

VIII.—THE HALIBUT-FISHERY OF THE UNITED STATES.

BY LIEUT. P. DE BROCA

One of the most frequently observed fish in the markets of the seaboard towns of the United States is the halibut, (abundant in the northern seas,) which the fishermen of Newfoundland consider of little value, in consequence of a prejudice cherished by them as absurd as that of the English in regard to the skate. The flesh of the halibut possesses every quality which can make it desirable to the consumer, being white, firm, and delicate. It may, perhaps, lack flavor; but it makes up for this deficiency by entering readily into the most varied culinary combinations, and, when smoked, it rivals, in my opinion, the best preparations possible. Under whatever form it appears, it is so highly appreciated in the United States, that it has become the object of an important industry. This fishery is generally combined with that of the cod, when it is carried on along the shores of the open sea.

The halibut is found in abundance along the coast of New England and of the British Possessions, as well as on the banks of Saint George, of Sable Island, and of Newfoundland.† The giant representative of the family of *Pleuronectids*, it attains such dimensions that among the edible fishes of the sea it may be considered as analogous to the ox among the animals of the slaughter-house. It is often caught weighing a hundred pounds, and in many instances it has been taken weighing even more than this. A few years ago one appeared in the market of Boston which weighed 400 pounds; and in 1807 one was caught at New Ledge, sixty miles to the southeast of Portland, that weighed over 600 pounds. It is truly astonishing that fish which contain so great an amount of alimentary substance have not long since attracted the attention of the French fishermen of Newfoundland or those of Iceland, and suggested to them the thought of their great commercial value.

During the warm season halibut are caught in shallow water, only a few miles from the shore; but as the weather grows colder, they migrate toward the banks of the open sea, where they must be followed to be

*Étude sur L'industrie huître des États-Unis, [pp. 139-224:—] Deuxième partie. Aperçus divers sur la pêche côtière, [pp. 141-148:—] Chapitre premier Pêche du Flétan.

†The halibut inhabits also all the seas of the north of Europe, and is the object of an important fishery, especially among the Icelanders and Norwegians. The English and the Dutch consume large quantities.

captured. A part of those taken on the coast, as well as upon the banks of Saint George and of Sable Island, are carried fresh to the markets. The methods of preservation used are those generally employed in such cases. Those of smaller size are thrown into tanks, while the very large ones are placed in the ice-houses of the fishing establishments. The most important fishing is done by schooners of from 70 to 120 tons burden, owned by the States of Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. They take on board during the summer from 20 to 25 tons of ice on each expedition.

In consequence of the great popularity of the halibut with consumers, this fishery has become so profitable that, in certain localities where mackerel have become scarce, the latter fishery has been almost entirely abandoned for the former, since it is much more certain. The harbor of New London is a case in point.

Besides the large vessels I have just mentioned, many smaller ones are also employed, but these never go beyond fifty miles from port.

The fishermen off the Grand Bank of Newfoundland, who combine halibut fishing with that of the cod, cut the fish into longitudinal strips, in order to salt it more easily; and, on their return, deliver it to certain establishments, where it is smoked after the manner of salmon.

During the year 1858, 444,920 pounds of fresh halibut were sold in the market of Gloucester, Mass. The total amount brought in by the fishing-boats of the harbor of New London is now estimated to be about 3,306,900 pounds. In 1861, the halibut taken by the fishermen of Gloucester was valued at \$120,000. From these examples, which might be multiplied indefinitely, since the entire coast of New England is engaged in this fishery, we may readily estimate the amount of sustenance annually furnished for public use by this single fish.

It is evident that our Newfoundland fishermen can never bring fresh halibut to France, but nothing prevents them from salting it, as the Americans do. Notwithstanding their prejudice against it, I have no doubt that the flesh of this fish would be received with favor by our population, especially as it could be sold to them as low as 7 or 8 cents per pound, the ordinary price of it in Boston.

Americans are surprised at our want of forethought in this matter, and one of them said to me, on more than one occasion, that if the French government would allow him to fish in the grounds of Newfoundland, reserved for our nation, he would engage to take only halibut, and to dispose at Saint Peter's of all the cod fish he might capture. The French consul at Boston has several times received overtures of the same kind.

