

## **Research and field-studies in the Caribbean with reference to historical trade with Charles Robin Company.**

### **Summary of research:**

Since 2017 I have been working on Entrepôt - a maritime photographic research project exploring the history of Jersey's cod-fishing trade in Canada and its merchant networks in the West Indies, South America, Mediterranean and Baltic in the 18th and 19th centuries. The project is centred around cod-merchant Charles Robin who founded the most successful Jersey firm on the Gaspé coast in 1766 and explore how, through the prism of colonial and family history, Jersey's original wealth generated by the proceeds from the North Atlantic fisheries and maritime trade lay the foundation for the island's future prosperity.

Several trips to colonial outposts in the maritime network have been completed, including Portugal (2017, 2021-22, 2023), Spain (2017, 2022), Brazil (2018), Belize and Honduras (2019), Italy (2020), Baltic (2022) and England (2022) travelling over 60,000 kms across land, sea and air, researching multiple archives and developing a large repository of new visual and textual material.

As part of my ongoing research and work on Entrepôt I will again this summer (18 July – 24 Aug) follow in the footsteps of Jersey mariners and visit five islands in the Caribbean. Recent digitised files in the Robin Funds (some 230.000 pages) detailing Letter books and Ledgers of Charles Robin and Company (CRC) have been made available from the Musée de la Gaspésie. [1] The archive records provide details of Robin ships frequently visiting ports in the islands of Barbados, Dominica, Martinique, Grenada, St Lucia and occasionally also Jamaica, Cuba, Santo Domingo and Trinidad and Tobago dating from 1777 up until 1931.

The primary focus of my trip would be to produce new knowledge and find evidence in the national archives in the Caribbean islands of St Lucia, Martinique, Dominica, Barbados and Grenada of inbound trade of salted codfish from CRC and other Jersey merchants operating in Gaspé [2] and outbound trade of plantation produced goods, such as sugar, molasses, rum and cotton for markets in Europe, USA and the UK (including Jersey).

Any discoveries in the national Caribbean archives would act as creative starting points and inform new photographic images being made in response to research and field-studies of places, people and objects linked with the plantation economy and production. This aspect of the work will also investigate links with plantations owned by Jersey residents who received compensation from the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1834. [3]

1. Robin, Jones & Whitman Funds. Musée de la Gaspésie. Quebec, Canada.
2. Le Boutillier Brothers, Fruing, Collas.
3. The UCL Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery.  
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/> .

## **Trade between Jersey and the Caribbean**

Within the maritime history of the Channel Islands, general transatlantic trade geometries with Jersey and Caribbean markets are well documented in several literary sources and archival records. However, the published historiography is less critical of Jersey's mercantile role in colonial trade of the 18th and 19th centuries in staple commodities based on a plantation slave economy in the British West Indies.

Cross referencing data we can analyse voyage patterns and see how the triangular trade developed in the 19th century. For example, by 1830 information in the Jersey ship register can be combined with "Nouvelles de Mer" from Chronique de Jersey to produce a more nuanced analysis that identifies owners of vessels on specific routes. In that year 14 vessels from Jersey traded with the Caribbean with total tonnage of 1913, representing 9% of total shipping from 11 different ship owners. [4] Ten years later in 1840 the numbers had increased to 22 vessels from Jersey, 3893 tonnage but it only represented 5.8% of total shipping from 17 different owners. [5] Although there were more Jersey ships and ship owners involved in the Atlantic carrying trade, by mid-19th century the West India market had declined in line with South American markets becoming dominant due to Brazil declaring independence in 1822 allowing British vessels, including Jersey owned ships to trade in their ports. [6] Further details of the voyages of Channel Island vessels at this period can be found in the customs bills of entry for the ports of London, Liverpool, Bristol and Hull.[7]

Charles Robin and trade with the West Indies

The scope of this study will cover period of 1760-1890 with export/ import of staple products [8] between Charles Robin and Company (CRC) and the West Indies, beginning with the British taking control of North Atlantic after victory from 7-year war with France in 1763 and ending with the bankruptcy of Robin's fishing empire in 1886 as a result of fraud and embezzlement in Jersey Banking Company, who was the main creditor for CRC. This covers a time before the abolition of slave trading (1807) and slavery (1833) in the British Empire and a period after abolition and beyond the date of compensation for slaves in Britain (1834).

