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Published on: 01 May 2010 - Canadian Historical Review (University of Toronto Press)

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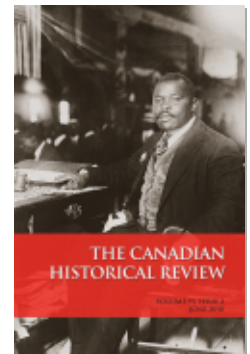
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The Canadian Historical Review, Volume 91, Number 2, June 2010, pp. 199-232
(Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/can.0.0304>



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KEITH MERCER

Northern Exposure: Resistance to Naval Impressment in British North America, 1775–1815



Abstract: *Focusing on resistance, this article examines naval impressment in British North America from 1775 to 1815. Although neglected in Canadian historiography, press gangs sparked urban unrest and political turmoil in seaports such as Halifax, St John's, and Quebec City. Impressment reached into most coastal areas of British North America by the early nineteenth century and its sailors and inhabitants employed a range of strategies to resist it. They also confronted it directly, sometimes with violent results. Press gang riots in St John's in 1794 and Halifax in 1805 led to a prohibition on impressment on shore for much of the Napoleonic Wars. Popular protest served as the catalyst for official resistance to the British Navy and had a lasting impact on civil–naval relations in the North Atlantic world. While the study of popular disturbances in Canadian history usually begins in the mid-nineteenth century, this paper shows that they were important in earlier generations as well. This was often the result of tensions caused by imperial warfare and quarrels with military personnel.*

Keywords: British Navy, impressment, popular politics, resistance, civil–military relations

Résumé : *Le présent article porte sur la résistance et examine l'enrôlement forcé dans la marine en Amérique du Nord britannique de 1775 à 1815. Bien que négligés dans l'historiographie canadienne, les racoleurs ont entraîné de l'agitation en milieu urbain et de l'effervescence dans les milieux politiques dans des ports de mer comme Halifax et St. John's, et aussi Québec. L'enrôlement forcé avait atteint la plupart des régions côtières de l'Amérique du Nord britannique dès l'arrivée du XIX^e siècle, et les marins et les habitants qui y vivaient ont employé une série de stratégies pour y résister. Ils se sont aussi insurgés directement, avec des résultats parfois violents. Les émeutes de racoleurs à St. John's en 1794 et Halifax en 1805 ont mené à l'interdiction de l'enrôlement forcé à terre durant une grande partie des guerres napoléoniennes. Les protestations populaires ont servi de catalyseurs à la résistance officielle à la Marine britannique et elles ont eu un effet durable sur les relations civiles-militaires dans l'Atlantique Nord. Bien que l'étude des périodes d'agitation populaire relatées dans l'histoire canadienne commencent habituellement au milieu du XIX^e siècle, le présent article montre qu'elles*

étaient importantes aussi pour les générations qui avaient précédé. Cette agitation découlait souvent des tensions provoquées par les guerres impériales et les querelles avec le personnel militaire.

Mots clés : Marine britannique, enrôlement forcé, politique populaire, résistance, relations civiles-militaires

INTRODUCTION

Andrew Brown was the Church of Scotland minister in St Matthew's Church in Halifax from 1787 to 1795. While he resided in Nova Scotia for only a short time, Brown had a significant impact on its religious, intellectual, and educational development in the nineteenth century. His tenure at St Matthew's has been described as a golden age: the church rose to prominence in Halifax society, and Brown helped mend the wounds in his congregation between Congregationalists and Presbyterians, and New Englanders and Scottish immigrants. Brown is perhaps best known these days as a historian – for his sympathetic and nuanced treatment of Acadian society, and his criticism of the Nova Scotia and Boston interests behind the expulsion of 1755. His ideas on Acadian neutrality influenced John Bartlet Brebner in his two classic monographs on Nova Scotia history. Although little of Brown's scholarship made it to print, several sermons he delivered in Halifax were published, including one on the dangers of seafaring in 1793, on the eve of the French Revolutionary War. Ironically, it is one of the dangers Brown left out of this sermon that this article concentrates on, because it is what sailors in Nova Scotia and the Atlantic world feared most during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – the press gang. As chaplain to the Royal Navy in Halifax, Brown must have anticipated the tensions that impressment would cause in the impending conflict. His seafaring audience surely did.¹

A *Sermon on the Dangers and Duties of the Seafaring Life* was read before St Matthew's congregation in the spring of 1793 and then published at the behest of the Halifax Marine Society.² Brown stated

- 1 Sara Beanlands, 'The Rev. Dr Andrew Brown: Nova Scotia's Elusive Historian,' *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 9 (2006): 75–99; George Shepperson, 'Andrew Brown,' *Dictionary of Canadian Biography (DCB)*, <http://www.biographi.ca/index-e.html>.
- 2 Andrew Brown, *A Sermon on the Dangers and Duties of the Seafaring Life* (Boston, 1793). The Halifax Marine Society was established in 1786 as a support group for masters and skilled seafarers in Nova Scotia; its rules were published and are described briefly in Marie Tremaine, *A Bibliography of Canadian Imprints, 1751–1800* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1952), 224.

in this pamphlet that religion was essential in a profession such as seafaring, where storms routinely put men at the mercy of the elements and the heavens. There was no escape if a ship went down at sea, and the danger of drowning was present at every turn. In such a perilous trade, belief in God had the ability to compose sailors' fears and give them courage during times of crisis; a 'vigilance of providence' rationalized the nature of things and ensured their divine protection.³ There was no better time to contemplate God, Brown concluded, than on a voyage at sea. Brown's sermon was designed as a spiritual and practical guide for mariners, but it is curious that he did not address wartime dangers that had nothing to do with morality and the weather. Enemy capture and imprisonment were possibilities, but so too was seizure by the British state. The Royal Navy had an insatiable need for sailors in wartime and used impressment to compensate for its lack of volunteers. In some cases, the Navy even sent armed press gangs into towns to force men into the service against their wills. Described by one historian as the 'evil necessity,' impressment was detested in Nova Scotia and in the larger Atlantic world.⁴ Brown's audience in 1793 was part of that Atlantic community. These nautical churchgoers knew that they could pray to the Almighty as much as they liked, but that would not save them from the press gang. Seafarers, merchants, law officers, and politicians thus took matters into their own hands in British North America.

Impressment is the forcible conscription of people, supplies, and transportation into the armed forces. It has a global history but is most closely associated with the Royal Navy in the long eighteenth century, when tens of thousands of maritime workers were compelled to fight in the imperial conflicts that dominated that period. The British government established the 'Impress Service' during the 1740s, a department of the Admiralty that regulated impressment in the British Isles. By the Napoleonic Wars, the Impress Service reached into every major port in the United Kingdom. Impressment in North America, by contrast, did not have a comparable system of government regulation; there was no Impress Service or recruiting authority in seaports such as Halifax. Impressment developed informally in the colonies, depending on the actions of naval officers on the ground and the arrangements they made with local authorities. The 'press gang' has

3 Brown, *Sermon on Dangers of Seafaring*, 20.

4 Denver Alexander Brunnsman, 'The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World' (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2004). This term refers to the mindset of British statesmen, who recognized the social and legal problems caused by impressment, as well as its inefficiency, but who still saw no realistic alternative to manning the Navy in wartime.

traditionally been seen as the face of impressment: it consisted of a group of about ten seamen and marines, led by a commissioned officer, and was sent into communities armed for confrontation, usually with wooden clubs but occasionally with pistols and swords as well. They targeted taverns and other waterfront premises. Compared to those in Britain, however, formal press gangs were infrequent visitors to colonial port towns, where it was often too dangerous for naval parties to recruit on shore. In British North America, impressment was a decentralized exercise that overwhelmingly took place on the water rather than on land – via guard boats that pressed men from incoming vessels, or warships that boarded merchantmen on the coast or the high seas. Although the press gang caricature of fiction and folklore was thus something of an anachronism in British North America, impressment itself was a common feature of maritime life in the Atlantic region. By land and sea, it was a detested institution that sparked opposition and violent behaviour. Although the need for it was eroded by the introduction of continuous service during the 1850s, which allowed seamen to have regular careers in the Royal Navy, impressment was never formally abolished.⁵

Despite its neglect in Canadian history, between 1775 and 1815 there was a significant amount of impressment in British North America and it was contested vigorously by crowds in the streets and by politicians, merchants, and magistrates through diplomacy and the law.⁶

- 5 For general overviews, see I.C.B. Dear and Peter Kemp, eds., *Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 278–9, 441; Brian Lavery, *Nelson's Navy: The Ships, Men and Organisation, 1793–1815* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1989), chap. 5. For a recent survey, see Kevin McCranie, "The Recruitment of Seamen for the British Navy, 1793–1815: "Why don't you raise more men?"" in *Conscription in the Napoleonic Era: A Revolution in Military Affairs?* ed. Donald Stoker, Frederick C. Schneid and Harold D. Blanton, 84–101 (New York: Routledge, 2009). This volume places naval impressment in Britain in the larger context of military conscription across Europe during the French and Napoleonic wars. On British popular culture, see Isaac Land, *War, Nationalism, and the British Sailor, 1750–1850* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), esp. chap. 2; Daniel James Ennis, *Enter the Press-Gang: Naval Impressment in Eighteenth-Century British Literature* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2002). On the historiographical pitfalls of trying to determine why sailors, maritime workers, and residents of seaports resisted impressment, or participated in popular disturbances generally, see Paul A. Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
- 6 Even naval histories skip over impressment. Julian Gwyn, 'Poseidon's Sphere: Early Naval History in Atlantic Canada,' *Acadiensis* 31, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 152–63. Gwyn's recent book touches on impressment in Nova Scotia but its



From *Harper's Magazine*, March, 1882

THE PRESS GANG IN NEW YORK

FIGURE 1 An impressment scene in colonial New York.

Source: Howard Pyle, 'The Press-Gang in New York,'

Harper's New Monthly Magazine 64 (1882): 489.

Moreover, these acts of resistance transformed impressment policy and civil–naval relations over time. Popular opposition was the catalyst for government action and reforms, stemming in particular from press gang riots in St John's in 1794 and Halifax in 1805. As the manning crisis intensified, especially around the War of 1812, law officers and the courts became the primary defender of colonial liberties in British North America. In Nova Scotia, Quebec (Lower Canada),⁷ and Newfoundland, as well as New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, press gang activity on shore and the detention of colonial inhabitants were

main focus is fleet movements and maritime defence. See Julian Gwyn, *Frigates and Foremasts: The North American Squadron in Nova Scotia Waters, 1745–1815* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003).

