NATIONAL RIVALRIES IN THE NORTH SEA HERRING FISHERY, 1790-1914.

Malcolm Gray

The habits of the herring moving through the ocean now known as the North Sea have been the focus for economic hopes, plans and sometimes realised gains for the nations around its edges – and particularly for Holland, Sweden, Scotland and Norway. These have, on occasion, not only supported communities of fishermen but also through the growth of export trades have led into much wider surges of economic growth. Yet the herring has always been an uncertain resource, a shaky basis for irreversible development. Several countries have had periods when income growth, through the development of a herring fishing industry, has been misleadingly easy, if never steady from year to year. In fact, since the gain has been from wide-ranging international trade as well as from a subsistence supply of food, income has been created only through a complex and adaptable organisation. Yet the basis for such elaborate organisation, the herring stocks, has always been shaky and uncertain; an organisation once in place and serving well in times of plenitude of resource may become a cumbersome source of loss when the supporting stocks fail. Herring fisheries have often enough run into periods of decline with effects upon whole national economies.

Such fluctuations, both in the short and in the long term, have stemmed from changes in apparently established behaviour, in the form of the annual gathering and movement of herring shoals. The herring, a pelagic fish, is constantly on the move, collecting in large numbers not far below the surface of the sea. The sheer drive of these moving hordes will entangle them in their thousands even in a simple wall of netting that is laid in their path. Hence derives the technique of drift-netting in which the fishing crew extends a long wall of rectangular nets, joined end to end to hang limp from a surface rope. All depends, then, on the interception of shoals that never rest in any settled location. The fisherman must develop the skill of knowing where they are like to be found and of understanding the superficial signs of their presence. To the fisherman engaged in the day-to-day battle for livelihood and looking for superficial signs of an unseen stock to be plundered, the movement of the shoals must seem erratic and unpredictable and it is true that his annual reward must always be uncertain. Nevertheless there are broad controlling factors which over periods determine the likelihood of fish appearing at certain times in particular locations. The weight of these factors may change so as to destroy the older habits on which fishermen have come to depend. But always a new habit will replace the old and perhaps create opportunity for a different body of fishermen.

The basic factors are the supply of food and the regular annual movement to and from the spawning grounds. The food of the herring is plankton, which is collected and carried by the currents created by the meeting of waters of varying temperature, mainly deriving from climatic conditions in the Atlantic and the Baltic. Thus weather conditions over an enormously wide area, subsuming always changing characteristics of manifold local variety, will every year create a distinctive pattern in the movement of plankton. Yet there is a degree of similarity in the annual experience over periods of years which results in some predictability as to where the best fishings are to be found. Such limited regularity, indeed, is the pre-condition for any solid development of a shore-based fishing industry. Over the longer period, however, even the limited regularity may vanish and with it the viability of long-estabilished fishings. More than one of the North Sea countries have suffered such loss or diminution.

There is another basis for sound prediction of the location and timing of good fishing conditions. The herring move in concert, at given times of the year, to known spawning grounds. It is, indeed, of great importance to the fisherman that he intercept the herring during its spawning cycle. It is just prior to spawning that the fish is in best condition. The difference between the "full" herring and the "spent" is of crucial importance to the discriminating consumer and such categorisation is carried through the stages of curing and sales. One broad movement to spawn is from the eastern to the western part of the North Sea, a fact of great importance to British, and particularly Scottish, fishermen. But the movement towards particular shores comes at different time of year, with earliest arrivals in the north, in Shetland waters. Then comes the spawning period along the Scottish east coast and finally the good fishing conditions off the English coasts, culminating in the East Anglian season. Such occurrences gave rise to the belief that a single vast shoal of herring encircled Britain. But it is not so. The appearance of the herring at different times in different areas is due to various sub-species displaying a different habit.