### **Charles Robin and trade with the West Indies**

The archive records from Robin, Jones & Whitman Fond reveal that on average one or two Robin ships laden with dried and salted cod would sail from Gaspé stopping in the Caribbean en route to the Mediterranean, or in some cases returning to New England (USA) with a cargo of West Indian plantation goods. Reading the correspondence of Charles Robin provides a more detailed picture of the nature of that trade.

For example, in a letter sent from Paspebiac on Aug 29, 1778 to his business associates Mr William Smith in Bonaventure, Robin writes, 'My West India fish are such as the Season has made them. They are sound & have absorbed now without flesh. The Major part of what I have here at 200 qtls [quintals] are large & fit to be shipped.' [9]

This letter was sent shortly before Charles decided to abandon his fishing station in the Bay of Chaleurs and return to Jersey because of disruption to trade caused by

the American War of Independence (1775-1783). On his return to the Gaspé, he writes another letter on 12 Nov 1787 to his agent in London John Fiott Esq., 'The "Aurora" not having returned from the West Indies, its plain she must have perished there... We are 2500 qtls short for this present time. I hope vessel & cargo were insured. Nov 17 I received a letter from Capt de Caen & another from Capt. Buie of Dominica advising of the "Aurora"... had not met with an advantageous market, but the returns have answered very well, the molasses were laid in very cheap... and is provided with other W. Indian produce. At any rate have no W. India fish left.'

Additional analysis and interpretation of commodity exchanges of cod, sugar, molasses, rum and cotton on transatlantic trade routes by Jersey owned ships with markets in Europe, USA and UK will provide further details of Robin's financial gains and direct involvement in the lucrative carrying trade based on a model of British capitalism and slave plantation economy during the first Industrial Revolution (1760-1840). [10]

### **Caribbean plantations owned by Jersey residents**

In the UCL database on Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery 33 individuals are listed with addresses in Jersey who received compensation when the Abolition of Slavery Bill was passed in Parliament in 1833. In a total of 81 claims, the majority of claims are from plantations in Jamaica (51 claims, equal 63%). However, there are five claims from Barbados, two from St Lucia and two from Grenada. For example: Rev. William Garnett of St Michael, Barbados was awarded compensation for 10 enslaved people in St Lucia on 8th Feb 1836 for total sum of £159 4s 4d and another in Barbados on 21st Mar 1836 for 7 slaves for the value of £217 10s 0d. [11] His daughter Elizabeth Mary Garnett married Michael Jackson who also was awarded compensation twice for two claims, one from Barbados and another from Soufriere Estate in St Lucia as part of his marriage settlement to Garnett's daughter.

4. Jersey Ship Registers.

5. Ommer, R.E. (1991). *From Outpost to Outport: A Structural Analysis of the Jersey-Gaspé Cod Fishery, 1767-1886*. Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 157.

6. Ibid Ommer, 80-81.

7. Jamieson, A.G. (1986). *People of the Sea: The Maritime History of the Channel Islands*. London: Methuen & Co, 384.

8. See staple product theorists Douglass C. North and Mel Watkins

9. Robin, Jones & Whitman Funds. Ref: P8/1/1/2/1,1.56 and Ibid. Ref: P8/1/1/2/1,3.33

10. See Williams, E. (1944). *Capitalism and Slavery*. Dublin. Penguin Random House.

11. Claims; St Lucia no. 771 and Barbados no. 1027. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>

**Martin Toft, June 2024**