7 In this article, *Quebec* refers to the colony rather than the town; it is replaced by *Lower Canada* after the Constitutional Act of 1791. The town of Quebec is referred to as *Quebec City* throughout.

the main causes of urban unrest and merchant and political hostility to the Navy. Many people who were protected from impressment by laws and regulations also spent time aboard British warships, because the Navy rounded men up first and dealt with protections and discharges later. Although the vast majority of impressments did not result in physical violence, it is also true that many acts of resistance, even skirmishes and verbal altercations, went unrecorded. Using intimidation and the threat of force, the Navy usually avoided all-out confrontation. In so doing, however, it also blocked out the silences of coercion that were inherent in impressment, especially away from the public eye at sea. While impressment was an occupational hazard for sailors and coastal people in British North America, and sparked widespread resistance, it also had different histories in the Canadian colonies based on recruitment level, the nature of their populations, and the responses of governments and legal systems. There was no single narrative, but impressment was at the centre of a turbulent period in Canadian history in which imperial warfare and civil–military relations played a prominent role.

Historians of popular protest in Canada usually commence their studies in the mid-nineteenth century, with sectarian tensions in New Brunswick and Newfoundland, agrarian protest on Prince Edward Island, early trade and labour disputes in the canals and resource sectors, and the rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada.⁸ However, there was a good deal of popular agitation in earlier generations as well. This was often the result of imperial warfare, when civilians clashed with soldiers and naval seamen over issues such as crime, militia duty, and impressment. In Lower Canada, for example, Terence

8 For an introduction to this historiography, see Rusty Bittermann, *Rural Protest on Prince Edward Island: From British Colonization to the Escheat Movement* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Allan Greer, *The Patriots and the People: The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993); Linda Little, 'Collective Action in Outport Newfoundland: A Case Study from the 1830s,' in *Labour and Working-Class History in Atlantic Canada: A Reader*, ed. David Frank and Gregory Kealey, 41–70 (St John's: ISEB, 1995); Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), esp. chaps 1–2; Scott W. See, *Riots in New Brunswick: Orange Nativism and Social Violence in the 1840s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993); Carol Wilton, *Popular Politics and Political Culture in Upper Canada, 1800–1850* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).

Crowley, F. Murray Greenwood, and Sean Mills have shown that popular disturbances erupted over militia service and fears of conscription.⁹ Impressment, despite taking place on a large scale and creating civil-naval unrest that resulted in two murder cases, and many other disputes, is absent from Quebec historiography. The earlier Atlantic literature on press gangs, based on the work of J.R. Hutchinson and Jesse Lemisch, saw impressment as a violation of civil liberties in Britain and a grievance against imperial authority in the Thirteen

- 9 Terence Crowley, "'Thunder Gusts': Popular Disturbances in Early French Canada,' *Historical Papers*, Canadian Historical Association (1979): 11–32; F. Murray Greenwood, *Legacies of Fear: Law and Politics in Quebec in the Era of the French Revolution* (Toronto: Osgoode Society and University of Toronto Press, 1993); Sean Mills, 'French Canadians and the Beginning of the War of 1812: Revisiting the Lachine Riot,' *Histoire Sociale / Social History* 38, no. 75 (2005): 37–57. For the legal context, see Donald Fyson, *Magistrates, Police, and People: Everyday Criminal Justice in Quebec and Lower Canada, 1764–1837* (Toronto: Osgoode Society and University of Toronto Press, 2006). Similarly, Jim Phillips and Judith Fingard have shown that the presence of the Army in Halifax contributed to the unruly nature of downtown society in the Georgian and Victorian periods, but far less scholarly attention has been paid to the Navy in that regard. Jim Phillips, 'The Operation of the Royal Pardon in Nova Scotia, 1749–1815,' *University of Toronto Law Journal* 42, no. 3 (1992): 401–49; Jim Phillips, "'Securing Obedience to Necessary Laws": The Criminal Law in Eighteenth-Century Nova Scotia,' *Nova Scotia Historical Review* 12, no. 2 (1992): 87–124; Judith Fingard, *The Dark Side of Life in Victorian Halifax* (Porters Lake, NS: Pottersfield, 1989). In an earlier work, Fingard describes Halifax's waterfront culture through the eyes of merchant sailors and crimps in the nineteenth century. See Judith Fingard, *Jack in Port: Sailortowns of Eastern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982). In Newfoundland, Jerry Bannister's important work has focused largely on the Newfoundland squadron's role as a government and legal system on the island rather than naval crime or everyday forms of civil–military relations. See Jerry Bannister, *The Rule of the Admirals: Law, Custom, and Naval Government in Newfoundland, 1699–1832* (Toronto: Osgoode Society and University of Toronto Press, 2003). The study of civil–military relations in eighteenth-century Newfoundland is in its infancy and focuses usually on the attempted mutinies in HMS *Latona* in 1797 and the Royal Newfoundland Regiment in 1800, both of which took place in St John's. See Martin Hubley and Thomas Malcomson, "'The people, from being tyrannically treated, would rejoice in being captured by the Americans": Mutiny and the Royal Navy during the War of 1812,' in *The Apathetic and the Defiant: Case Studies of Canadian Mutiny and Disobedience, 1812 to 1919*, ed. Charles Leslie Mantle, 31–83 (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2007); John Mannion, 'Transatlantic Disaffection: Wexford and Newfoundland, 1798–1800,' *Journal of the Wexford Historical Society* 17 (1998–9): 30–60.

Colonies, which gave momentum to the revolutionary cause.¹⁰ From the interwar years, however, especially during the 1960s, naval historians began to focus on the ‘manning problem,’ moving away from the social and legal problems caused by impressment in favour of studying it as an administrative challenge that affected the British fleet in wartime.¹¹ This approach reached its apex more than twenty years ago with N.A.M. Rodger’s revisionist study of the Georgian Navy, in which he declared that impressment was often misunderstood by historians and that it was largely ‘a humdrum affair calling for little if any violence.’¹² This perspective has been challenged recently, with social historians such as Denver Brunzman and Nicholas Rogers arguing convincingly that resistance to impressment was among the most violent and frequent forms of protest in the Atlantic world.¹³ The same was true of British North America in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, where impressment was anything but a ‘humdrum affair.’

- 10 J.R. Hutchinson, *The Press-Gang: Afloat and Ashore* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1913); Jesse Lemisch, ‘Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America,’ *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 25, no. 3 (July 1968): 371–407; Jesse Lemisch, *Jack Tar vs John Bull: The Role of New York’s Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution* (New York: Garland, 1997). Of course, impressment is also commonly cited as a principal cause of the War of 1812, but this is a larger and much different literature.
- 11 For example, see Daniel A. Baugh, *Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); Christopher Lloyd, *The British Seaman, 1200–1860: A Social Survey* (London: Collins, 1968). Roland G. Usher Jr, ‘Civil Administration of the British Navy during the American Revolution’ (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1942), and several other earlier studies discuss impressment as an administrative problem before the 1960s, but they did not have the same impact on the literature as Baugh.
- 12 N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: Collins, 1986), chap. 6, esp. 164, 182. This book covers much more than impressment. It is the classic revisionist statement on the social history of the Navy.
- 13 Brunzman, ‘Evil Necessity’; Denver Brunzman, ‘The Knowles Atlantic Impressment Riots of the 1740s,’ *Early American Studies* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 324–66; Nicholas Rogers, ‘Archipelagic Encounters: War, Race, and Labor in American-Caribbean Waters,’ in *The Global Eighteenth Century*, ed. Felicity A. Nussbaum, 211–25 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Nicholas Rogers, *The Press Gang: Naval Impressment and Its Opponents in Georgian Britain* (London: Continuum, 2008).

IMPERIAL INTRUSIONS

The outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775 created unprecedented manning problems for the Royal Navy. Its traditional labour market in the Thirteen Colonies was closed at the same time that more warships were sent to American waters than ever before. And while New York and other northern American ports remained in British hands, this put pressure on loyalist colonies such as Nova Scotia and Newfoundland for manpower. Nova Scotia was largely protected from impressment during the Seven Years War, as a result of concessions made to early colonists and the New England planters, but this was not the case in 1775.¹⁴ That August, Nova Scotia authorities received complaints from local merchants that impressment was damaging maritime trade. As a result, the general assembly convinced Governor Francis Legge to plead Nova Scotia's case to the Admiralty: the fishing industry was in dire straits, he declared, foreign and domestic commerce was suffering, and press gangs were scaring away loyalist immigrants.¹⁵ Vice-Admiral Samuel Graves at Boston refused to consider the assembly's call for a prohibition on impressment, but he did exempt Nova Scotia residents from the Navy; British and colonial American seafarers, however, were fair game and continued to be pressed in significant numbers from vessels in Halifax harbour and along the coast.¹⁶ Some naval captains ignored Graves's impressment policy. William Dudingston, who was attacked violently in Rhode Island in 1772 for his heavy-handed application of British trade policies in HM Schooner *Gaspee*, terrified Liverpool and other south shore villages in early 1776 by illegally pressing Nova Scotia residents. The town's complaints were turned aside by this arrogant young naval officer.¹⁷ In a similar case, Thomas Curtis, who was in a merchant

14 Keith Mercer, 'Sailors and Citizens: Press Gangs and Naval-Civilian Relations in Nova Scotia, 1756-1815,' *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 10 (2007), esp. 89-92.

15 Executive Council Minutes, 4 Aug. 1775, 334-5, vol. 189, RG 1, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (NSARM), Halifax; General Assembly to Legge, [30] October 1775, 16-17, Nova Scotia Correspondence, Colonial Office Papers (CO) 217/52, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA); Legge to Lord Dartmouth, 4 Nov. 1775, 7-9, CO 217/52, TNA.

16 Graves to Marriot Arbuthnot, 8 Dec. 1775, 508-9, North American Station, Admiralty Correspondence (ADM) 1/485, TNA.

17 Charles Bruce Fergusson, ed., *The Life of Jonathan Scott* (Halifax: Public Archives of Nova Scotia, 1960), 56-61; Steven H. Park, 'The Burning of HMS *Gaspee* and the Limits of Eighteenth-Century British Imperial Power' (MA thesis, University of Connecticut, 2005); Simeon Perkins, *The Diary of Simeon Perkins*,

vessel at Canso in 1776, wrote about his master's interrogation by the officer of a British warship there, which 'had been recruiting in Nova Scotia and had got about 60 Very Rag[g]ed looking men.'¹⁸ Although Curtis's vessel escaped under shouts of protest and gunfire, things quickly turned violent in Halifax, where press gangs clashed with crowds in the streets.