For long, the country best able to track and intercept the movements of the herring was Holland – a success due not to geographical advantage but to organisation. Annually a massive fleet of some hundreds of vessels was fitted out to fish for long periods without return to port and to move widely over the North Sea. Each unit of this fleet not only carried the tackle for uninterrupted fishing but also stores for shipboard curing. The fish, once cured, were transported to the home ports by specialist carrier vessels. The whole organisation had the qualities of speed – not an hour was wasted between catching and curing – and adaptability. The fleet could go wherever there seemed to be the chance of good fishing: in fact, it operated mainly in the more westerly sectors of the North Sea, starting from Shetland waters and moving gradually southwards, generally within sight of the Scottish mainland. Another element in Dutch success was the development of markets by penetration over the north European plain and southward into central Europe. It was characteristic of the Dutch herring cure that its high quality, inherent in the type of

herring used and the care exercised in the during process, appealed as a delicacy and commanded high prices.

The peak of the Dutch achievement in fishing, as in many other aspects of social life, was reached in the seventeenth century. For the first half of the eighteenth century the annual routine persisted in full strength but in the latter decades of the century output declined and less and less was sent to the established markets. Failure was occurring before any effective competitor had emerged but the opportunities were noticed. Three countries were to struggle for the Dutch inheritance of a developed and potentially growing market – Sweden, Norway and Scotland. The Swedish challenge, strong for a time, faded early in the nineteenth century, leaving the field to Norway and Scotland. Both entered a period of dramatic expansion but the nature of their success differed as between the two countries.

That Scotland's geographical position was relatively advantageous is shown by the fact that the Dutch fleet had chosen to operate so close to Scottish shores, had indeed used the shore facilities of the Shetland Isles. The first reaction of the Scots, prodded by the British legislature, was to try to imitate the Dutch methods. Bounties were given for the fitting out of vessels which could circle the coasts and stay for long periods at sea but this was to waste the advantage of proximity to the fishing grounds and there was but faltering success, partly because little was done to ensure the quality of the cure. The main market for Scots herring cured by pickling was the West Indies where the product was distributed as food for the slaves. It was not a market calling for discipline or care by the curers. The reputation on the Continent of herring cured in Scotland was low. But Continental Europe had to be the market for any expansion, particularly when emancipation destroyed the West Indian trade after 1833, to be followed by decline in the second main traditional market, Ireland, as a consequence of the potato famine of the forties.

The escape from these crippling traditional practices in catching and curing was to begin the the 1790s. The pioneering area was Caithness. This county had little fishing history and no communities of specialised fishermen such as lay dotted along the far shore of the Moray Firth and further south. The immediate impetus to action was the appearance of shoals in several successive years, sufficiently close to the shore to be taken in small and ill-equipped boats. Thus was started the method of fishing and the associated curing organisation which, imitated over many parts of the eastern coastline of Scotland, was to lead into unprecedented industrial expansion.

The new principle of fishing was such as to take full advantage of Scotland's geographical position, in proximity to some of the main spawning grounds. For 150 years substantial fishings were to be made on these "Scottish" grounds during a well-defined summer season, extending from early July to mid-September. The "Great Summer Fishing" became the central focus for fishermen within a complicated annual routine involving several forms of fishing activity. It became ever the practice

for herring boats to sail from port of an afternoon, to cast their nets on selected grounds through the hours of darkness and to return with their landings the following morning. And so on through the week with an invariable break for the Sabbath. At first the boats used were small – of no more than 25-foot keel – and undecked, and consequently could carry only a small number of nets. Their fishing efficiency was limited but catches were sufficient to produce some profit year by year. Further, it was possible to draw the boats over open beaches and many of the small creeks that break into the solid wall of the Caithness cliffs could be used as stations. Little investment was required for a considerable expansion of effort. Soon some hundreds of crews, consisting largely of farmer-fishermen, were eagerly engaged in the summer fishing. But soon, too, the move began to improve equipment, to increase the size of boat, up to 30- or 40-foot keel, and to increase the spread of nets that could be cast from each boat. With the increase in the size of boats came a tendency to concentrate more and more upon the main centre of Wick. Boats gathered, too, from other parts of the coast, and particularly from the southern shore of the Moray Firth so that by the 1830s over 1000 craft would be engaged in the Caithness summer fishing.

