

Beyond Bacalao: Newfoundland and the Caribbean in the Sixteenth Century

*By Jack Bouchard*

In the early sixteenth century, Europeans occupied the northwest Atlantic at Newfoundland and the Caribbean islands in a set of parallel colonial processes. Yet historians have been reluctant to write about Newfoundland and the Caribbean together, enforcing a north-south divide in the historiography. There is nonetheless reason to believe that a comparative-connective approach, considering both historical interconnections and important differences, offers a revealing new perspective on how Europeans approached and interacted with these two corners of the western Atlantic basin. Rereading both the surviving evidence and scholarly literature with an eye to European conceptions of island geographies, the role of Iberian empires, the importance of permanent settlements, and the nature of commercial connections in the early Atlantic shows two things. First, Europeans often actively connected their colonial efforts, conceptually and commercially, at both Newfoundland and the Caribbean in the early sixteenth century. Second, those connections changed and waned over time as the reality of differing ecologies and settlement patterns produced very different forms of occupation at Newfoundland and the Caribbean. Together, these points indicate that the historical relationship between Newfoundland and the Caribbean was more complex, contingent, and varied than historians have acknowledged.