Lieutenant-Governor Richard Hughes, a former naval officer, published a proclamation in 1778 that harshly criticized the Navy for its disregard of colonial authority. It came in response to press gang altercations in Halifax that were 'frequently attended with Quarrels and Bloodshed and the loss of Life.'¹⁹ The issue was no longer the impressment of Nova Scotia residents, who had been protected since Graves's initiative in 1776, but press gang violence on shore. Hughes proclaimed that press gangs were forbidden in town without colonial permission and that searches for deserters were illegal unless supervised by the magistracy. He wanted impressment confined to the harbour and threatened legal action against naval intruders; however, Hughes's attack on press gangs was undermined by a brawl on the Halifax waterfront the following summer. He reissued his proclamation but impressment remained a volatile issue in Nova Scotia.²⁰ Violence erupted again in January 1781, when press gangs started a riot in Halifax by parading recruits through the town. According to the merchant Simeon Perkins, who heard about the incident in Liverpool, 'Marines and Saylor Drove all before them in the Streets.'²¹ The grand jury responded by publicly criticizing the Navy's contempt of colonial and municipal authority and for binding men's hands behind their backs and carrying them through the streets like 'Malefactors.'²² While Lieutenant-Governor Andrew Snape Hamond, another former naval officer, attempted to regulate impressment later in the war, his efforts were undermined by the high turnover of warships on the

1766–1780, ed. Harold Innis (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1948), 1:107–15; Neil R. Stout, *The Royal Navy in America, 1760–1775: A Study of Enforcement of British Colonial Policy in the Era of the American Revolution* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1973), 141–3.

- 18 'A Narrative of the Voyage of Thos Curtis to the Island of St John's in the Gulf of St Lawrence in North America, in the Year 1775,' in *Journeys to the Island of St John or Prince Edward Island, 1775–1782*, ed. D.C. Harvey, 57–8 (Toronto: Macmillan, 1955).
- 19 Commission and Order Book, 12 Dec. 1778, 275, vol. 170, RG1, NSARM.
- 20 *Nova-Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle*, 20 July 1779.
- 21 Simeon Perkins, *The Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1780–1789*, ed. D.C. Harvey and C. Bruce Fergusson (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1958), 2:63.
- 22 *Nova-Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle*, 23 Jan. 1781.

North American station and by naval officers' unfamiliarity with or disregard for local manning customs.²³ The following year Governor John Parr lashed out at the Navy once again because of the 'Violent and unlawful Acts' committed by press gangs in Halifax.²⁴

Quebec City emerged as an important deep-sea port in the British Atlantic world in the late eighteenth century. As the American war cut off traditional sources of timber and grain from British merchants, these items were increasingly sought in Quebec and the Canadian interior. As a result, the North American squadron sent warships to the St Lawrence River each year to protect convoys and to support the province militarily, particularly after the Navy helped lift the American siege of the colony in 1776. Cruisers were also needed to clear the St Lawrence of rebel privateers. These warships suffered from desertion, as the fleet did everywhere, and to keep them manned their captains pressed large numbers of sailors each year in Quebec. The armed ship *Canceaux*, for example, possessing a crew of only fifty-five men, served as a recruiting tender in the colony throughout the American war. Stationed at the Isle of Bic, an uninhabited island near Rimouski on the south coast of the St Lawrence River that served as the Navy's main watering and wooding base in Quebec, the *Canceaux* pressed sailors from merchant vessels passing by the island and then turned them over to larger warships.²⁵ The latter also used the Isle of Bic as a recruiting centre, but they pressed seafarers throughout the river, from Gaspé Bay to Quebec City. HMS *Garland* alone entered more than eighty men in Quebec in 1777, many of whom were pressed. Some of these sailors were put on the ship's books immediately, while

23 Hamond to Captain Russell of HMS *Hussar*, 19, 20, 23 Apr. 1782, *The Hamond Naval Papers, 1766–1825*, 75–9, vol. 7, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville (copy on microfilm at NSARM).

24 Royal Proclamations, 27 Nov. 1782, no. 86, vol. 436, RGI, NSARM.

25 Musters of HM Armed Ship *Canceaux*, ADM 36/9662–8, TNA; Master's Log of HM Armed Ship *Canceaux*, ADM 52/1637–8, TNA; Captain's Log of HM Armed Ship *Canceaux*, ADM 51/153, TNA. In many cases, the *Canceaux*'s recruitment efforts went unrecorded in its musters because these men were never intended to enter that vessel, but rather be handed over to other warships in Quebec. Men-of-war such as the *Viper*, for instance, discussed below, received a large number of recruits from the *Canceaux*, but these men and those exchanges are rarely mentioned in the *Canceaux*'s records. Of course, the *Canceaux* performed other duties in the St Lawrence and it was not permanently stationed at the Isle of Bic. At most times, however, at least one warship was moored at that island, where nearly every merchantman passing by was boarded and inspected by naval parties. There was a tremendous amount of recruitment in this area. The Isle of Bic was also the rendezvous for convoys in the St Lawrence River, where French pilots could be hired to navigate warships.

others were supernumeraries (or reserves) who were later distributed to warships in North America and the British Isles.²⁶ In this way, Quebec became a significant source of manpower for the Navy during the American Revolution.

Despite the *Garland's* recruitment efforts, by September 1778 Captain Augustus Hervey of HM Sloop *Viper* was petitioning colonial authorities for permission to send parties into Montreal to press seamen and to canvass its taverns to man the fleet.²⁷ Warships in the St Lawrence usually received Governor Frederick Haldimand's co-operation in taking sailors from merchant vessels and landing the occasional press gang in Quebec City, but this relationship chilled in 1779 when John Stiles, master of the *Viper*, killed a man while on the impress service at the provincial capital. Although the deceased sailor was a foreigner, this episode created a 'great ferment' in the community.²⁸ Some British residents, clearly worried about the potential the incident had of stirring up the French-speaking population's resentment at such an important time in the war, called upon Haldimand to resolve the dispute. Stiles escaped from custody and fled down the river, but he was recaptured quickly and then convicted of manslaughter in Quebec City. He was burnt on the hand and sentenced to a year in jail, but Hervey persuaded the governor to pardon him a short time later, and he was sent back to England. Haldimand reported to the British administration that Stiles's trial had a 'good effect upon the People' and that their resentment had much subsided.²⁹ Impressment persisted in the St Lawrence region throughout the American war, but the Navy now faced competition from provincial warships, which recruited men to serve on Lake Champlain and the Great Lakes.³⁰ Generally, however, popular resistance to impressment was limited in Quebec during the American war because it was con-

26 Musters of HMS *Garland*, ADM 36/8784-5, TNA. Twenty-eight seamen deserted from the *Garland* in this same period.

27 Hervey to Haldimand, 7 Sept. 1778, in Douglas Brymner, *Report on Canadian Archives*, 1887 (Ottawa, 1888), 5; Captain's Log of HM Sloop *Viper*, ADM 51/1039, TNA; Musters of HM Sloop *Viper*, ADM 36/7940-I, TNA.

28 Haldimand to Lord George Germaine, 15 June 1779, 66-7, reel A-618, Frederick Haldimand Collection, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Ottawa.

29 Haldimand to Germaine, 15 June 1779, 66-7, reel A-618, Haldimand Collection, LAC; Hervey to Admiralty, 20 June 1779, n.p., 1779, 'H,' Captains Letters, ADM 1/1905, TNA; Captain's Log of HM Sloop *Viper*, ADM 51/1039, TNA; George Marsh et al. to Philip Stephens, 18 Aug. 1779, ADM/B/199, 1779, Admiralty Letters from Navy Board, National Maritime Museum, London.

30 Brymner, *Report on Canadian Archives*, 1887, 467-531.

fined to British, colonial, and foreign sailors, who were taken from vessels on the river. As the Navy discovered in the early nineteenth century, violence usually occurred when press gangs abused civilians on shore, especially in urban centres, and when francophones and other long-term residents were forced into the service.

Although the least volatile site of naval recruitment during the American Revolution, Newfoundland was likely the Atlantic region's biggest contributor of manpower to the British war effort. While impressment in Newfoundland dated back to the seventeenth century and occurred throughout the American conflict, it was poverty and unemployment that drove hundreds of fishing servants to enlist in the armed forces during the 1770s, not only for the Newfoundland squadron but also for warships stationed in Boston and Army recruiting parties from British North America. Initially, therefore, press gangs were less important in Newfoundland than in other Atlantic settings because recruits volunteered in significant numbers. Ironically, by the time the Admiralty realized Newfoundland's manning potential and ordered Governor Richard Edwards to recruit generally for the British fleet there in 1779, fewer men were available: the labour market on the British end of the Newfoundland fishery had dried up, the Newfoundland Regiment and other Army corps were stern competitors for manpower, and the economic climate in Newfoundland had improved dramatically, which meant that fewer men volunteered out of material necessity. It is no coincidence that impressment made serious inroads at Newfoundland around this same time. Responding to Admiralty directives, Edwards instituted an aggressive manning policy during his governorship from 1779 to 1781, whereby the squadron recruited heavily each fall until the end of the war, including by impressment. Surplus recruits were brought home to the British Isles or sent to the neighbouring fleet at Halifax. Even at this early stage, however, impressment was largely a seasonal affair at the island, restricted to September and October to protect Newfoundland's fishing economy.³¹

Press gangs still caused problems in the fishery. William Pitt the Younger told the House of Commons in 1783 that Newfoundland

31 Edwards to Admiralty, 7 June 1779, 7 Dec. 1779, 34I, 36I-4, Newfoundland Station, ADM 1/471, TNA; Richard Edwards Letter Books, 1779-81, MG202, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL), St John's. I thank the Toronto Reference Library (TRL) for permission to cite this material. HMS *Guadaloupe* pressed more than thirty men at St John's in September and October 1778, once the fishing season was over. Pay Book of HMS *Guadaloupe*, ADM 34/365, TNA.