The new Caithness fishing industry brought innovation not only in the techniques of catching fish. Equally important was the development of the curing section. A firm principle was set that boats operated and, more important, made their landings at a pre-arranged station, indeed that each boat had connection with a particular curer. This made for speed in the curing process and it kept curers at the centre of all stages of the industrial process. By engaging boats to fish for them, they acquired something of a controlling hand on how the fleet would be deployed and at the same time ensured some sort of match between the likely landings and the processing capacity ready to meet these landings. Speed and the capacity to deal with all fish landed were built into a system which had inevitably to deal with much uncertainty, both from day to day and from season to season. Again the value of a principle – close involvement amounting almost to control by the curers – first tested in Caithness, was never lost as the industry spread to other parts of the east coast.

Indeed, the explosion of activity in Caithness was but the beginning for the opening of summer fishings on many sectors of the eastern coastline and, ultimately, to the north in the Shetland Isles. In such cases the new industrial growth knitted with old-established fisheries and engaged a body of men whose livelihood had long been fishing and who lived with their own kind in communities which lay, to the total number of over 100, along the whole east coast. The expansion began in 1815 when the old communities and small ports of the south shore of the Moray Firth and of east Aberdeenshire joined to energise a local fishing. Later, summer activities came to be based in Kincardine, Angus, Fife, Lothian and Berwickshire. All these areas had periods of decline and ultimately of virtual withdrawal to leave the summer activity centred on the North-East, Caithness and Berwickshire. Yet while particular areas might rise and fall in the scale of their summer activity, the whole body of east coast

fishermen, growing strongly in numbers, would engage in the Great Summer Fishing if necessary by taking their boats, it might be by a move of up to 100 miles, to the more active and promising centres. The expansion was furthered too by the engagement of wage-hands mainly from the north-western mainland and islands to help to crew the boats. The east coast fishermen retained full ownership of their boats in small partnerships of two, three or four members and when it came to the summer fishing the owners would make up the crew to six or seven by temporary engagement of wage hands. Thus it became possible to put to sea over 5000 boats of a summer night in search of the herring.

Expansion took other forms. Originally the east coast fishermen had confined their effort to catch herring to the strictly defined summer season. But as the equipment specific to herring was amassed at considerable expense it became expedient to use it through longer periods of the year. Further, herring caught, cured and despatched before the main season commanded high prices. Thus an early summer fishing was developed in the Hebrides which was attended, indeed dominated, by east coast crews and curers. By the 1860s crews were beginning to make the journey to Yorkshire centres and, later in the year and more decisively, to East Anglia. Thus it came that the greater part of the year was occupied in herring fishing.

The number of boats in the fleet was growing almost from year to year and without any protracted halt through the first three quarters of the nineteenth century even as the geographical range widened. Just as decisive in increasing output was the improvement in the catching capacity of the individual boat. The basis had to be greater size for only thus could be carried greater numbers of nets and the catch that might be hauled aboard thereby. Decade by decade, although there always had to be laggards stuck in earlier modes, the typical craft could be quoted as edging up in size. In summary, the 25-foot open boat of the earliest days has to be compared with a decked vessel of 60 feet by the 1870s. The method of propulsion, however, remained virtually unchanged until 1900 when the introduction of the steam drifter brought a sudden leap in capacity to add to the more gradual but relentless changes of ealier decades.

