fishing area frequented by the Indians twice a year. The Quaker made no special effort to extend pacific relations to the natives of Newfoundland and in this regard hardly distinguished himself from other white settlers. He resolved that 'if the Gover[n]m[en]t would allow him two boats with 6 men each, he would engage to keep the country always clear of the Indians.'²⁶

By now he also was no longer the only Newfoundlander engaged in the salmon fishery. John Masters, a Silly Cove (Winterton) native, and Phillip Watson had established a salmon fishery at Grand Salmonier, Little Salmonier, Colinet and Biscay Bay, where they employed 16 men and produced 180 tierces, all of which were shipped directly from Newfoundland to foreign markets, presumably in the Mediterranean.²⁷ In 1725 a disturbance was caused this time not by the Beothuks but by Joseph Randall from Poole, who interfered with Skeffington's salmon fishery. The two perpetrators acting on the instigation of Randall, when apprehended, received in St. John's '10 and five lashes respectively with a catt of nine tails on the bare back at each of the Admiralls rooms in the harbour.'²⁸ In 1727 a further salmon fishing competitor is mentioned. This time the fishery was operated by the controversial Lt.-Governor Samuel Gledhill at Placentia.²⁹ It is not certain what eventually led Skeffington to dispose of his business. But by 1729 he had sold his interest in the salmon fishery.³⁰

No additional information is available about this Salmon fishing pioneer, whether he left Newfoundland for England or - as the several subsequently named George Skeffingtons in the Bonavista area suggest - married and stayed in Newfoundland. Also the extent and nature of his involvement in Quaker missionary activities remains uncertain in light of the lay character of Quaker religiosity and its lack of institutional expressions. The Philadelphia minutes which spoke of him as 'having been travelling upon the services of Truth in these parts,'³¹ indicate that his Quaker faith was no nominal matter. His Quaker habits were obvious to Friends and outsiders alike. To the colonial administrators in London he was known as 'George Skeffington and of the people called Quakers.'³² And all extant business correspondence with William Keen addressed the associate in Quaker idiom as 'Friend Keen' and ends with greetings such as 'thy Reale friend Geo[rge] Skeffington.'

The Quaker presence in Newfoundland did not vanish with George Skeffington of Bonavista. The harbour with the greatest Quaker merchant concentration during the eighteenth century was Trinity, where the Taverner, Jefferey, White, Vallis, and Rolles families came from Poole and West Country Quaker stock and were in many ways related by marriage.³³ The extent of their overt religious commitment and practice is difficult to determine because of the non-institutional and lay character of Quaker piety. There is little doubt, however, that the Anglican clergyman in eighteenth-century Trinity, Reverend James Balfour, perceived their economic and social power in ominous and their ecclesiastical allegiance in adversarial terms.³⁴

Another outpost with a considerable Quaker presence was Placentia, where the Harrisson, Penney, and Neave families belonged to the Religious Society of Friends, and the Irish Quaker merchant house of Strangman, Courtenay and Ridgway as well as the Jacob, Penrose and Harvey families engaged in the Waterford-Newfoundland provisions trade.³⁵ Here also a cultural activity made itself felt and the connection with English Friends was maintained. In 1772, for example, London Quakers sent devotional and religious classics to a library in Placentia and initiated the private distribution of Quaker religious literature shipped to Placentia via the Poole merchant Moses Neave.³⁶ During the British American hostilities of the 1770s and 1780s and the resulting trade embargo with America, English Friends also petitioned the king to permit access for Nantucket and other New England fishermen to the rich Newfoundland fishing grounds.³⁷

While Quakers had a significant personal and economic presence in some Newfoundland communities during the eighteenth century, they never initiated a concerted missionary effort to solidify and enlarge their institutional religious presence on the island, presumably because of their tentative and dual residence, in Newfoundland and England or Ireland. Thus members of Quaker families who remained in Newfoundland became gradually absorbed by their religious competitors, who - especially after the toleration of dissenters in the outgoing eighteenth century - expressed their religious allegiance in more permanent social and institutional forms.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ On the Ringwood origin of the Skeffington family, see Gordon Handcock, *So longe as there comes noe women: Origins of English Settlement in Newfoundland* (St. John's: Breakwater, 1989), 204.
- ² Philadelphia Monthly Meeting Minutes, in *Pennsylvania Genealogical Society Publications*, vol. 6 (1917), 73, quoted in James Bowden, *The History of the Society of Friends in America*, vol. 2: *Pennsylvania and New Jersey* (London: W. & F.G. Cash, 1854), 231-2.
- ³ On the Shambler family from Ringwood see Handcock (note 1), 46, 110, 204.
- ⁴ The most comprehensive study of Esther Biddle is Lydia L. Rickman, 'Esther Biddle and Her Mission to Louis XIV,' *Jnl. Friends Historical Society* 47 (1955), 38-45. The 1659 stay with Mary Fisher in St. John's has eluded all historians. A 1658 collection may have furnished the funds for Esther Biddle and Mary Fisher. It records one pound and 10 shilling for Esther Biddle and 2 pounds and 4 shilling and 6 dimes for Mary Fisher's return from Barbados. None of the historians, including Bowden, who prints the account in his *History*, 1: 60, furnishes a reliable chronology for the

