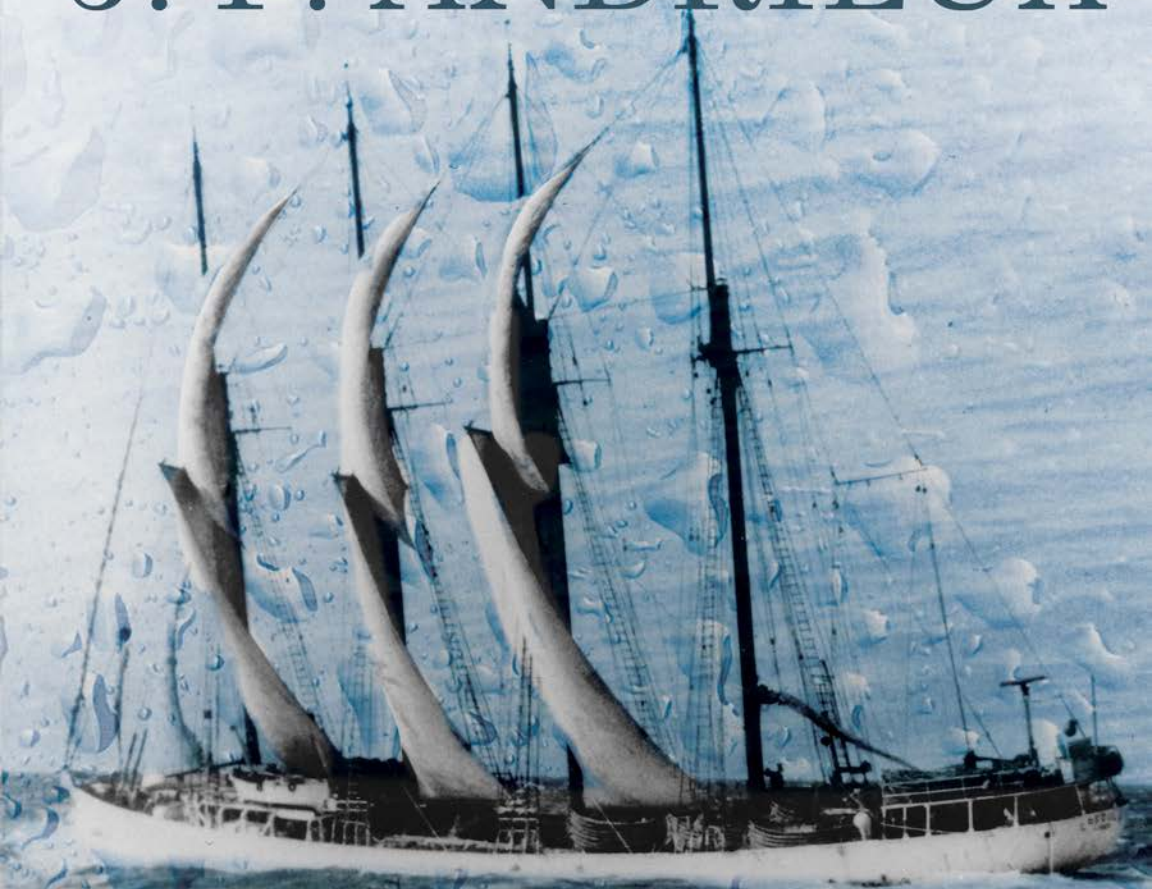


J. P. ANDRIEUX



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A History of the Portuguese Handliners

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The White Fleet

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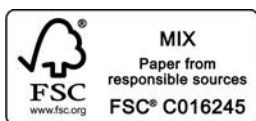
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The White Fleet

