

OPINION

NET PROFITS

EMMA CARDWELL on fisheries, dispossession and calls to ‘reclaim our seas’.

Modern trawlers of the UK pelagic fleet are objects of fascination for both fishermen and fisheries researchers. Like sea eagles, pelagic (herring and mackerel) trawlers are an elusive breed: large, powerful, and infrequently spotted. A few are sometimes seen docked in Fraserburgh, Shetland, or in Plymouth. Despite being ostensibly British though, some never visit UK shores at all, instead landing their massive catches in their owners’ native Spain or the Netherlands.

This fleet, numbering approximately 30 vessels in the UK, catches almost double the weight of fish caught by the approximately 700 equivalent boats registered in the UK in 1970. In 2016, The North Atlantic Fishing Company, which owns just two vessels, had a turnover of £24 million pounds. The Klondyke Fishing Company turned over £22 million, and Altaire – a single boat – £18 million.

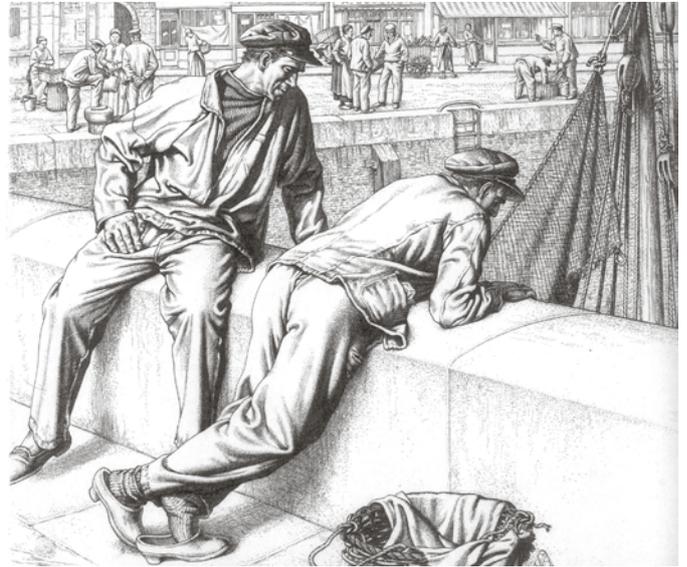
“They’re like cruise ships,” a fisheries scientist told me before I joined the crew of a northern Scottish vessel on a trip into the North Sea for herring. “You have to take your shoes off to go inside.” The high-tech boat was new, recently purchased from Norway (where all the best fishing vessels are built). It was bigger and more luxurious than the Caledonian McBrayne ferries running to Shetland and the Hebrides. I sat in my socks with the skipper in the gleaming glass expanse of the wheelhouse. Busy computer screens beeped around us. Outside, oil rigs flared hot and orange into the night.

Common Fisheries?

I asked the skipper if he knew *The Silver Darlings*, Neil Gunn’s story about the growth of the Scottish herring industry in the wake of the Highland Clearances, when Highland people pushed from the land attempted to re-make their lives – and a living – at sea. He’d read it multiple times. “That book,” he said, “tells you everything you need to know about fishing.”

It may seem anomalous for a man using a bank of computer screens to control an 8,000 BHP fishing vessel – one that at dawn would suck up hundreds of thousands of herring with a giant suction pipe, the fish untouched by human hand – to claim that a book about wooden, sail-powered boats in the early 19th century tells you everything you need to know about fishing. But *The Silver Darlings* tells us something that fisheries statistics can’t. It tells us about fishermen’s perceptions of themselves, and their communities. It tells us about the resource politics that have shaped British fishing since the times of barons and serfs. It tells us why so many fishermen are so anti-European Union.

As with agriculturalists and the land, fishermen – particularly those in small-scale boats – have a deep connection to the



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environment in which they work. The box-ticking of the EU’s Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) promotes the opposite. The CFP is a highly centralised and bureaucratic management system, built to favour a neoliberal vision of the free market. It flattens the living spaces of the sea into empty administrative areas, scattered with isolated economic-return units that we might otherwise call fish. Its conservation policies, according to many fishermen, could only be designed by someone in an office, miles away from the sea.

Fishermen I spoke to before the Brexit vote expressed deep frustration at the fact that, on observing a school of juvenile fish in an area, fishing couldn’t be halted without the UK Marine Management Organisation presenting a formal case to the EU. This process is time-consuming – requiring centralised political debate, then a regulation passed back as a derogation to the UK – by which time, the young fish are already likely to have been caught.

A survey conducted by Dr Craig McAngus at the University of Aberdeen in 2016 found that over 90 percent of the UK fishing industry was in favour of leaving the EU. This is perhaps unsurprising when you consider that since joining the Common Fisheries Policy, the number of fishermen has halved, yet the conservation status of stocks remain poor.

Looking North

Since the 1970s, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea has allowed coastal states to claim exclusive fishery management rights over an area extending 200 nautical miles from their coastline. But as part of the CFP, the UK has never experienced that exclusivity. Instead, the UK opted into the

European 'common pond'. The relatively poor waters around Spain mean that despite its size, the pond offers little to UK fishers, who instead look towards the profitable and productive fisheries of non-EU states to the north.

For fishermen, a UK outside of the EU has the potential to be like Norway – a community-oriented and profitable fishing industry with good environmental status. Norway has the same hyper-modern herring and mackerel vessels as the UK, but also allows a decent living for the small-scale fleet. For fishermen, Norwegian fisheries benefit the people of Norway. UK fisheries, in contrast, benefit large foreign companies, with smaller boats pushed out.