Even a relatively steady rise in catching capacity failed to produce a commensurate and unfailing annual rise in the catch and amount cured. Over the longer period the upward sweep of the figures from catch, cured herring and sales does not conceal the year-on-year irregularity; every sudden surge was followed before long by at least partial falling back. Even in a time of expansion the herring trade was full of uncertainty for the fishermen, for the curers and for the yard workers. Incomes varied enormously from one year to the next, hitting particularly those dependent on piece-work earnings. But the result in the end was to raise the annual total herring cured from less than 100,000 barrels in the first decade of the century to a typical level of 400,000 by the 1830s, of 600,000 by the 1860s and to a peak of 1,500,000 by the

1880s. The year 1884, however, brought a crisis of over-production and the next ten years saw stagnation or even falling back. But growth was resumed by the later nineties and the catching power added by a growing fleet of steam drifters carried the industry to its all-time high immediately prior to 1914 when even the output of the 1880s had increased by a further 60 per cent.

Growth in catching capacity, if it was to be useful, had to be matched by growth of the market. At home the pickled herring was always regarded as a cheap and basic food, acceptable only to a section of the population. Nor did the home market expand as the population grew. Export markets wherever they might be found were a paramount necessity for the prosperity of the industry and for the financing of its growth. The main traditional markets, we have seen, were the West Indies and Ireland which were at best static in the first few decades of the nineteenth century and were in steep decline by 1850. The solution was to be found on the Continent in the traditional market areas of the Dutch. The herring were landed in the North German ports and particularly in Stettin. Thence they were distributed not only over the northern plain but, having been transported by river, through the countries of central Europe. Poland, too, was important for the sale of the cheaper types of cured herring. These markets took up the slack of the increased production as the traditional markets failed to expand. Indeed, it was after 1850, when all had to depend on the Continent, that the extent of these markets was shown not only in the ability to take almost the whole of a greatly expanded Scottish production but also in the rise of the ruling prices even as the amount sold increased. It was here, too, that competition with Norway, also in a phase of expansion, became critical for both countries. In the countries reached through the German ports Scotland took the greater share of the market but this conceals some differences of the balance showing in the sale of different types of herring. The Scots dominated in the market for high-grade cured herring, of the type that were regarded as a delicacy bought by middle-class people with the means to afford the higher price. In the sale of the cheaper grades, purchased as a cheap food by the poorer classes, the market was shared more equally, with possibly the Norwegians accounting for the larger part. There was another market of potential, further east, in Russia. Here the Norwegians were at first dominant, partly due to a fiscal advantage granted by the Russian importers. But late in the century the Scots increased their sales in the east, with Koenigsburg as the port of entry and the railway as the means of distribution. By 1914 the Russian market was as important as the German.

It was success in selling high-quality and therefore high-priced herring in these markets of northern and central Europe that powered the drive to expand the Scottish herring fishery. Why did success come so abundantly in the nineteenth century when the eighteenth had been so full of fumbling and failure? A key requirement was to improve the quality of the cure. The Dutch hold on the continental markets now so important to Scotland had been the ability to sell at high prices to consumers in search of herring to be eaten as delicacies. In fact much had to

be done before Scotland could fully seize the opportunities created by the decline of the Dutch industry. But done it was, partly by governmental ordinance and control.

The improvement of the cure depended on the proper selection of fish and separation to be packed in barrels of designated uniform quality; also on control over the processes of gutting and packing. At the end of it all there had to be affixed some recognisable sign of quality and grade so that barrels of cured herring could change hands – as had to be done several times on the way to distant markets – without being opened for inspection, which could not be done without serious damage. These problems of achieving quality and guaranteeing contents were attacked by a sub-governmental body – the Fishery Board of Scotland. Officers of the Board were placed all along the coasts of Scotland, arranged in defined fishery districts. Their first task was to improve the standard of curing. Success was achieved by a system both of regulation and of inspection. An inspection enabled barrels of completed cure to be branded as up to standard. This brand was to prove the means by which Scottish herring could be carried along the channels of European trade without interruption for inspection and the reason why payment or even advances could be made on an article that was literally unseen. Indeed, the Fishery Board and its brand was a unique institution in Victorian Britain, a government interference with trade that was often condemned in Parliament but, because of its practical usefulness, never abolished.