was unfairly treated when it came to impressment.³² The St John's publican John Mahany certainly thought so, as he was arrested in 1780 on charges of keeping firearms in readiness to oppose naval parties looking for recruits and deserters. Asked if 'he was not afraid of the Press,' Mahany snapped back that he 'was not afraid of any Bugar that would dare take him for he had three loaded muskets and a hanger [small sword] in his possession and that 'he would screen any poor fellow that was going to be prest.'³³ On the other hand, Mahany's defiance is the exception that proves the rule – physical resistance to impressment was rare in Newfoundland during the American war, at least in the surviving records. This may have been due to the preponderance of volunteers for much of this conflict, or perhaps the fact that seafarers used people like Mahany to hide and run from the Navy rather than confront it directly. It is also significant that because the Navy doubled as the government in Newfoundland, there were virtually no resident colonial officials to campaign against impressment; in Nova Scotia, by contrast, colonial administrators, a provincial assembly, and grand jury all resisted press gangs during the American Revolution.³⁴ Finally, there is no hard evidence that the Navy sent armed press gangs – the source of most impressment disturbances in the eighteenth century – into St John's or other towns during the war. In the end, it was the Army rather than the Navy that was known for its unruly behaviour in Newfoundland: forcing fishermen into the land service, breaking into homes and businesses on false pretences, abusing naval seamen during inter-service rivalries, and failing to rein in recruits who drank heavily and committed crimes in St John's. To prevent these irregularities, Governor Edwards banned Nova Scotia and Quebec recruiting parties from the island in 1780.³⁵

32 W.L. Morton, 'Newfoundland in Colonial Policy, 1775–1793' (PhD diss., Oxford University, 1935), 127–32.

33 Record of Governor's Court in St John's, 19 Sept. 1780, n.p., vol. 1, D'Alberty Transcripts, Centre for Newfoundland Studies (CNS), St John's.

34 Jerry Bannister, 'The Naval State in Newfoundland, 1749–1791,' *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* n.s. 11 (2000): 17–50.

35 Diary of Lieutenant John Dun of the Newfoundland Regiment, 1780–2, 28 Dec. 1780, 8 June 1781, 29 Oct. 1781, 24–5, 110–11, 150–2, MG707, PANL; Captain Henry Stanhope of HM Sloop *Trepassey* to Edwards, 28 Dec. 1779, n.p., vol. 1, SPC MS DA 87.1 A4 1779, Henry Stanhope Collection, Massey Library, Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston, ON; Edwards to Lieutenant-Governor Richard Hughes of Nova Scotia, 12 June 1780, vol. 1, D'Alberty Transcripts, CNS; Edwards to Governor Frederick Haldimand of Quebec, 20 July 1780, vol. 1, D'Alberty Transcripts, CNS; Edwards to Hughes, 18 Sept. 1780, vol. 1, D'Alberty Transcripts, CNS.

POPULAR PROTEST AND POLITICAL CHANGE

When Britain declared war on Revolutionary France in 1793, no one imagined that it would turn into a struggle for national survival that would rage almost continuously until 1815. In British North America, a generation of people grew up that knew only war and were acclimatized to the armed forces in their communities. Although most fighting took place in Europe, the Navy expanded in size dramatically during the Napoleonic Wars and sent an unprecedented number of warships to the region. As was the case during the American Revolution, desertion trimmed naval crews, and captains responded by pressing seafarers and other residents. Impressment peaked in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia in this period. Unlike in the American war, however, resistance to impressment had a profound and long-term impact on civil–naval relations. Opposition from below, in the form of press gang riots in St John's in 1794 and Halifax in 1805, served as the vehicle for political and merchant hostility to the Navy. They were both violent incidents that resulted in deaths and serious injuries and led directly to manning reforms that lasted for the duration of the Napoleonic Wars. While impressment occurred usually on the water in British North America, as it did throughout the Atlantic world, these disturbances resulted from press gang operations on shore. They demonstrate that popular protest played an important role in early Canadian history, which stemmed often from its military presence and the tensions of war.

As the fishing season came to a close in October 1794, Governor James Wallace ordered the Newfoundland squadron to prepare for convoy duty. Captain J.N. Morris of HMS *Boston* was told to bolster his crew by pressing men in St John's. Assured by Wallace that this was legal in Newfoundland, and that press gangs had been sent into town in the previous few weeks, Morris ordered his first and second lieutenants to lead a press gang into St John's to conscript any seamen or fishermen 'they might find Idling about.'³⁶ This operation went smoothly, but trouble erupted the following afternoon when Lieutenant Richard Lawry and a small naval party escorted two of the recruits into town to collect their belongings, where they were confronted by a large crowd armed with sticks and clubs. According to Aaron Thomas, an able seaman from the *Boston* who wrote about this incident in his diary, this was a premeditated attack: the naval party was stalked by

36 Morris to Wallace, 28 Oct. 1794, 294–5, vol. 12, GN 2/1/A, Colonial Secretary's Letter Book, PANL.

two segments of the crowd, of both men and women, Lawry was beaten to death with 'savage ferocity,' and the pressed men were rescued.³⁷ The remaining members of Lawry's party, who were also bloodied, managed to return to the harbour and alert the squadron's guard. Wallace sent naval parties into town that night to look for the crowd, but it was nowhere to be found. The following morning naval and civilian search parties canvassed St John's and arrested about one hundred suspects, one of whom turned king's evidence and identified two of the guilty parties. The next week witnessed several shows of imperial power in St John's that were intended to reinforce the authority of the naval government and to awe the citizenry into obedience. The two suspects were convicted in the Supreme Court and hanged in a public ceremony, while Lawry was given a funeral parade that attracted a large civilian and military audience. In reporting the incident to the British government, Wallace was hopeful that Lawry's death would not be in vain, meaning that the theatre of state authority he had coordinated might subdue the town and thwart press gang disturbances in St John's in the future.³⁸

Lawry's murder transformed the nature of impressment in Newfoundland, but it did not undermine its productivity. Hundreds of men were pressed in St John's during the 1790s and in the early nineteenth century. Traditionally, the Navy recruited in the fall to safeguard the seasonal rhythms of the cod fishery, but Lawry's death went further and restricted impressment to the water. Frightened by the violence in this case, naval and colonial officials barred press gangs from shore for the remainder of the Napoleonic Wars. This was the direct result of civilian unrest. When Newman and Company complained of a hot press in St John's in 1795, a year after the homicide, they were not concerned with press gangs on the streets but rather guard boats in St John's harbour.³⁹ Twenty years later, in April 1813,

37 *The Newfoundland Journal of Aaron Thomas: Able Seaman in H.M.S. Boston*, ed. Jean M. Murray (Don Mills, ON: Longmans, 1968), 178–80; *Royal Gazette and Nova-Scotia Advertiser*, 18 Nov. 1794.

38 For more on this case, see Keith Mercer, 'The Murder of Lieutenant Lawry: A Case Study of British Naval Impressment in Newfoundland, 1794,' *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 255–89.

39 Newman and Company et al. to Governor Wallace, 13 Oct. 1795, 356–8, vol. 12, GN 2/1/A, Colonial Secretary's Letter Book, PANL. *Hot press* was a contemporary term for an intense period of impressment. Because the Navy's strategy in these cases was to take seafarers and other residents by surprise, and to round up as many of them as possible, multiple press gangs descended on a particular community or region for a couple of days. During some emergencies, the British government temporarily cancelled protections and other exemptions from impressment, even those issued by Parliament. This was called a *general press* or a *press from all protections*.

Captain William Cumby of HMS *Hyperion* attempted to send a press gang into St John's but was turned down by the civil power, well knowing 'that such a measure would inevitably lead to the most serious and dangerous consequences.'⁴⁰ Resistance forced the Newfoundland squadron to reform its manning system. The *Boston* tragedy also highlights the dangers for naval personnel in colonial ports. Residents knew that the Navy collected recruits' belongings shortly after they were pressed, and the crowd that attacked Lawry pounced on the naval party when it was most vulnerable. A similar case occurred in 1798: two days after HMS *Mercury* pressed four men from the *Elizabeth* merchantman in St John's harbour, the recruits were 'rescued by the Inhabitants when sent for their Cloaths.'⁴¹ Lawry's death may also have had trans-Atlantic repercussions. In November 1794, the merchant ship *Maria* was boarded by a press gang in Poole harbour after returning from Newfoundland. Three of the *Maria*'s sailors were killed during a heated battle aboard their vessel and a mob quickly assembled on the wharves to carry out vigilante justice. However, the naval officers escaped a possible death sentence when the Admiralty removed the case from the Dorchester Assizes to the Old Bailey in London, in a move that angered Poole for some time. The *Maria* was likely part of the convoy in St John's a month earlier that was delayed by the murder of Lieutenant Lawry.⁴²

It was a different story in Nova Scotia, where popular violence against press gangs had been the catalyst for official opposition to the Navy during the American Revolution. Ironically, Richard Hughes, the former lieutenant governor, inadvertently ceded control over impressment on shore to Nova Scotia authorities when he returned as the admiral during the Nootka Sound crisis in 1790. John Wentworth and his administration capitalized on Hughes's mistake to regulate press gangs in Halifax during the Napoleonic Wars. When hostilities erupted in 1793, naval captains such as Rupert George of HMS *Hussar* submitted formal applications to the Nova Scotia govern-

40 Thomas Coote to Cumby, 14 Apr. 1813, 221-2, vol. 24, GN 2/1/A, Colonial Secretary's Letter Book, PANL.

41 Muster of HMS *Mercury*, ADM 36/13,233, TNA.

42 Diary of Benjamin Lester, 30 Nov. 1794, 9 Dec. 1794, Lester-Garland Papers, 1761-1802, Dorchester Record Office, Poole; Hutchinson, *Press-Gang*, 193; F.W. Mathews, 'Poole and Newfoundland: Printed in the *Poole and Parkstone Standard*,' 93-4, CNS, 1936; Rogers, *Press Gang*, 29, 145n66; A.C. Wardle, 'The Newfoundland Trade,' in *The Trade Winds: A Study of British Overseas Trade during the French Wars, 1793-1815*, ed. C. Northcote Parkinson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1948), 245.

ment to land press gangs on shore.⁴³ Wentworth presented these requests to his executive council, which deliberated on them quickly and issued regulations for successful applications. At least thirteen of these press warrants were issued between 1793 and 1805: most had time and quota restrictions, the Navy was prohibited from taking farmers and landsmen, only commissioned officers could head press gangs, and the process was to be supervised by the Halifax magistracy. Only two impressment requests were rejected in this period, in both cases because the business-minded members of the executive council deemed them to have been made too soon after previous recruitment campaigns. While this impressment system operated well for over a decade, with no major disturbances in Halifax, merchants still complained that sailors were conscripted in Nova Scotia waters and the small town of Liverpool was hit particularly hard by impressment.⁴⁴ With its merchant fleet devastated by enemy captures and wartime hazards during the 1790s, Liverpool invested heavily in privateering to survive.⁴⁵ Privateer crews were protected in Nova Scotia, but in 1800 more than thirty men were pressed from two Liverpool privateers in the West Indies, where they were cruising. Dozens of families were terrified by the sudden loss of their fathers, sons, brothers, and breadwinners, and the community as a whole petitioned the Navy and Nova Scotia government to get them discharged. Most of the sailors were released in the next few months.⁴⁶

Press gang violence returned to Halifax in 1805. Beset by desertion and undersized crews, Vice-Admiral Andrew Mitchell petitioned Wentworth for a press warrant that spring. Although Mitchell was given a liberal warrant, allowing him to press an unlimited number of sailors over two weeks, the admiral was unsatisfied and demanded multiple warrants, for six months apiece. Wentworth took this issue seriously and convened a special meeting of the executive council, which rejected Mitchell's request. Speaking from past experience, Wentworth's administration dismissed the notion that sending press gangs on shore had ever been an effective means of manning the fleet

43 Executive Council Minutes, 27 Apr. 1793, 262–6, vol. 190, RG1, NSARM; Wentworth to George, 27 Apr. 1793, no. 74, vol. 2160, MG1, George Family Papers, NSARM.

