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THE DECISIVE ROLE OF NEW ENGLAND IN THE CHARACTER OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF ISLE ROYALE In the early eighteenth century France was determined to develop and maintain Cape Breton Island and its capital fortress and port of Louisbourg as a base for its dry fishery, as a naval depot protecting its life line to New France, and, hopefully, as a key link in an all-French triangular trade. The plans included the settlement of a substantial agricultural population that would contribute heavily to the needs of the fortress, visiting ships, and the fishery in terms of food and lumber and boats and vessels, and perhaps have an added surplus to send to the French Antilles. However, such a population never materialized, and such an agricultural and forestry economy never developed beyond the most tentative beginnings. Yet somehow the people of Cape Breton and Louisbourg survived, and it required a very large British effort to dislodge them in 1758 and again in 1759. That survival, ironically enough, was assured largely by the very people who officially inveighed most loudly and firmly against the French power that Cape Breton was designed to bolster, and who supplied the motley array of farmers, fishermen, deckhands, and longshoremen that achieved the first capture of Louisbourg in 1758. It was these same New Englanders who, throughout the period, supplied food, building materials and fishing vessels and gear in quantities that were often marginally critical for the continued functioning of the island's economy. But in making possible the continued existence of the fortress and the island's population, they also helped to keep the latter narrowly peripheral and largely indifferent to the economic possibilities of the land. The total inadequacy of local production was at the heart of Cape Breton's problem. Also, when French shipmasters had excess capacity on their way out to pick up dried codfish, they usually preferred to use it for goods more profitable than food. Some help did come from New France (for example, on some of the nineteen vessels that arrived at island ports from Quebec in 1732), but Canadian farmers had all too little surplus to contribute and in many years the supply from that source was a mere trickle. Moreover, cargoes from Quebec often could not compete in price with those from New England. Isle St.-Jean, designed to be a supply base for Cape Breton, faced its own severe economic and settlement problems and largely failed to play its assigned role. Supplies from Acadia were more important than from any of these but there were many problems on that supply route. In the first place such trade was illegal in British law, because the Acadians lived in Nova Scotia under British rule. If British interdictions were honoured more in the breach than in the observance, it still was more difficult to drive livestock or move agricultural products across the isthmus of Chignecto to Bale Verte, from Cobequid Bay (the head of Minas Basin) overland to Tatmagouche, or by the St. Mary's and Salmon rivers to Chedabucto Bay, than by open sea through the Bay of Fundy and the Atlantic where they might be intercepted. Moreover, Acadian surpluses were readily and regularly picked up by New England vessels (which also often had to



avoid surveillance from Annapolis Royal) in exchange for cloth, hardware and tools, rum, sugar, fishing vessels and gear, and many other things the Acadians needed. The latter may well have had the most nearly subsistent economy of any Europeans in Anglo-French North America at the time but they were by no means self-sufficient. However, the Acadians were pleased to have competitive markets to which to sell, and their assistance to Cape Breton, if less patriotic than profitably commercial in inspiration, was conducted with vigour and could reach substantial proportions. In 1740, for example, 250 head of livestock and a wide variety of other kinds of food (flour, bread, oats, peas, wheat, meat), wood, feathers, skins and hides to a total value of nearly 26,000 livres were imported from mainland Acadia to the island. Yet even the Acadian contribution left a notable deficit which had to be made up by New England traders from their own local supplies or from British mainland colonies further south. Sometimes the French governors complained of the New England trade and tried to stop it; more often they closed their eyes to it, participated in it indirectly by means of bribes or other forms of graft, or even, sometimes, openly defended it. As early as 1725 an observer saw ten New England sloops in Louisbourg harbour at one time, for sale intact vessels and cargoes. Apart from schooners, Isle Royale Beverages Limited Your Miiheriztd COCA-COLA bolfi?r 564'130 562-4439 14SW?Its?St. SydiMy,N. S. Cape Breton's Magazine/34 At. Our New Location Better Health Centre 364 Charlotte Street, Sydney Offers a Large Range of Health, Vegetarian, Special Diet & Diabetic Foods and Vitamins C.O.D .Orders Accepted/Bulk Rates OEBN MON'FRI HdONB: 5'2'X237 Health is Happiness