Successful exporting demanded more than the careful preparation of a saleable product. There was necessarily a long sequence of exchanges, to be performed, we have seen, at speed, between the curing station somewhere on the Scottish eastern coastline and the ultimate retailer somewhere within a vast area of northern Europe. The marketing process might be said to begin with the pre-seasonal contract between crew and curer by which it was agreed that the fisherman hand over at least the first 200 or 250 crans of catch at a stated and unalterable price. Regulations required that at least two weeks elapse between initial packing and the closing of barrels as finished cure to which the brand could be affixed. Branding, in fact, placed the herring within certain standard grades as well as guaranteeing the correctness of the curing method. Once the cure was completed and the brand secured, the herring would, for the most part, be speedily sold, probably to one of the big German import firms, whose representatives attended the Scottish ports as the fishing and curing took place. Some herring might indeed have been sold to the Germans and payment made before the commencement of the season – in fact a cash advance to curers to help with their preparations. Speed as well as the implicit credit arrangements was essential. Herring cured in August or September had to be carried across the North Sea, possibly re-sold in a German port of landing and transported by slow-moving barge into the European heartland before the rivers were closed by frost. A barrel of herring that failed to reach the final retailer by late autumn was virtually wasted for it lost much of its value in the market by the spring of the following year.

While the Scots were locking themselves into a existing export organisation, taking a central but not dominating position, the methods and means of catching the fish had been adjusted to a changing natural environment – to the mysteries and changing habits of the shoals. The good fortune of finding fishing opportunities year after year within a few miles of the Scottish coast could not, and did not, last. The fishermen had to reach further to sea and, given the chosen method of operating by daily return to fixed bases, there had to be an ability to shift large sections of the organisation from one part of the coast to the other.

Essential for this mobility of fishing stations was willingness by crews to leave their home communities for the fishing season. Such adaptation had been forced even at the first rudimentary stages of the development of herring fishing. The fishing population lived in mostly small communities scattered over the entire length of the east coast. As this population was progressively drawn into the summer fishing great numbers had to move to more centralised points of operation. Even so the attachment to the traditional scattered communities was unshaken and the rise and fall of a diversity of fishing centres merely increased the complexity and the scale of the seasonal migrations by which a fishing fleet of increasing numbers adapted with great sensitivity to a changing pattern of opportunity. Preparation for the herring season brought an eager search by fishermen, wherever the home community might be, to find the stations at which the prospects were best. A measure of security, a firm marketing framework, was given by the engagement system. The advantages were two-fold. Curers could shift the balance of their operations from one centre to the other and still retain a guarantee that they would have sufficient fishing capacity at their disposal and, on the other hand, fishermen had a guarantee of a pre-arranged price for their catch.

Another factor in the sustained rise of the Scottish herring fishing industry was a technical adaptability which required a continuing high level of investment. The industry was faced in fact with a significant worsening in the return to a given fishing effort or to the continued use of boats and gear of given size and type. The answer had to be bigger boats, each with more nets, boats, too, which were decked instead of open. The consequent increase in expense could have been crushing. At the beginning of the century a boat could be built and equipped for herring fishing at a cost of little more than £100; by the last quarter of the century the comparable cost was in the region of £1000. Furthermore there were many times more of these fishing units at the end than at the beginning.

How were the funds for this growth raised? The ownership of boats and gear continued to lie with the working fishermen. Each boat was owned, quite without strings, by a small partnership, a section of the crew which would work it through the season. And virtually every member of a fishing community would have such a share in one or more boats. Ownership carried with it the obligation to find the means of keeping the vessel and its gear up to the best contemporary standards. For families

whose incomes were highly uncertain and, over the years, not greater than those of skilled workmen the struggle to keep going when so much was changing, and changing for the worse, was severe and daunting.

The working fisherman, always struggling with financial problems in which the need to keep his boat up to standard was inescapable had but poor access to funds from outside. The capital coming into the industry landed in the hands of the curers, and curers were not involved as owners in the acquisition of boats and the improvement of gear. Indeed, they were able to place some of their own duty of providing working capital for curing on the shoulders of the fishermen, who had to wait until after the close of the season for settlement on account of the fish that had been passed into the yards in the previous two or even three months. And this was in spite of the fact that payment to curers for cured herring would have come in while the season was in progress.