A History of the Portuguese Handliners

J. P. Andrieux

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ST. JOHN'S



NEWFOUNDLAND

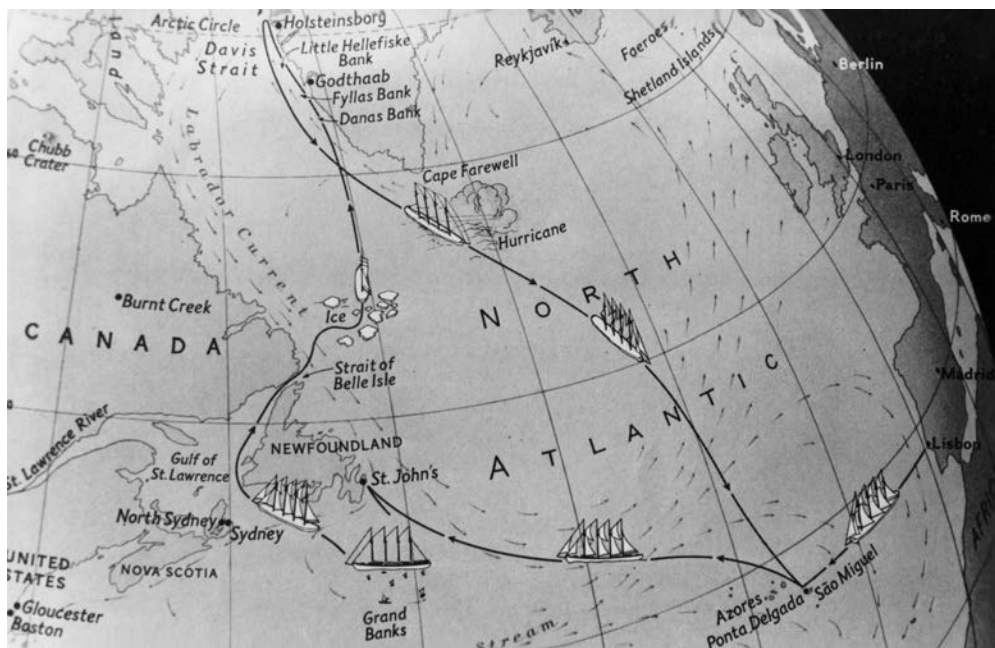
THE GRAND BANKS



Dedication

To the memory of
The White Fleet
and its fishermen

PORTUGAL



▲ Map with Portuguese fishing areas on the Grand Banks and in Greenland. (Courtesy of Museu Municipal de Etnografia e História da Póvoa de Varzim, Portugal)

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Preface

The Portuguese White Fleet, which was made up of sailing and motorized vessels using single-man dories for cod fishing purposes, should not be confused with the “Great White Fleet.” The latter was a nickname for a United States Navy battle fleet, all painted white, that made a circumnavigation of the globe from December of 1907 to the end of February 1909. The sixteen battleships were meant to demonstrate to the world the growing American military power.

The Portuguese handliners were given the nickname of “White Fleet” during World War II, when Portugal remained neutral. Portuguese vessels continued fishing during the hostilities and were ordered by their government to paint their hulls white. On the hulls were the names of the vessels, the Portuguese flag, and the country of Portugal in large letters. At night they were to sail with full navigational lights on.

Post-World War II, the fleet would sometimes come to North Sydney, Nova Scotia, but most often to St. John’s to pick up the precious bait of squid or mackerel for their hook-and-line operations. In St. John’s they would also pick up provisions and fresh water, have repairs done on their equipment, receive medical care, and rest. Some of the vessels would leave the Grand Banks for a few weeks in summer and head for Greenland, then come back to Newfoundland to complete their fishing campaign prior to returning to Portugal.

It has been nearly forty years since the White Fleet disappeared. Despite this, they will always be remembered in St. John’s, where they graced the harbourfront when they came in massive numbers to shelter from the fall hurricanes.

St. John's citizens remember well the Portuguese fishermen washing their clothes in local brooks, and playing soccer on the waterfront or on soccer fields with local boys. The merchants loved the Portuguese White Fleet fishermen, who would buy many items to bring home to their beloved family members.

Possibly the single most important event throughout this whole era was the arrival in May 1955 of the statue of the Lady of Fatima, on the maiden voyage of the hospital/assistance vessel *Gil Eannes*. All vessels of the fleet, with its complement of 4,000 fishermen, were in St. John's for the event. These, along with Portuguese officials, paraded from the waterfront to the Basilica of St. John the Baptist, with the statue, a gift from the Portuguese fishermen to the residents of St. John's for the warm welcome they had always received when coming to this region. Marching with the Portuguese dignitaries and fishermen was Dr. Patrick Horan, who was in charge of the medical needs of the Portuguese fishermen in St. John's.

Technological advances had already changed the fishing methods of others, including the French fleet, which had returned to the Grand Banks post-World War II with its large side draggers. The Portuguese had continued the traditional way of catching fish while at the same time adding more trawlers to their fleet. The old and the new methods coexisted, but there came a time when there was so much pressure on the fish stocks from non-traditional fishing nations that the White Fleet vessels became unprofitable. This, coupled with difficulties in obtaining crews for the antiquated vessels, brought about the eventual demise of the White Fleet.

By 1974, it was all over. Today, four vessels of the White Fleet have survived, as well as the hospital/assistance vessel *Gil Eannes*, which has been converted into a museum ship, and is moored in the northern Portuguese town of Viana do Castelo.

The last chapter of this book is directed to those who are salt fish lovers and may want to go to Portugal to try out the wonderful local dishes there for themselves.