44 Mercer, 'Sailors and Citizens,' 97–101.

45 Dan Conlin, 'A Private War in the Caribbean: Nova Scotia Privateering, 1793–1805,' *Northern Mariner* 6, no. 4 (Oct. 1996): 29–46.

46 Dan Conlin, 'Privateer Entrepot: Commercial Militarization in Liverpool, Nova Scotia, 1793–1805,' *Northern Mariner* 8, no. 2 (Apr. 1998), 21–38; Log of Privateer *Charles Mary Wentworth*, 1799–1800, no. 10, vol. 215, MG20, NSARM; Memorial of Joseph Freeman (with enclosures), [Nov. 1800], 158–69, ADM 1/495, TNA.

in Nova Scotia. It stated that there were few sailors available in the Halifax area and that such a wide-ranging warrant would 'produce the most alarming and injurious Consequences to the Country.'⁴⁷ Although the Navy pressed dozens of sailors in the Atlantic region during the spring and summer of 1805, Mitchell was still not pleased and the following October he allowed press gangs from HMS *Cleopatra* to storm the streets of Halifax. Naval seamen and marines reportedly pressed men in the streets and abused civilians with bayonets and other weapons. With his warrant expired, and no authorization from colonial or municipal authorities, a riot ensued in which one man was killed and several others injured. Wentworth criticized the admiral for disturbing the peace and pressing illegally on shore, while the solicitor general was ordered to arrest the guilty parties.⁴⁸

Wentworth and his law officers dropped the criminal investigation, but the riot severely compromised the Navy's manning capabilities in Nova Scotia.⁴⁹ Wentworth and his officials exploited the violence in this case to tighten their grip on impressment. For instance, the crews of timber vessels and privateers were formally protected from the press, locally owned trading vessels enjoyed similar exemptions; and while fishermen could technically still be pressed in 1805, the Nova Scotia government moved quickly after the riot to protect them for the rest of the war.⁵⁰ Indeed, so many groups were protected from impressment that the Navy could not man its ships in Nova Scotia. Militiamen, freeholders, apprentices, and residents of Nova Scotia generally were off limits if they provided documentation or witnesses, who were often sheriffs and law officers. Even before 1805, however, residency claims against impressment, based on the customs

47 Executive Council Minutes, 6–18 May 1805, 152–6, vol. 191, RG1, NSARM.

48 Thomas B. Akins, *History of Halifax City* (Halifax, 1895), 137–8; Brian C. Cuthbertson, *The Loyalist Governor: Biography of Sir John Wentworth* (Halifax: Petheric, 1983), 132–4; Executive Council Minutes, 23 Nov. 1805, 161–2, vol. 191, RG1, NSARM; John George Marshall, *A Brief History of Public Proceedings and Events, Legal – Parliamentary – and Miscellaneous, in the Province of Nova Scotia, during the Earliest Years of the Present Century* (Halifax, 1879), 22–4.

49 According to Thomas Beamish Akins, the public archivist in Nova Scotia in the nineteenth century, Mitchell paid heavy fines in civil court because a press gang broke open the store of Forsyth and Company on the pretence of looking for deserters. This has not been confirmed, but it may explain why Nova Scotia authorities did not pursue their criminal investigation. Akins, *History of Halifax City*, 137–8.

50 Wentworth to Lord Castlereagh, 3 Feb. 1806, 80–2, Governor Wentworth's Nova Scotia Letter Books, vol. 54, RG1, NSARM; Gerald S. Graham, 'Fisheries and Sea Power,' in *Historical Essays on the Atlantic Provinces*, ed. G.A. Rawlyk (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1967), 14.

imported by New England planters during the 1760s, exempted most Nova Scotia settlers from the Navy: for example, HMS *Asia* pressed 108 men during a two-week recruiting drive in the fall of 1799 but was forced to release 87 of them because they were inhabitants of Halifax.⁵¹ Residency protections became more common over time, particularly after the press gang riot of 1805. The law was used in other ways as well. Provincial officials re-invoked desertion legislation from the 1750s in an attempt to ban naval parties from Halifax altogether, while captains were served with writs of habeas corpus to liberate pressed men.⁵² The most important reform, however, was that no more press warrants were issued until the War of 1812, when only two were given. Nova Scotia stopped co-operating with the Navy.⁵³ Put another way, popular resistance combined with merchant hostility and government resolve to ban press gangs from Halifax for much of the Napoleonic Wars.

GUARD BOATS AND ATLANTIC RECRUITMENT

Guard boats and small warships sent along the coast were the main sources of impressment in British North America. Guided by port orders, guard boats became fixtures at Halifax and St John's in the 1760s and 1770s; as press gangs were barred from shore during the Napoleonic Wars, they emerged as the most reliable source of naval recruitment in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. According to the port orders, captains took turns launching boats to perform harbour duty. They boarded incoming and outgoing vessels, searched them for deserters and contraband, and reported intelligence to the commanders-in-chief. They also served as floating press gangs, conscripting bewildered sailors who never knew if a boat was on regular duty or the impress service.⁵⁴ Restricting impressment to St John's harbour after Lawry's death in 1794 was intended to prevent more violence between civilians and the Navy, but resistance followed the gangs into the water in Newfoundland. In 1806 a guard boat from

51 Muster of HMS *Asia*, ADM 36/13,662, TNA.

52 Marshall, *Brief History*, 22–4; Richard John Uniacke, *The Statutes at Large, Passed in the Several General Assemblies Held in His Majesty's Province of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1805), 13–15, 56–7.

53 For a list of all known press warrants in Nova Scotia, see Mercer, 'North Atlantic Press Gangs,' Appendix 6, 351.

54 Bannister, *Rule of the Admirals*, 180–5; Port Orders, n.d., 247–9, MG204, Sir John Thomas Duckworth Collection, PANL.

HMS *Camilla* boarded the *Euphemia* merchantman entering St John's harbour and was violently repulsed. Led by the vessel's master, James Boucher, a midshipman was knocked unconscious and several other naval seamen were battered back to their cutter. Captain John Bowen of the *Camilla* responded by dispatching more guard boats to intercept the *Euphemia* and press its entire crew.⁵⁵ There were also less confrontational ways to avoid the guard boats. Quite literally, sailors could take to the hills or swim for their lives. Although it ended tragically, a case from 1814 illustrates one of the most dangerous ways to escape impressment. The *Swiftsure* merchant vessel was boarded by a guard boat from HM Sloop *Sabine* as it arrived in St John's, prompting the crew to jump overboard and swim for shore. Unfortunately, Adam Ross, the second mate, drowned before help arrived from the waterfront.⁵⁶ The reputation of the St John's guard boats for pressing from incoming vessels was such that sailors tried to avoid them at all costs. Crews in St John's refused to join their ships in 1805, and sailors from Bonavista stayed away in the same year, while merchants throughout the Atlantic region had difficulty conducting voyages to Newfoundland because of the fear of impressment.⁵⁷

The Admiralty also issued warrants to naval captains that allowed them to press at sea without colonial permission. This created anxiety for seafarers. For example, the crew of the *Sisters* merchantman deliberately stranded the vessel at the mouth of Halifax harbour in 1797 and headed ashore in a boat to avoid impressment.⁵⁸ Masters also landed sailors along the coast to avoid guard boats, often at the insistence of their crews. The vessel *Sophy* was contracted to bring masts to the Halifax naval yard from the Bay of Fundy in 1805, but its crew was pressed upon arrival and the 'whole country was thrown

55 Bowen to Governor Erasmus Gower, 29 Dec. 1806, 145–6, ADM I/476, TNA; Captain's Log of HMS *Camilla*, TNA, ADM 51/1667; Muster of HMS *Camilla*, ADM 36/16,959, TNA; Supreme Court of Newfoundland Minute Book, 3–15 Dec. 1806, 68–77, GN 5/2/A/1, PANL.

56 *Royal Gazette and Newfoundland Advertiser*, 11 Aug. 1814.

57 John Bland to Gower, 17 Oct. 1805, vol. 15, D'Alberti Transcripts, CNS; Gower to Bland, 23 Oct. 1805, vol. 15, D'Alberti Transcripts, CNS; Gower to Messrs Parker and Knight, 12 Oct. 1805, vol. 15, D'Alberti Transcripts, CNS; *The Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797–1803*, ed. Charles Bruce Fergusson (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1967), 4:469; *The Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1804–1812*, ed. Charles Bruce Fergusson (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1978), 5:158.