How then did the east coast fishermen both retain the freedoms of untrammelled ownership and, at the same time, invest so heavily in the improvement and expansion of the fleet? It was only by saving out of income that expansion could be financed. Success was due to two principal factors. Firstly, the determination of the fishermen achieved a very high rate of savings out of very modest and uncertain incomes. And secondly, prices of cured herring were on a generally rising curve through the sixties and seventies when the major steps in the accumulation of capital were taken. Such prices improved profit prospects for the curers and such was the competition in the curing trade that the scramble to secure the services of boats improved the offers made to fishermen. It is true that these favourable conditions disappeared in the eighties with the collapse of prices because of over-production. But prosperity returned in due course and fishermen were able to equip, without falling into debt, with the last and finest generation of sailing vessels, the Fifies and Zulus – a final flourish before the impact of the steam drifter.

The move to use steam drifters as the main instrument for herring fishing, starting about 1900, became in many ports a hectic rush to re-equip. At the same time, it seriously jeopardised the older system of ownership by fishermen. The awkward fact was that a steam drifter cost at least three times as much as the latest type of sailer, a price beyond the means of even the most prosperous and ambitious of the small fishing partnerships. But such was the efficiency of the steam drifter that it offered good profit prospects even on a big capital outlay. The result was an influx of captial both in the form of loans and of outright purchase of owning shares from other branches of the fishing industry and particularly from fish salesmen (who had emerged and prospered when daily auctions became common in the late eighties). The grip of the fishermen on the means of fishing was attenuated but not entirely broken. Some retained partial owning shares although they often had to borrow to do so. Others would content themselves with a share in the nets which remained a significant contributor to expense. Others again sank to the position of wage-

earners. There were now fissures in the fishing community that had not existed before.

For the greater part of the nineteeth century the great rivals to the Scots in herring fishing were the Norwegians, particularly within the markets of northern Europe. In outline, from as early as the eighteenth century, the course of the fishing in the two countries was remarkably similar. The Norwegian herring was based on the arrival in spring of the spawning herring off the west coast, that is, on a 500-mile stretch of the coast extending from north of Bergen to south of Stavanger. In the eighteenth century this recurring resource was exploited in fumbling fashion. Much of the fishing was for subsistence but an export trade, modest in scale, did develop. The only market open to the Norwegians was in the Baltic where trading in herring was dominated by the Dutch and, in the latter years of the century, the Swedes. The main difficulty in expanding markets was the low reputation of the cure. Failure in this respect can be traced to the custom of carrying herring over some distance to be cured in the main towns of Bergen and Stavanger. Delay in gutting and salting herring for pickling is fatal to the quality of the finished cure and the resulting condition of the Norwegian cured herring must have been somewhat on a par with that of the Scots herring that were sent to the West Indian plantations.

The herring trade in the eighteenth century had been tied down with governmental restrictions, such as the regulations covering the supply of salt and the monopolistic privileges of the main trading centres. Liberalisation began in 1784 but the herring fishermen were unable to take advantage because the spring herring were failing to arrive. There followed the restrictions on trade during the wars. Trade within the Baltic was opened again in 1808 when the spring herring had returned to their old habits. Another development favourable to the Norwegians was the calamitous and final failure of the Swedish fishing. This left gaps not only in the markets around the Baltic but also in Sweden itself. Export to Gothenburg became the mainstay of the Norwegian trade. Arrangements with Russian also helped to create opportunities for Norwegian export. Expansion into these markets and also into areas where the competition of the Scots was keen was necessarily based on the expansion in fishing activity. Just as in Scotland landings of herring soared through the decades. Indeed the match in scale between the fishing in the two countries was remarkably close. In 1870, however, there started another period when the shoals were failing to appear and fishing activity declined, only to be resumed at the old levels at the beginning of the twentieth cnetury. From then until the 1930s the two countries were again rivals of similar achievement.