Having many years ago accidentally met Captain Chico Paiao, master of the *Vimieiro*, the meeting led to a life of friendship with the Portuguese people. From the first multi-course, all-night dinner my wife and I had on the fishing vessel, we discovered a warm people and a sensational cuisine that was at the time foreign to us. After that chance meeting, we got to know most of the captains and officers of the Portuguese fleet and a great friendship developed. My wife, Elizabeth, and I have made countless trips back and forth to both Spain and Portugal. In the last chapter we share with you some of the fantastic experiences we have had in this most welcoming country. Included are a few places to stay, as well as restaurants that we wouldn't want to miss on our annual trips there without going from table to table.

It is impossible to describe them all; it would take a book especially dedicated to this. All that can be said is to follow the birthplace of the White Fleet and be adventuresome in trying some of these tiny, out-of-the-way restaurants, where you will find the best salt fish dishes in the world.

The rest of the book contains numerous photos: a pictorial history of the White Fleet and its crew members.

A toast: "May long live the memory of this fabulous fleet."

Jean Pierre Andrieux

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Acknowledgements

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Early Days of the Portuguese on the Grand Banks

Portuguese fishermen have been fishing on the Grand Banks since the early days of discovery. The first recorded voyages date back to the 1500s, when the intrepid navigator Gaspar de Corte Real, with a charter from the king of Portugal, arrived hard upon the heels of John Cabot. It is, however, speculated that Portuguese from the Azores had already ventured to the Newfoundland area previous to this time.

Pietro Pasquaglio, Venetian ambassador in Portugal, writing to his brother on October 19, 1501, spoke of the voyage of Corte Real and the country that he discovered. He called the land “Terra Dos Labradores.” On some ancient maps, Labrador is called by the name of its discoverer, “Terra Di Corte Real” (Vatican Fresco map of 1556). On this particular map, the southern part of what is now Labrador is called “Terra Di Corte Real,” while the northern part is called “Bacalhaus.” On the map of Sylvanus, 1511, it is called *Domus Regalis*, which is the latin form of Corte Real. For many years after his death, his relatives held the hereditary title of Governor of Terra Nova.

Others followed, such as João Alvares Fagundes, explored the Newfoundland coast, and discovered and named specific sites. It appears they were not interested in making land claims for the purpose of settlement in the Newfoundland area.

Immediately after Corte Real’s first voyage, fishing companies

were founded in Aveiro, Viana do Castelo, and Terceira, for the purpose of sending vessels on cod fishing expeditions to Terra Nova. It would appear that these vessels were sailing as early as 1504. King Manuel established a tax in the ports of the Douro and Minho regions on the cod brought back from the Grand Banks, some 2,000 miles away. They fished with hook and line, filled their holds with cod, and raced back home before the fierce northern winter caught them.

Fog, gales, and freezing weather took their toll each year, and in spite of these dangers, they continued their expeditions and fishing campaigns to the New World. Cod had come to mean the difference between food and hunger in much of southern Europe.

The number of Portuguese vessels engaged in the Newfoundland fishery grew rapidly. By 1550, Aveiro alone had 150 vessels sailing to Newfoundland, with similar numbers from Oporto and other seaports.

These vessels would shelter in harbours around the Bonavista Peninsula. They were chased out of these ports by the British in a violent encounter in 1620. They fished continually, except for a period in which Spain had invaded Portugal, from 1580 to 1640, when Portugal was freed from the Spanish crown.

The Portuguese fished on the Grand Banks in an area known as the Virgin Rocks, and the Eastern Shoals, where the water was shallower. This was a good place to launch their one-man dories.

In the twentieth century, the Portuguese shared the fishing grounds with Newfoundlanders, Canadians, Americans, and the French fishing fleet. As early as 1907, the French had introduced large steam trawlers which were capable of harvesting cod twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year, in just about all types of weather. These trawlers were said to have the capability of catching seven times more fish than the traditional handliners.

All fishermen were worried over the presence of these large trawlers. In the earlier part of the 1900s, Newfoundland fishermen were predicting the demise of the fishery if these trawlers continued to fish there, and were lobbying the government to have them

banned. There was little that could be done since they were fishing in international waters.

On June 28, 1908, the French steam trawler *Wagram*, out of Boulogne-sur-Mer, picked up a Portuguese sailor named Manuel Marques. He was floating on top of an overturned dory. The nineteen-year-old fisherman was from the Portuguese handliner *Florida*, out of Lisbon, which was fishing on the Grand Banks.

He and another fisherman had left the schooner the previous day for a day's fishing and, due to fog, became lost from their vessel. After failing to find the *Florida*, they started drinking their secret brandy, of which they had a considerable amount aboard the dory. The other fisherman consumed an abundant supply and got drunk and became wild. He managed to upset the dory, and drowned. Marques managed to climb onto the bottom of the dory.