58 William Forsyth to Robert Livie, 18 Nov. 1797, 418–19, vol. 150, MG 3, Letter Book of William Forsyth and Company, 1796–8, NSARM.

into consternation.⁵⁹ Mast ships were protected from impressment, but in the crisis surrounding the Halifax press gang riot of 1805 rules were broken by naval patrols, which turned the labour market upside down. When rumours circulated that the Navy was ignoring protections in Halifax, sailors throughout the Maritimes stayed away, refusing higher wages and other incentives. Indeed, merchants often found it just as difficult filling up their crews as their naval counterparts. The demand for seafarers in Halifax drove up the price of maritime labour throughout the Atlantic region – a form of agency that sailors then used to select the voyages they wanted.⁶⁰ They also had the option of immigrating to the United States and entering its burgeoning merchant marine. In some complaints about impressment in Nova Scotia, provincial officials were warned about losing sailors to the United States in this way, where they were more insulated from impressment than in British colonial ports, and where they enjoyed high wages. The promise of work in American ports put even more strain on the labour market in British North America.⁶¹

The North American squadron faced almost insurmountable manning challenges during the Napoleonic period. Warships were short-handed, and desertion further weakened naval crews. In response, admirals dispatched small warships to the outports and regional shipping lanes to find replacements, which served as tenders for larger warships or recruited generally for the squadron. In 1797, HMS *Thetis*'s manning drive was aided by the naval brig *Vixen* and a yacht belonging to the Halifax naval yard. The latter's impressment activities sparked such outrage in Liverpool that local authorities plotted to arrest its commander.⁶² By the War of 1812, one naval vessel recruited from Cape Sable to Cape La Have, a second from Cape La Have to Halifax, and a third from Cape Sambro to Canso. Guard boats covered Halifax harbour while a schooner targeted coastal traffic off Sambro lighthouse. These vessels covered the south coast of Nova Scotia, while other warships pressed men in the Northumberland Strait,

59 Julian Gwyn, *Afloat and Ashore: The British Navy and the Halifax Naval Yard before 1820* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press 2004), 198–9.

60 On William Forsyth and Company's troubles in Halifax, see Forsyth to Thomas C. Amory, 18 Sept. 1797, 286–7, vol. 150, MG3, Forsyth Letter Book, NSARM; Forsyth to Hans Coratt Landt, 29 July 1797, 340, vol. 150, MG3, Forsyth Letter Book, NSARM; David A. Sutherland, 'William Forsyth,' DCB.

61 Executive Council Minutes, 18 May 1805, 153–6, vol. 191, RGI, NSARM.

62 Muster of HMS *Thetis*, ADM 36/13,182, TNA; *Diary of Simeon Perkins*, ed. Ferguson, 3:47–8.

around Prince Edward Island, and in the Bay of Fundy.⁶³ As Vice-Admiral George Berkeley informed the Admiralty in 1806, without dispatching sloops and schooners on the impress service, the Navy had no hope of sustaining its manpower in Nova Scotia.⁶⁴

By the early nineteenth century, then, impressment was an occupational hazard for seafarers throughout British North America. It occurred in remote areas on Newfoundland's 'French Shore' and the Labrador coast as well as regional metropolises such as Halifax and Quebec City. It was also resisted – through violence, desertion, the law, and politics. In Pictou there has even emerged folklore surrounding that town's battles with press gangs, whether real or imagined.⁶⁵ Many residents of Pictou, like elsewhere in British North America, carried militia certificates and other papers (many of them fraudulent) to protect themselves from the Navy. Samuel Leonard, commanding the revenue schooner *Union* in 1806, pleaded for the Admiralty's help in a lawsuit he faced in Pictou stemming from an impressment case the previous year. Leonard had assisted the *Vixen* by taking a boarding party to press men in northeastern Nova Scotia, including two from a timber raft in Pictou harbour. One turned out to be a freeholder who sued Leonard and the naval party for damages. Despite Leonard's connections – his father was a prominent loyalist and the superintendent of trade and fisheries in the Maritimes – and a letter from the admiral confirming that he was employed by the Navy in pressing sailors in the Canso area in 1805, the Admiralty refused to help. It also left the *Vixen's* press gang to the mercy of the colonial justice system. As neither Leonard, as a revenue officer, nor the *Vixen's* petty officer who was in charge of the boarding party could hold press warrants, the Admiralty deemed this an 'illegal act' and washed its hands of the case.⁶⁶

The law was also used against the Navy in New Brunswick. William Frissel, commanding the naval brig *Plumper* in the Bay of Fundy in

63 John Talbot Order Books, 14–24 July 1813, n.p., reel A-1632, IAC.

64 Berkeley to Admiralty, 15 Aug. 1806, 411–12, ADM 1/496, TNA.

65 For instance, see James M. Cameron, *Pictonians in Arms: A Military History of Pictou County, Nova Scotia* (Fredricton, NB: the author, by arrangement with University of New Brunswick, 1969), 47–8; George Patterson, *A History of the County of Pictou, Nova Scotia* (Montreal, 1877), 259–61; Ronald H. Sherwood, *Pictou Pioneers: A Story of the First Hundred Years in the History of Pictou Town* (Windsor, NS: Lancelot, 1973), chap. 16.

66 J.C. Arnell, 'The Ports of the Maritimes and Their Trade and Commerce in 1800,' *Canadian Geographical Journal* 78, no. 1 (Jan. 1969): 12–17; Berkeley to Admiralty (with enclosures), 9 Aug. 1806, 394–7, ADM 1/496, TNA; Ann Gorman Condon, 'George Leonard,' *DCB*.

1809, was served with a writ of habeas corpus to appear before Chief Justice Jonathan Bliss to explain the impressment of a New Brunswick sailor.⁶⁷ New Brunswick authorities complained of the large number of sailors pressed by HM Sloop *Columbine* in the same year, shortly after it suffered a mutiny in the Bay of Fundy. The *Columbine* pressed many replacements, including sixteen at Saint Andrews in one night, but a number of them escaped when escorted ashore to get their belongings.⁶⁸ Impressment peaked in New Brunswick during the War of 1812, when warships such as HMS *Spartan* conscripted dozens of men at Saint John.⁶⁹ Prince Edward Island did not suffer greatly from impressment, but men were taken from vessels in Charlottetown harbour and occasionally from the shore. For example, the wheelwright Benjamin Chappell noted the disquiet caused by impressment in Charlottetown in the summer of 1805, but also the town's relief when the naval brig *Vixen* sailed out of the harbour. The *Vixen's* seamen were accused of plundering buildings in the provincial capital as well as pressing men into the Navy.⁷⁰ Similarly, HM Sloop *Halifax* and the naval schooner *Bream* conscripted men at the island in 1807, including several from the *Hope* merchantman at Three Rivers, which was on the verge of sailing for Britain. The pressed sailors protested to the *Halifax's* commander, the *Hope's* departure was delayed, and its master and charterers petitioned Lieutenant-Governor Joseph DesBarres for assistance. They asked him to put a stop to impressment at Prince Edward Island, but there is no evidence that the provincial government contacted the Navy on this matter.⁷¹

As the Halifax labour market dried up after 1805, the North American squadron pressed large numbers of sailors in the West Indies,

67 Writ of Habeas Corpus for George Lughton, 8 July 1809, F55-2(2), H.T. Hazen Collection, New Brunswick Museum, Saint John.

68 Captain's Log of HM Sloop *Columbine*, ADM 51/2227, TNA; Gwyn, *Frigates and Foremasts*, 123-4; Muster of HM Sloop *Columbine*, ADM 37/1098, TNA; William Wellesley Pole to Vice-Admiral John Borlase Warren, 28 Nov. 1809, ADM 1/500, TNA; H.F. Pullen, 'The Attempted Mutiny Onboard HM Sloop *Columbine* on 1 Aug. 1809,' *Nova Scotia Historical Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (Dec. 1978): 309-18.

69 Muster of HMS *Spartan*, ADM 37/3667, TNA.

70 Diary of Benjamin Chappell, 24-9 May 1805, Acc. 2277, Benjamin Chappell Fonds, Public Archives and Records Office of Prince Edward Island (PAPEI), Charlottetown; *Royal Herald* (Charlottetown), 30 May 1805.

71 Captain's Log of HM Sloop *Halifax*, TNA, ADM 51/1692; Collector of Customs Records for Prince Edward Island, July 1807, Inward and Outward, RG 9, PAPEI; A.B. Warburton, *A History of Prince Edward Island* (Saint John, NB: Barnes, 1923), 305-6.

along the American seaboard, and in the St Lawrence River. Desertion was a serious problem at Quebec City, where naval officers countered it by conscripting men from merchant vessels that frequently were members of their own convoys. For example, four men ran from HM Sloop *Lilly* at Quebec City in 1794, where its captain entered two recruits to replace them and then another sailor at Gaspé Bay.⁷² Impressment increased in the St Lawrence over time. Warships such as HMS *Pallas* entered dozens of recruits in Lower Canada in 1805, the vast majority of whom were pressed.⁷³ Recruitment also occurred at Montreal and from vessels all along the river, but it was concentrated at Quebec City. Nor did it all take place on the water. Thomas Rideout, the son of a public official in Upper Canada, saw a press gang in action while passing through the port in 1811. It rowed into town at night and pressed about fifteen sailors. Rideout saw these 'poor fellows' marched into the boat by a party of soldiers or marines.⁷⁴ Lower Canadian officials rarely complained about press gangs, but prompted by the impressment of a hat-maker's apprentice in Quebec City in 1805, Lieutenant-Governor Robert Milnes informed the British government of the dangers caused by pressing men from vessels leaving the St Lawrence River. So many sailors were taken from convoys each year, he warned, that they did not have enough manpower to cope with the navigational dangers of the St Lawrence waterway. Milnes stated that impressment also had the potential to backfire politically in a 'conquered colony' such as Lower Canada, where habitant loyalty to the British state was tenuous at best.⁷⁵

Known as 'la Presse,' press gangs were regular visitors to the taverns and streets of the lower town of Quebec City in the early nineteenth century. One case from 1807 enraged the population. HM Sloop *Blossom* suffered mightily from desertion at Quebec City that summer, and in a now familiar pattern, its captain pressed more than thirty seafarers as compensation.⁷⁶ In so doing, however, its press gang killed a francophone sailor while he was trying to escape. Simon

72 Muster of HM Sloop *Lilly*, ADM 36/15,133, TNA.

73 Muster of HMS *Pallas*, ADM 36/16,835, TNA.

74 Matilda Edgar, ed., *Ten Years in Upper Canada in Peace and War, 1805–1815: Being the Rideout Papers* (Toronto, 1890), 40.

75 Milnes to Earl Cambden, 15 Nov. 1804, 367–69, MG 24 A-7, 1799–1805, Robert Shore Milnes Entry Book, LAC (this letter and its enclosures can also be found in the Colonial Office Series 'Q,' 2–6, vol. 96, 1804, Lieutenant Governor Milnes, LAC).