- elusive women preachers. On Mary Fisher see especially James Bowden, *The History of the Society of Friends in America* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1850), 1: 30-41; William C. Braithwaite and Henry J. Cadbury, *The Beginnings of Quakerism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1955), 288-94 and 421-8.
- ⁵ George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, edited by Norman Penney (Cambridge: University Press, 1911), 2: 334. See also Frederick B. Tolles, *Quakers and the Atlantic Culture* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 138-139.
 - ⁶ E. Mountagu to Secretary of State John Thurloe, 16 Sept. 1656, Aboard the Nasebye, in the Bay of Wyers, in the River of Lisbon; in Thomas Birch (edit.), *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe*, 7 vols. (London: Printed for the Executor of F. Gyles, 1742), 5: 422.
 - ⁷ Richard Blinman to John Winthrop Jr., Ferryland, 22 August 1659; John Winthrop Jr Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.
 - ⁸ *Letters, &c., of Early Friends; Illustrative of the History of the Society, from Nearly Its Origin, to About the Period of George Fox's Decease: With Documents Respecting Its Early Discipline, Also Epistles of Counsel and Exhortation, &c.* (London: Harvey & Darton, 1841), 292.
 - ⁹ For previous literature on Skeffington see Michael Godfrey, 'Newfoundland salmon pioneer,' *Fish Trades Gazette*, 7 January 1967; Carson I.A. Ritchie, 'Skeffington, George,' *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), vol. 2, 609; Henry J. Cadbury, 'Mr. Skeffington,' in his *Friendly Heritage: Letters from the Quaker Past* (Silvermine, 1972), 81-3; C. Grant Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland: A Geographers's Perspective*, The Carleton Library, vol. 90, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), 75-6.
 - ¹⁰ Louis Dechene, "Testard de Montigny," *DCB*, 2, 625-7.
 - ¹¹ "Memorandum of Mr. Roop[e] with the Names of such English prisoners as had been taken by the French at Newfoundland," in C.O. 194/3, fol. 459 [144]; summary in *CSP, Colonial*, 1706, 83, no. 194. See also "A particular Accompt of the Losses Sustained by James Campbell of London Merch/t in Newfoundland," in C.O. 194/4, fol. 458-61 [1706].
 - ¹² "A particular Accompt of the Losses Sustained by James Campbell of London Merch/t in Newfoundland," in C.O. 194/4, fol. 458. On Colin Campbell, see *DCB*, 3, 117-8.
 - ¹³ Deposition of George Skeffington regarding Lieut. Moody, taken by Richard Holford, London 21 March 1705/6, in C.O. 194/3, fol. 505; see also Skeffington's signature under memorial thanking Lieut. Moody and his soldiers for their defence against the French (no date on document in C.O. 194/3, fol. 476; for the dating see document on 21 March 1705; the memorial was read on 28 March 1706). On Lloyd and Moody, see *DCB*, 2, 438-9, 486-7.
 - ¹⁴ "A particular Accompt of the Losses Sustained by James Campbell of London Merch/t in Newfoundland," in C.O. 194/4, fol. 458.
 - ¹⁵ "Memorial from M/r Roop relating to the State of the English Trade & Fishing in Newfoundland," received 11 January 1706, C.O. 194/3, fol. 308 [93ii].
 - ¹⁶ Anthony Netboy, *The Atlantic Salmon: A Vanishing Species?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 171-2.
 - ¹⁷ On Keen see the biographical article of Keith Matthews in *DCB*, 3, 323-4.
 - ¹⁸ George Skeffington to William Keen, C.O. 194/7, fol. 60.
 - ¹⁹ Petition of George Skiffington to the King, C.O. 194/6, fol. 332 [76]; summary in *CSP, Colonial*, 1720, 363, no. 574.
 - ²⁰ Census of 1708, in C.O. 194/4, fol. 267.