Fortunately, he was sighted by the French steam trawler that had sailed from Boulogne twelve days earlier. At the time it was heading for North Sydney to load up with coal prior to starting to fish on the Grand Banks.

In early July of the same year, another Portuguese handliner, the *Duke of Sardinia*, was fishing at the Virgin Rocks. In her hold were 600 quintals of salt fish that had been harvested since arrival from her hometown of Oporto. She had sailed from there in early May for the Grand Banks after a three-week sail. Her captain was Manuel Latradole, with a total complement of twenty-nine men. Fish was plentiful.

One of her crew, João Brandão, aged twenty-five, left the vessel in his dory for fishing at 4:00 a.m., having enough food to last for the day. In the afternoon, dense fog came on so quickly that he didn't know his position. Nevertheless, he hauled in his fishing gear and attempted to find his vessel. He rowed for two hours but, without a compass, he was unsuccessful. He wasn't overly worried, as he knew that, unless a storm sprang up, the weather would eventually clear and there were many other Portuguese schooners fishing in his proximity, where he would be able to seek refuge until he located his vessel. By eight o'clock that night, a passing schooner sighted him, picked him up, and took him to Belleoram, where the schooner was going to pick up some bait.

A while later, that same schooner sighted another lost doryman, by the name of Antonio, from the handliner *Labrador*. The twenty-eight-year-old fisherman had also departed Lisbon in early May, along with twenty-nine other fishermen. The *Labrador* was under command of Captain João Serrano. Like the other doryman, Antonio had been overtaken by the fog, but he became lost for two days and two nights, and as time went on, he was beginning to become anxious. He was greatly relieved when rescued.

From Belleoram, the two Portuguese dorymen were sent by coastal vessel to St. John's, where they resided at the Seamen's Institute until they could be repatriated to their respective vessels. These types of incidents were common, and many Portuguese dorymen were lost. Many were rescued, but the others not so fortunate.

When the *Titanic* sank off the coast of Newfoundland on April 15, 1912, a lot of debris floated on the Grand Banks for weeks afterwards from the ill-fated liner. Captain João Frade of the Portuguese handliner *Leopoldina* sighted some of this debris, some of it rather large. The crew brought aboard a sideboard, which had a case of the *Titanic* silverware stamped with the White Star Line logo. The silverware was unpacked from a wooden crate with straw packing.

Captain Frade kept a service for himself and offered the rest to the owner of the vessel. Today some of these silverware items are still in the possession of family members in Ílhavo, Portugal.

With the First World War in progress, the fishing activities on the Grand Banks slowed down considerably. Despite having had an old alliance with Britain dating back to the Treaty of Windsor in 1386, Portugal did not effectively get involved and kept its neutrality, except during the Spanish occupation, 1580-1640.

Soon there were tensions between Portugal and Germany as German U-boats were blockading the United Kingdom, which at the time was the most important market for Portuguese products. The initial neutral stance by both countries didn't hold. Unofficially, there were many hostile engagements between the countries, which ultimately resulted in a declaration of war between them.

With the armistice in November 1918, vessels returned en masse

to fish on the Grand Banks. In the early 1920s, they were joined by a new fleet of steam trawlers from Spain, owned by the “PYSBE” Group of San Sebastian, in the Basque country.

The harsh conditions of the Treaty of Versailles, which were imposed on the Germans after the end of World War I, brought about considerable discontent in Germany, as well as economic hardship. In 1933, Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist German Workers Party came to power, and cloudy days were ahead.

The League of Nations had been created at the end of the hostilities in hopes of preventing future wars. Germany was not part of the organization. Upon his ascension to power, Hitler immediately started to find ways to rearm the country. He wanted to regain the lost territories in Europe that Germany had been forced to concede at the Treaty of Versailles.

The whole continent became very troubled in the latter part of the 1930s, when Hitler annexed the Sudetenland and eventually the rest of Czechoslovakia. With Stalin he signed the so-called Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement, a non-aggression pact between the two countries Germany and the Soviet Union. A week later, on September 1, 1939, Hitler’s troops marched into Poland. Other countries such as France, Britain, and the British Empire and Commonwealth, which included most of the great powers, lined up against Germany, but noticeably absent were the United States and the Iberian nations of Spain and Portugal.

The conflict would be the deadliest in all of human history.

Neutral Portugal took no official side during the war and continued trading with the Axis powers as well as the Allies during the period of conflict. Antonio Salazar, the prime minister of Portugal, had addressed the Portuguese national assembly after the German invasion of Poland and declared his nation’s neutrality.

The Portuguese, with hundreds of succulent preparations, had an insatiable appetite for salt cod throughout the whole country. In spite of their massive fishing fleets that alternated between the Grand Banks and Greenland, there was so much demand that Portugal supplemented its own fishing efforts with additional large purchases

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