76 Muster of HM Sloop *Blossom*, ADM 37/1539, TNA; Captain's Log of HM Sloop *Blossom*, ADM 51/1687, TNA; Ship's Log of HM Sloop *Blossom*, ADM 53/138, TNA; Master's Log of HM Sloop *Blossom*, ADM 52/3811, TNA.

Latresse, a twenty-five-year-old Montreal native and voyageur, was to dance in a place of entertainment one night in September when a press gang from the *Blossom* barged in and seized a number of its patrons. Two marines guarded the door but Latresse somehow escaped and was chased through the streets. Unable to close the distance, one of the marines fired his pistol and brought Latresse down. According to the staunchly francophone *Le Canadien* newspaper, Latresse died the following day 'after suffering with courage and resignation.' He left behind a widowed mother with no family to care for her.⁷⁷ Nor did it sit well in the town that Captain George Pigot of the *Blossom* fled from the criminal justice system. Despite orders from the Quebec magistracy, he weighed anchor one morning after the incident without handing over the men to be tried for Latresse's murder. The fact that soldiers occasionally aided press gangs on shore must have caused further resentment in Lower Canada, since they were often long-term residents who interacted with citizens daily. Although Quebec historiography is silent on impressment and civil-naval relations, they are an underappreciated element of the French-English dynamic in the revolutionary era.⁷⁸

VIOLENCE AND THE WAR OF 1812

Shortly after Latresse's death in 1807, Captain Pigot of the *Blossom* reported to the Admiralty that it was an accident. Having investigated the case, he was happy to find that 'no kind of blame can be attended'

77 *Le Canadien*, 19 Sep. 1807. This incident was not covered by the anglophone newspaper *Quebec Mercury* or the government organ *Quebec Gazette*, even though the latter advertised the *Blossom's* arrival a couple of weeks before Latresse's murder. *Le Canadien* emerged as the voice of French nationalists in Quebec at this time, particularly against the English establishment and Governor James Craig.

78 According to historian Arthur Lower, Quebecers never forgot the press gang; for example, 'in the celebrated election of 1911,' fought in part over the formation of a Canadian navy, 'nationalist agents sent men around the countryside disguised as British naval officers and inquiring how many sons were in the house,' thus mimicking impressment, while Quebec's response to the conscription crisis in 1917 'was much the same as it had been in 1794, and in this opposition to compulsory service the old memories of the press-gang played no inconsiderable part.' The latter refers to opposition to militia duty in Lower Canada during the French Revolutionary War. See Arthur R.M. Lower, *Canadians in the Making: A Social History of Canada* (Don Mills, ON: Longmans Green, 1958), 124-5.

to the *Blossom's* crew. The sad irony, according to Pigot, was that Latresse was a 'Canadian' and thus free from impressment.⁷⁹ There was no formal policy against pressing Lower Canadians, but few francophones were coerced into the service; the problem, however, is that press gangs rounded men up first and asked questions later, creating turmoil and precipitating misunderstandings.⁸⁰ Without government leadership on impressment, like in Nova Scotia, or civil-naval collaboration on recruitment parameters, as in Newfoundland, it was increasingly the law that protected Lower Canadians from the Navy. The *Blossom*, for example, lost several recruits in 1807 when Pigot was served with writs of habeas corpus.⁸¹ Other warships, such as HMS *Owen Glendower* in 1810, pressed dozens of men in Quebec City, only to lose many of them when their masters or the civil power produced the Navy with apprenticeship indentures.⁸² In addition to pressing Lower Canadians and other protected groups, these warships sent armed press gangs ashore, sometimes leading to retribution against naval personnel. At least two crewmembers of HMS *Iphigenia*, for instance, recorded depositions in Quebec City courts in 1808 stating that they had been beaten and assaulted by groups of men in the St John's suburbs.⁸³ Impressment continued to spark resistance in Lower Canada, despite being constrained by the law. During the War of 1812, three groups competed for the seafarers that passed through Quebec City. Warships such as HM Sloop *Ceylon* entered dozens of recruits, both pressed men and volunteers, while Governor-General George Prevost and the provincial marine in the Canadas targeted the same men for naval campaigns on the Great Lakes; warships at Quebec also sent parts of their own crews to the Lakes,

79 Pigot to Governor John Holloway of Newfoundland, 2 Oct. 1807, n.p. (enclosure: Lieutenant John Undrell of *Blossom* to Pigot, 13 Sept. 1807), 1807, 'P,' Captains Letters, ADM 1/2332, TNA. After leaving Quebec City, the *Blossom* called at St John's on its way back to England.

80 For example, Joseph Fournier, pressed by HM Sloop *Ceylon* at Quebec City on 8 Oct. 1814, was discharged less than a week later, 'being a Canadian.' Muster of HM Sloop *Ceylon*, ADM 37/5241, TNA.

81 Muster of HM Sloop *Blossom*, ADM 37/1539, TNA.

82 Muster of HMS *Owen Glendower*, ADM 37/2448, TNA.

83 Captain's Log of HMS *Iphigenia*, ADM 51/2004, TNA; Deposition of William Colvill, boatswain of *Iphigenia*, 10 Oct. 1808, no. 3989, SS1, S1, TL31, BAnQ-Q; Deposition of J.F. Petherick, purser of *Iphigenia*, 30 Sept. 1808, no. 3566, SS1, S1, TL31, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ-Q), Quebec City.

making the manning problem even more acute.⁸⁴ Then there were the merchants and ship masters who attempted to circumvent the labour shortage in the St Lawrence by offering inflated wages for return voyages to Europe.⁸⁵ Although most impressments did not involve bloodshed, press gang violence on shore and the coercion of residents (even temporarily) created an undercurrent of civil-naval animosity in Quebec City throughout the early nineteenth century.

As much as press gangs inflamed the populations of Lower Canada, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island, they had the greatest impact in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. Resistance continued on the water in St John's, where guard boat disputes occasionally ended up in domestic courts. This undermined the Navy's reputation in Newfoundland and aggravated the manning problem. As Chief Justice Thomas Tremlett explained in 1807, the Navy's goal in the future should have been to avoid clashes with civilians.⁸⁶ That was not always possible. In 1811, Peter Gibson, a sailor pressed by HMS *Jason* from a merchant vessel in St John's harbour, absconded when collecting his belongings. As soon as Gibson got clear of the warship, he knocked down his midshipman escort and fled into St John's. A crowd then beat the midshipman, who survived only because a naval party heard the 'Cry of Murder' and came to his rescue.⁸⁷ While most incidents of this kind stemmed from guard boats, tensions occasionally spilled over into town, the result of drunkenness and naval parties searching for deserters. For example, in 1810 a lieutenant from HMS *Franchise* was attacked by a group of 'malicious and ill-disposed' persons in St John's.⁸⁸ About three weeks later, Walter Walsh and two other townsmen were abused by a naval party consisting of five or six armed men,

84 Muster of HM Sloop *Ceylon*, ADM 37/5241, TNA; Captain's Log of HM Sloop *Ceylon*, ADM 51/2233, TNA; Robert Christie, *Memoirs of the Administration of the Colonial Government of Lower-Canada, by Sir James Henry Craig, and Sir George Prevost: From the Year 1807 until the Year 1816* (Quebec, 1818), 140–1; Prevost to William Henry Robinson, 28 July 1812, 26, vol. 2, Sir George Prevost Collection, S108, Special Collections, TRU; Prevost to Robinson, 26 Oct. 1812, 31, vol. 2, Prevost Collection, TRU.

85 [Anon.], *Some Account of the Public Life of the Late Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost* (London, 1823), 70–1. As a result of the labour shortage at Quebec, this writer states that merchants paid double or triple the regular wages for the 'run-home' to England.

86 Supreme Court of Newfoundland Minute Book, 13–17 Mar. 1807, 116–25, GN5/2/A/1, PANL.

87 J.W. King to Governor John Thomas Duckworth, 13 Aug. 1811, 4858–9, MG204, Duckworth Collection, PANL.

88 *Royal Gazette and Newfoundland Advertiser*, 29 Nov. 1810.



FIGURE 2 A Portsmouth tavern, England, in the 1790s.

Source: *Sailors Carousing*, by Julius Caesar Ibbetson, 1802, courtesy National Maritime Museum, London.

likely from the *Franchise*. One of them, who appeared to be an officer, grabbed hold of Walsh and called out ‘Franchise a hoy.’⁸⁹ Walsh pleaded with the officer to let him go, but he was attacked with a sword and then stabbed in the back. The naval party chased the men through the streets until they were rescued by pedestrians.⁹⁰ While it is unclear if the attackers sought retribution for their battered lieutenant, or were pressing illegally on shore, the St John’s magistracy would not tolerate this kind of behaviour. When Captain Cumby of the *Hyperion* demanded the magistracy’s assistance in sending a press gang into town in 1813, he was turned down and impressment was restricted to the harbour.

89 Examination of Walter Walsh, 7 Dec. 1810, 1608–9, MG204, Duckworth Collection, PANL.

90 Examination of Walter Walsh, 7 Dec. 1810, 1608–9, MG204, Duckworth Collection, PANL; Thomas Coote to Duckworth, 22 Dec. 1810, 1604–6, MG204, Duckworth Collection, PANL.

By the War of 1812, Newfoundland had evolved from a fishing station into a colony with a growing resident population.⁹¹ This meant that many seafarers had families and friends on the island to protect them from the Navy, or to petition for their release after being pressed. This was not the case during the American Revolution, when the Navy faced few obstacles in manning its ships in Newfoundland and when resistance was muted. Evidence of this trend can be found in advertisements for deserters in the *Royal Gazette* newspaper: in 1812 the Navy offered a reward for three men who ran from HMS *Antelope* and were 'well known in Newfoundland, having been employed in the Fishery.'⁹² This description implies that the recruits should have been easy to round up because they were familiar faces, but the opposite was true: civilians rarely co-operated with military authorities regarding deserters, but rather concealed and assisted them, often in their journeys to the south and northeast coasts to find a way off the island. Generally, however, civil–naval relations held steady in Newfoundland over time. There were disputes arising from guard boats, but the absence of press gangs on shore after 1794 prevented more serious disturbances. The guard boats also turned out to be a reliable source of recruits and the Navy received more co-operation from the civil power in Newfoundland than it did in other settings. The latter sent petty criminals to the fleet and rounded up large numbers of deserters. It also helped that the Navy was the backbone of the colonial government and legal system in Newfoundland; naval authorities were thus more in tune with local concerns than in other British North American colonies, as reflected in the seasonal impressment parameters that safeguarded the fishery. John Duckworth, for example, the popular naval governor between 1810 and 1812, demonstrated mercy and pragmatism by discharging mariners from the Navy and protecting Conception Bay men from impressment on the Labrador coast. Upon his departure, Duckworth was saluted publicly by the merchant community for his actions as governor, including preventing the trade and fisheries from being harassed by press gangs.⁹³

This level of civil–naval collaboration did not exist in Nova Scotia. Even during the American Revolution, when former naval officers such as Richard Hughes served as lieutenant governor, press gangs

91 Shannon Ryan, 'Fishery to Colony: A Newfoundland Watershed, 1793–1815,' *Acadiensis* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 34–52.