Below the superficial similarities of the Scottish and Norwegian reactions to the fishing and the market opportunities of the nineteenth century there were key differences that account, for example, for the Norwegian decline in time of difficulty and for the failure to meet the Scottish challenge in the market for quality herring. The greater part of the Norwegian catch was secured by drift-netting, just as in

Scotland, but this section of the fishing was in the hands of farmer-fishermen and so remained. Such crews operated on a purely seasonal basis and did not have the means or indeed the incentive to equip up to the standard of the specialised Scottish fishermen who were able to use their herring fishing equipment over a much longer season. An investment in gear and in the improvement of boats was more likely to pay off under the Scottish conditions. The Scots, also, were able to surmount the deteriorating conditions that became apparent in the 1860s because of their heavy investment in large boats and in high catching capacity. It is true, however, that the decline in the herring stocks that approached the Norwegian coasts was much more severe than that which afflicted Scottish fishermen and that there can be no strict comparison between reactions.

The greatest relative failing of the Norwegians was in the quality of the cure, a matter of preparation rather than any inherent inferiority of the fish caught; Scottish-cured herrings retained their hold at the upper end of the discriminating German market until at least 1914. The difference between the two countries in marketing achievement can be traced to the manner in which the trade of curing was organised, or perhaps more simply to the attitude of the curers themselves. From the 1790s onwards the Scottish curers had involved themselves closely with the day-to-day operations of the fishermen, although without entering into ownership of boats. They were in attendance at the ports of landing, indeed, up till the 1880s, worked in arrangement with specific crews. Herring, consequently, were gutted and placed in salt immediately on landing; indeed, the regulations determining the award of the Crown Brand so demanded. (The brand system continued to be important in ensuring the quality of the cure into the twentieth century). Norwegian curers were less closely involved at the points where herring were landed; their relationship with the fishing crews was much more distant. Consequently, they continued to operate what was in essence the fallible eighteenth century system, with the herring carried to the main centres for chance sale. The curing process was commenced with herring already partly stale. Nor at later stages was care as demanded by the Scottish Fishery Board of their own curers applied; Norwegian curers behaved more as merchant intermediaries rather than as managers in industrial enterprise. They reached further towards the eventual markets than did Scottish curers for they would send the herring to be sold on commission in the markets of the importing countries. But even this was a source of weakness, for Norway lacked the help of the big German import firms that was so important to the Scots. Herring were bought in Scotland by representatives of importing countries, almost as the cure was being completed – sometimes, indeed, before cure had started – and within days could be on the way across the North Sea. Speed, knowledge of the market and financial help were built into the Scottish marketing system. In Norway it was otherwise, with delay and a blind approach to the market inherent.

Scotland and Norway, between them, dominated the North Sea herring fishery in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In both cases there was firm and

continuing expanion in scale at much the same rate. They also turned towards the same markets. But the differences between the experiences of the two countries were more notable than the similarities. While each had some success in the expanding markets of the north European plain, their respective strengths showed in different sectors of a market that was far from uniform. In a sense they portioned off the market according to the rather differing nature of their products. However, much of the variation in their achievements was due to the continuing distinctive characteristics of the societies within which the fishermen were organised. In the Scottish case we find a system largely of specialised fishing communities and full-time fishermen who had other fishings than that for herring to fill out the annual round. Most importantly, they had the basis and the incentive to face the expense of equipping in ways that would overcome the erratic variations in the viability of fishing from particular locations. The Norwegians, on the other hand, at least as far as herring fishing went, remained part-timers, dependent on a seasonal activity which did not make it worth-while to equip expensively. Furthermore, when this seasonal fishing from locations adjacent to their home communities failed, the crews would simply retreat to farming as a basic occupation. So it happened, apparently in the 1870s. Basically, in the nineteenth century, herring fishing in Norway remained an activity separate from other fishing activities and was the weaker for it.