To a degree, this conclusion is right. The EU allocates around 30 percent of the common pond's allowable catch to UK vessels. Should access be geographical post-Brexit, as it is in Iceland, Faroe and Norway, this allowable catch would be much larger. Fishermen therefore see Brexit as a chance to reclaim an area of sea they consider rightfully theirs, allowing struggling small-scale boats to catch more, while still keeping within environmental limits.

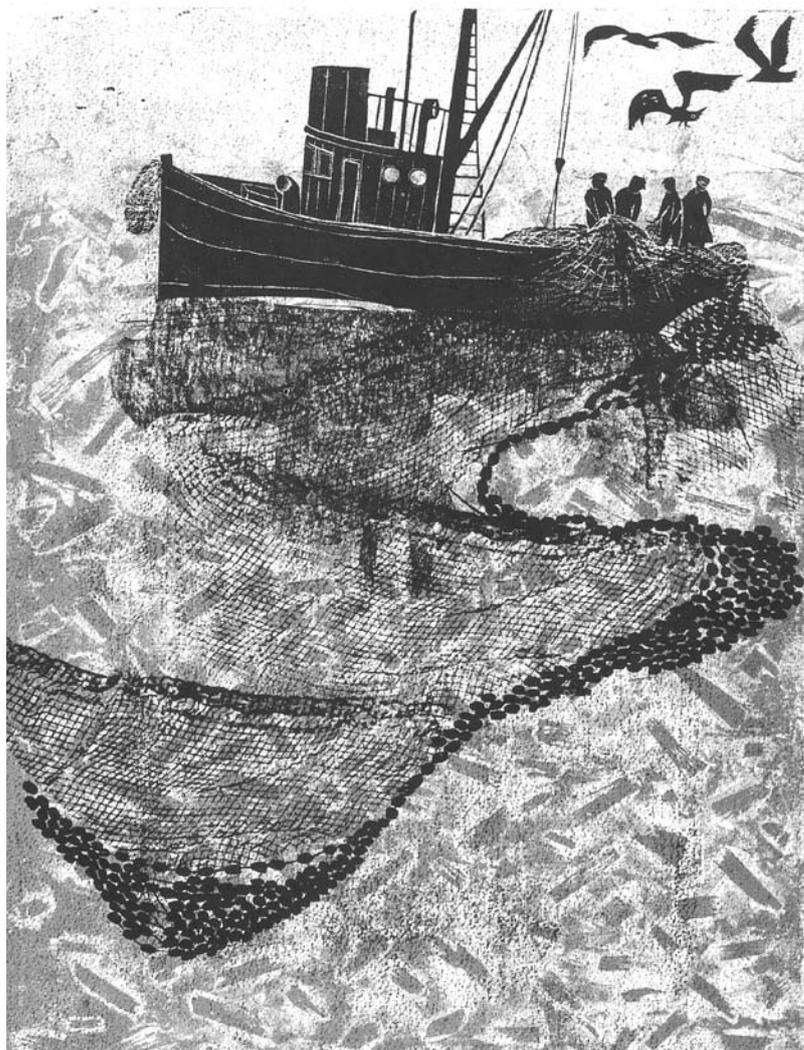
Distribution

A second issue is the distribution of that 30 percent allowable catch once it hits UK shores. Currently, fishing entitlements are allocated along a quasi-privatised system that allows the 'right' to fish to be bought and sold as quota. At a conservative estimate based on recorded quota holdings, about 40 percent of English quota is held by foreign companies (see *Selling The Silver*, *The Land* 15, 2014).

At a less conservative estimate, including badly listed but probably foreign companies, and broader access via other means (such as quota held by fisheries producer organisations), this foreign entitlement to English fish can be revised upward to 58 percent. In contrast, the 82 percent of all English flagged boats which are under ten metres long have total entitlements to only around 2 percent.

Many fishermen are aware that the UK government attempted to limit foreign ownership of UK flagged fishing vessels in the 1980s and 1990s, but that this was deemed illegal under EU competition law. They are also aware that attempts to create community quota schemes can fall foul of EU state aid regulations. Outside of the EU, the quota currently used by foreign companies could in principle be distributed on a more socially equitable basis – as it is in Norway.

Theoretically, UK fisheries and fishing communities could thrive outside of the neoliberal European Union. Since the Brexit vote, however, conversations on the widely-used *Fishing News* Facebook group reflect growing – and arguably justified – concern that this isn't going to happen. Much of the devil in the details when it comes to fisheries dispossession



Antonio Frasconi

is domestic, rather than European. An attempt to reallocate quota to the small-scale fleet in 2012 was met by challenge in UK, not European courts. The market-based system was a domestic, not an EU, imposition. And now the fishing rights market is dealing with commodities worth millions of pounds, is it any surprise that small-scale operators are priced out of the market?

Out of the Frying Pan...

There is certainly potential, once the UK is out of the EU, for the quota market to be dismantled. Fisheries quota could be allocated in an equitable, sustainable way, and stocks could be well-managed. But this would require both will and capacity within the UK government. In fighting the neoliberalism of the EU, it is easy to forget that the UK is one of the most neoliberal states in Europe, and as fishermen are beginning to fear, Brexit is likely to be a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire.

As the skipper of that multi-million pound boat, gliding through the privatised oil fields of the North Sea, thinking of Norway and *The Silver Darlings*, said to me: "It's not right, the way things are now. We were lucky, that's all, just lucky... I'd change it all back if I could."

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<http://bloodandoats.blogspot.co.uk/>