92 *Royal Gazette and Newfoundland Advertiser*, 27 Aug. 1812.

93 *Royal Gazette and Newfoundland Advertiser*, 22 Oct. 1812.

sparked violence from below and protests from above – indeed, Hughes was their most vocal critic. Although John Wentworth's administration regulated press gangs on shore in Halifax between 1793 and 1805, the Navy was not entrenched in the community to nearly the same extent as it was in Newfoundland. Colonial and naval authorities were separate and often antagonistic entities, as was clear from the press gang riot of 1805. Even before then, however, desertion wreaked havoc on the North American squadron, and frustrated naval officers began to break impressment regulations. Earlier that summer, Vice-Admiral Mitchell ordered John Orkney to command HM Schooner *Whiting* on the south shore to press men for the fleet. Orkney promptly allowed magistrate John Hames and a party from the *Whiting* to terrorize the Shelburne countryside – pressing men, forcing their way into homes, conducting illegal searches, and literally threatening to blow people's brains out. Several residents were attacked and abused, and more than a dozen families fled into the woods for extended periods of time. Although no action was taken against the *Whiting's* press gang, incidents of this nature did not enamour Nova Scotians to the Navy.⁹⁴ Four years later, in October 1809, two young men at Pictou were attacked and then pressed into the Navy at the behest of rival timber merchants. They were shipped off to the West Indies before Pictou's authorities realized what had happened. This became a *cause célèbre* in the colony. Pictou's magistrates petitioned the house of assembly, which tabled a report on the abuses of impressment and called for the men to be returned home. This case was also followed in the newspapers and led the Society of Merchants in Halifax to initiate a campaign against press gangs.⁹⁵ Vice-Admiral John Borlase Warren responded quickly by putting even tighter restrictions on impressment in Nova Scotia: protected men were to be released immediately, impressment was now illegal on the wharves and on shore, the Navy was to abide by provincial regulations, and all colonial residents, fishermen, foreigners, and apprentices were free from the wooden world.⁹⁶

Despite this victory against impressment, civil–naval relations deteriorated in Halifax during the War of 1812. Faced with low recruit-

94 'Letter to Chief Justice Sampson Salter Blowers' (with enclosures), [1 Aug.] 1805, nos. 818–24, vol. 954, MG1, White Family Papers, NSARM. This case is discussed in Keith Mercer, 'Terror in the Countryside: HM Schooner *Whiting* in Southern Nova Scotia in 1805,' *Trafalgar Chronicle* 19 (2009), 38–53.

95 *Journal of the House of Assembly of Nova Scotia*, 30 Nov.–13 Dec. 1809, 407–30, vol. 7, NSARM; *The Novator* (Halifax), 25 Dec. 1809.

96 *Weekly Chronicle* (Halifax), 15 Dec. 1809.

ment figures, high desertion rates, and weak crews, naval captains occasionally turned a blind eye to illegal impressments on shore.⁹⁷ The first hint of trouble came in July 1812, when magistrates wrote to Lieutenant-Governor John Sherbrooke about a press gang from HMS *Spartan* that was operating in Halifax. Led by William Sabatier, the Society of Merchants complained to Sherbrooke about another press gang on shore the following spring. Not only was this against Warren's proclamation from 1809, the merchants argued, but it also damaged trade and created urban unrest. The society even forced Sherbrooke's hand by submitting a memorial to the British government, which railed against the Navy generally and about impressment in particular.⁹⁸ However, as a result of the Navy's paucity of sailors during the American war, including hundreds of men from the Halifax squadron who were sent to serve on the Great Lakes, the Admiralty rejected the society's call for a prohibition on impressment in Nova Scotia.⁹⁹ With their overlapping memberships, the Halifax magistracy and the Society of Merchants emerged as the fiercest opponents of press gangs in Nova Scotia by the War of 1812. They had more reason to complain in 1813 when Richard Tremain, a prominent merchant and justice of the peace, was awakened in the middle of the night by cries in the Halifax streets. He hurried downstairs to find people throwing stones at a press gang, which was 'dragging a man along with large Clubs beating him unmercifully, and apparently without provocation.'¹⁰⁰ When Tremain entered the fray, a member of the press gang threatened to break his head as well.¹⁰¹ This case went before the court of sessions in Halifax and was reviewed by the attorney general. The court found for Tremain, who had been accused of heading a mob to rescue deserters from the Navy. Sherbrooke too had finally been won over to Halifax's fight against impressment. He chastised Rear-

97 On the desertion problem, see Martin Hubley, 'Desertion, Identity and the Experience of Authority in the North American Squadron of the Royal Navy, 1745-1812' (PhD diss., University of Ottawa, 2009); Thomas A. Malcomson, 'Creating Order and 'Disorder' in the British Navy: The North American and West Indies Station, 1812-1815' (PhD diss., York University, 2007).

98 William Sabatier to Sherbrooke, 25 May 1813, no. 74, vol. 226, RG1, Manuscript Documents, NSARM; Sherbrooke to Earl Bathurst, 4 July 1813, 141-2, CO217/91, TNA; Bathurst to Sherbrooke, 28 Sept. 1813, 29-30, Nova Scotia Correspondence, CO218/29, TNA.

99 John Barrow to Colonel Banbury, 13 Sept. 1813, 185, CO217/92, TNA.

100 Tremain to Sherbrooke, 30 July 1813, no. 90, vol. 226, RG1, Manuscript Documents, NSARM; David A. Sutherland, 'Richard Tremain,' *DCB*.

101 Tremain to Sherbrooke, 30 July 1813, no. 90, vol. 226, RG1, Manuscript Documents, NSARM.

Admiral Edward Griffith for these illegal activities, which threatened the tranquility of the town.¹⁰²

Press gangs were at the centre of several other court cases in Halifax during the War of 1812. It has not received much attention, but the Navy's increased visibility in the courts diminished its standing in the popular mind and precluded any co-operation from colonial authorities on the manning problem. Stemming from a town meeting in Halifax in December 1814, the writer 'Plain Truth' launched the last major attack on press gangs in Nova Scotia. Claiming to be a concerned citizen and a supporter of the British armed forces, he could no longer sit by while his town suffered from the brutal side effects of imperial warfare. He lashed out at the Navy and the 'cruel tyranny' of its press gangs, and he criticized Nova Scotia's authorities for their lack of police protection. He called upon the public to 'resist oppression': where were the magistrates and courts, he asked, to arrest and prosecute the press gangs? Why did they allow naval parties to break into homes and businesses? What about his birthright as a Briton and a Nova Scotian? This diatribe came in response to several recent press gang altercations in Halifax that symbolized the civil-naval discord that plagued the town in the latter stages of the Napoleonic Wars. Ironically, while this call to arms ignited a spirited and even jingoistic debate in the *Acadian Recorder* newspaper, Halifax's fight against press gangs was all but over.¹⁰³ This is because 'Plain Truth's' editorial coincided with the end of the War of 1812 and the final vestiges of impressment in Nova Scotia and the Atlantic world. It closed the window on a turbulent period in Canadian history. Although the Navy remained in Halifax, St John's, and Quebec City after the Napoleonic Wars concluded in 1815, in the nineteenth century it relied on volunteers rather than press gangs to man its warships.

CONCLUSION

'Plain Truth' seems to have been unaware that residents of Halifax and British North America had been resisting press gangs for about forty years by the time he took up his pen in late 1814. Confronted with the

102 Tremain to Sherbrooke (with enclosures), 30 July 1813, no. 90, vol. 226, RG1, Manuscript Documents, NSARM; Halifax Sessions, 29 July 1813, 31 July 1813, RG34/312/P5, Records of the Court of Sessions, Halifax County, NSARM; Sherbrooke to Griffith, 7 Aug. 1813, 31-4, vol. III, RG1, Lieutenant Governor's Letter Books, NSARM.

103 *Acadian Recorder*, 3 Dec. 1814; Mercer, 'Sailors and Citizens,' 87-8.

same 'evil necessity' that plagued seafarers throughout the Atlantic world, they fought back between 1775 and 1815. Impressment reached into most coastal areas of British North America by the early nineteenth century and its residents employed a range of strategies to resist it – desertion, running and hiding from naval parties, carrying false papers, instituting legal proceedings, and pressuring government officials and merchants to get them discharged. Law officers and the courts emerged as a robust defender of civil rights and the main bulwark against naval transgressions in each of the North Atlantic colonies. Few forms of resistance to impressment resulted in physical violence, but disputes commonly followed press gang operations on shore and when colonial inhabitants were detained aboard men-of-war. Moreover, several popular affrays in this period did have a lasting impact on civil–naval relations; they served as the catalyst for official resistance to the Navy and paved the way for manning reforms. Press gang riots in St John's in 1794 and Halifax in 1805 led to the prohibition of impressment on shore in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia for much of the Napoleonic Wars. Therefore, resistance from below led to political and social change in British North America, at least when it came to the Navy's role in colonial society. Impressment was no 'humdrum affair' in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹⁰⁴ Despite its absence from Canadian historiography, it was a part of everyday life for people in Nova Scotia, Lower Canada, and Newfoundland, where it occurred on a significant scale. The tensions that it caused in British North America should force historians to rethink the chronology of popular protest and urban unrest in Canadian history. They also demonstrate that the Canadian colonies were part of a larger Atlantic narrative on impressment and civil–naval relations.

104 Rodger, *Wooden World*, 182.

The author is grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its generous support of this project. An earlier draft of this paper was given to the Lawrence D. Stokes History Seminar at Dalhousie University. The author thanks the members of that seminar, the journal's peer reviewers, and Martin Hubley, Donald Fyson, and John Reid.