The unreasonable prejudice of our fishermen should be overcome by the single fact that this want of interest in the fishery is the cause of a serious loss in the supply of articles of food. Besides, it is not to be supposed that a fish which is used by the wealthier classes of a country as rich as the United States is in every kind of product, is essentially

unpalatable, and that our countrymen could not become accustomed to the taste of it. For my part, I would find it difficult to determine which I preferred, salmon or smoked halibut.

Before my visit to the United States, I was acquainted with the halibut only through the descriptions of naturalists. I did not know that it constituted a fishery of such importance. But since I have had the opportunity of observing the large amount of food it furnishes to all classes of the American people, I consider it great folly on the part of our fishermen to neglect such a source of profit and of food.

The best way of elevating the French fisherman from his condition of pecuniary distress is to have him understand that he ought to make his arrows out of every kind of wood, and not to disdain, without good reason, riches which lie at his very door.

When a nation has, as ours, a large population to nourish, it amounts almost to a crime to deprive it of an element of food both economical and agreeable. In many cases, too, fishing for halibut would become a useful auxiliary to that of the cod, and would increase its value.

Without dwelling further upon this subject, I think that an attempt, at least, should be made to put the question to a practical test, on the fishing-grounds of Newfoundland or Iceland. The bait used in catching the halibut, whose gluttony is proverbial, is composed of salted fish of the herring order, of very little value in America on account of their abundance and inferior quality. They are the same as those used for catching mackerel, and for manuring fields of Indian corn. A barrel of bait, all prepared, sells at the rate of \$1 or \$1.50. It would be a very easy matter to obtain it, and the French consul at Boston could send it to Saint Peter's, if to do so were deemed advisable.*

Many persons may object, that if this subject were really as important as I suppose it to be, it would not have remained so long unnoticed. But the truth is too evident to be affected by such reasoning. I do not claim the merit of having discovered what might have been proved a thousand times better by our consuls, or by any other competent person; but I have seen, I have handled, I have tasted, the flesh of the halibut, and found it superior to that of very many fish which appear in our markets; and, not being able to doubt the evidence of my senses, I consider it a duty to publish the fact.

*It is unnecessary, however, to agitate the question of bait, since that used by the Icelandic and Norwegian fishermen could be employed.

IX.—THE FISHING-VILLAGES, SNEKKERSTEEN AND SKOTTERUP,
AND THE COLLECTION OF FISHING-IMPLEMENTS EXHIB-
ITED BY THEM AT ELSINORE, DENMARK, DURING THE
SUMMER OF 1872 *

The fishing-villages, Snekkersteen and Skotterup, are situated not far from the town of Elsinore, on the Danish island of Zealand, where the sound is narrowest. The inhabitants are, with few exceptions all fishermen and entirely dependent on the sea for their living. The circumstances under which they are obliged to gain their livelihood are somewhat peculiar, for, while the location of their villages offers in some respects, great advantages for fishing, on the other hand it presents difficulties which the greatest energy of the fishermen can scarcely overcome. The most important field for their operations is the narrowest part of the sound where it widens on both sides like a funnel; and they have consequently both the advantages and disadvantages of being in the very spout of the funnel, where everything that is poured into it must pass through. All the schools of fishes pass close by them, but the powerful current, which, flowing sometimes this way, and sometimes that, according to the wind, while it brings the fish to them, frequently drives them just as rapidly away. Hence, here more than in many other places the fishermen must understand how to seize the right moment for their work. The large number of ships sailing by or riding at anchor † proves useful to the fishermen, as they are by this means often enabled to sell their fish at a very high price. Yet their nets are often destroyed by the ships or entirely carried away by anchors or oars. The peculiarity of the location makes stationary fish migratory, and *vice versa*. The haddock and flounder are thus obliged to migrate, and though their migrations do not extend far, they occur all the more frequently; while the hornfish and other migratory fish are often compelled to remain in those waters much longer than is good for them. Thus many different things are to be considered by the fisherman in order that he may not come too soon or too late with his nets. The more accurately he can calculate the probabilities, and the more completely he is provided with suitable nets for catching the numerous kinds of fish that pass the coast, the more remunerative will be his labor.

It has not been possible to exhibit all the implements "*in natura*," hence the boats and great casting-nets are only shown in models.

1. *Model of a transport-boat*.—The boat of which it is a model was

*From Nordisk Tidsskrift for Fiskeri.

† On an average, 21,000 per annum.—[Translator's note.]