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- ²¹ Articles of Agreement of George Skeffington and William Keen, 8 Sept. 1718, C.O. 194/7, fol. 63; cf. *CSP, Colonial*, 1720, 224, no. 335vii. George Skeffington to William Keen, Bonavista, 29 Sept. 1718, C.O. 194/7, fol. 57; George Skeffington to William Keen, Bonavista, 23 March 1719, C.O. 194/7, fol. 59; George Skeffington to William Keen, Bonavista, 25 March 1719, C.O. 194/7, fol. 55-6; George Skeffington to William Keen, Gander Bay, 9 April 1719, C.O. 194/7, fol. 58; cf. *CSP, Colonial*, 1720, 223, no. 335i-v.
- ²² Petition of George Skeffington to the King, C.O. 194/6, fol. 332; summary in *CSP, Colonial*, 1720, 363, no. 574.
- ²³ Board of Trade to Secretary Cragg, 8 April 1720, C.O. 195/7, fol. 10, 11, 35-38; summary in *CSP, Colonial*, 1720, 6 April 1720, 21-22, no. 38. I am grateful to Mr. Robert H. Cuff for identifying the places mentioned in this document.
- ²⁴ Commodore Percy to Council of Trade and Plantations, C.O. 194/7, fol. 11; summary in *CSP, Colonial*, 1720, 13 October 1720, 72, no. 260.
- ²⁵ Replies to Heads of Enquiry relating to the Fishery and Trade of Newfoundland, C.O. 194/7, fol. 116, no. 51; summary in *CSP, Colonial*, 12 Nov. 1722, 163, no. 337 (51).
- ²⁶ "Commodore Bouler's Answers to Heads of Enquiry relating to the Fishery at Newfoundland," C.O. 194/7, fol. 246v, no. 51; summary in *CSP, Colonial*, 9 Oct. 1724, 226, no. 373 (li).
- ²⁷ Commodore Bouler to Heads of Enquiry relating to the Fishery at Newfoundland, C.O. 194/7, fol. 240, 246v, no. 51; summary in *CSP, Colonial*, 9 Oct. 1724, 226, no. 373 (li).
- ²⁸ Commodore Bouler to Heads of Enquiry, 10 Oct. 1725, C.O. 194/8, fol. 14, no. 51; summary *CSP, Colonial*, 10 Oct. 1725, 457, no. 757 (li).
- ²⁹ Commodore St. Lo to CTP, 30 Sept. 1727, C.O. 194/8, fol. 141, 51; summary *CSP, Colonial*, 30 Sept. 1727, 365, no. 721 (li).
- ³⁰ C.O. 194/8, fol. 277; summary in *CSP, Colonial*, 14 Oct. 1729, 509, no. 940 (li).
- ³¹ See note 2.
- ³² Deposition of George Skeffington regarding Lieut. Moody, taken by Richard Holford, London 21 March 1705/6, in C.O. 194/3, fol. 505.
- ³³ Gordon Handcock, "A Biographical Profile of 18th and Early 19th Century Merchant Families and Entrepreneurs in Trinity, Trinity Bay" (manuscript).
- ³⁴ Balfour, in a letter of 27 October 1774 to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts speaks of the Trinity-Poole merchant Samuel White as 'a rich Miser Quaker, of above two hundred thousand Pounds, principal Fortune; but no friend to our common cause.' *U.S.P.G. Letters*, Series B, vol. 6, fol. 200.
- ³⁵ John J. Mannion, 'The Waterford Merchants and the Irish-Newfoundland provisions trade, 1770-1820, *Négoce et industrie en France et en Irlande aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles: actes du Colloque Franco-Irlandais d'Histoire* (Paris : Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, (1980), 27-43.
- ³⁶ London Yearly Meeting, Meeting for Sufferings minutes, vol. 33 (Feb. 1772); Minutes of Meeting for Sufferings, vol. 33, 1771-1775, 14 Feb. 1772, pp.43 & 45-6.
- ³⁷ Minutes of Meeting for Sufferings, vol. 34, 1775-1777, 24 Feb. 1775 and 27 Feb. 1775, pp.18 & 21 (see also 3, 13, 15 March 1775). I am grateful to Archivist Rosamund Cummings of the Library of the Religious Society of Friends for supplying these and other early records.