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'For the Betterment of the Industry': The establishment and work of the White Fish Commission, 1936–1939

Martin Wilcox

Between the wars, the British fishing industry faced an invidious economic climate. Costs rose, over-fishing and falling prices depressed incomes, and structural faults that had mattered little in the years of growth prior to 1914 became serious handicaps. Government was thus obliged to intervene in a small but strategically important industry to a far greater extent than before, and did so in ways that reflected the broader thrust of interwar industrial policy. The Herring Industry Board has been well studied but the short-lived parallel body established to develop the bulk of the sea-fishing industry, the White Fish Commission, is all but forgotten, perhaps unsurprisingly since it did not even publish a report before it was suspended on the outbreak of the Second World War. This article surveys the situation facing the fishing industry between the wars and examines in detail the establishment of the White Fish Commission and its activities during its short life. It argues that, while the commission's powers and resources were insufficient for the scale of its task, it laid the groundwork for much further-reaching intervention in the changed climate after 1945.

Key words Fisheries, industrial policy, fishing industry, interwar, intervention

One aspect of British fisheries history into which a lot more research is needed is the relationship between government and the industry, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[1] The international dimensions of this relationship are reasonably well charted in some respects, especially the disputes over access to Icelandic fishing grounds which eventually led to the Cod Wars.[2] However, although some works dating from the early twentieth century trace domestic policy towards the fisheries up to that time, historians since have shown much less interest in successive governments' attempts to develop and support the industry from the 1920s on.[3] Chris Reid has conducted extensive research on the Herring Industry Board,[4] established in 1935 to address the problems of the struggling herring fishing industry, but the White Fish Commission, a parallel body set up to address the rest of the industry's difficulties, has received barely a mention in even the works covering the interwar period in the greatest detail.[5]

1 The author would like to thank the anonymous referees for their valuable input.

2 See for example Thór, *British Trawlers and Iceland*; Jóhannesson, *Troubled Waters*.

3 Key examples are Johnstone, *British Fisheries*; Jenkins, *The Sea Fisheries*, Alward, *The Sea Fisheries of Great Britain and Ireland*.

4 See for example Reid, 'From Boom to Bust'; Reid, 'Managing Innovation in the British Herring Fishery'.

5 See for example Robinson, *Trawling,* Coull, *The Sea Fisheries of Scotland*. The only partial exception is a useful primer on the growth of government involvement Willson, *Governmental Services to the Sea-fish Industry*.

This article aims to rectify this deficiency, to provide background and context for published work on post-1945 fisheries policy, and also to flesh out some aspects of the fishing industry's interwar history, which, it is fair to say, has not received the level of attention afforded to the more prosperous years before 1914.[6] The first section surveys the interwar fishing industry and highlights the problems that the commission was set up to address. The second charts the increasingly interventionist stance taken towards the industry by government in the interwar period, and seeks to connect domestic policy towards it with international developments in fisheries governance, of which Britain was at the forefront. The third section examines the establishment of the commission and its activities during its short life.[7] The final section looks at what it achieved, and what it might have been able to achieve had it not been stymied by the outbreak of war.

The British fishing industry between the wars

The British fishing industry had experienced consistent, sometimes rapid, growth in the half-century before the First World War, but between the wars it faced a much less favourable economic climate and most sectors struggled to maintain profitability, although the problems of each were different in origin and varied in severity. The herring fishery, a small proportion of whose products were consumed at home and whose fortunes therefore depended on exports, was hamstrung by the loss of access to its principal markets in Russia and central Europe.[8] It was usually treated separately from the rest of the industry by policymakers in this period, although it was covered by much of the same legislation. The other major sectors, the deep-sea trawl fishery and the heterogeneous, small-scale inshore fisheries, were orientated largely towards the domestic market. Problems emerged here too after the war, although they were slower to manifest themselves and perhaps more tractable. Nevertheless, throughout the 1920s much of the fishing industry faced a pincer movement of falling prices and rising costs. Wholesale prices had rocketed during the war and continued to rise for a few years afterwards, peaking at an average of £1 10s. 8d. per hundredweight of demersal fish in 1923 before sinking back to £1 5s. 8d. by 1929, and although this was still 40 per cent above their 1913 level, the same pattern also applied to the catching sector's costs.[9] For example, coal, which accounted for around a fifth of a trawler's operating costs, had nearly doubled in price between 1913 and 1924, and in 1929 was still a third above the pre-war rate.[10] Another factor was fish imports, which had more than doubled during the early 1920s and continued to increase thereafter. Many

6 See Wilcox, 'A Record of Abortive Enquiries and Empty of Achievement?'.

7 Great Britain, Sea Fish Commission for the United Kingdom, *Second Report: The White Fish Industry* (London, 1936) (hereafter Duncan Commission), 80.

8 Reid, 'From Boom to Bust', 192; Reid, 'Managing Innovation in the British Herring Fishery', 281–95; Great Britain, Economic Advisory Council, *Report of the Committee on the Fishing Industry*, 100–5 (hereafter 'Economic Advisory Council').

9 Sea Fisheries Statistical Tables, 1929. See also Great Britain, Imperial Economic Committee, *Report of the Imperial Economic Committee on Marketing and Preparing for Market of Foodstuffs Produced Within the Empire. Fifth report: Fish* (hereafter Imperial Economic Committee), 20–2; Economic Advisory Council, 60.

10 Great Britain, Board of Trade, *Statistical Tables relating to British and Foreign Trade and industry 1924–1930*, 48.

Table 1 First-class vessels, employment and catches in England and Wales, 1922–36

	1922	*1930*	*1936*
First-class vessels	3,125	2,453	2,110
Men employed at sea	38,577	34,134	31,734
Demersal fish landings (cwt)	9,007,004	11,454,125	12,637,573

Source UK Sea Fisheries Statistical Tables.
Note 'First-class' vessels were defined as decked vessels of over 15 tons.

in the industry considered imports, in some cases from subsidized foreign vessels, to be unfair competition, and blamed them for depressing prices and exacerbating their problems.[11] Whether or not this was true, rising costs, falling prices and disappearing profits forced some players out of the industry, meaning that the inter-war period saw a downward drift in numbers of boats and men, as outlined in table 1.

The figures in table 1 cover only England and Wales, but the fleet at Aberdeen, the principal trawling centre in Scotland, fell from 302 to 235 steam trawlers across the same period.[12] Virtually all ports struggled, but those still deploying sailing vessels fared worst. The Brixham fleet dwindled from 80 sailing smacks in 1930 to just three in 1939, and attempts to operate steam and motor trawlers from the port were unsuccessful.[13] Even at Grimsby, however, the fishing fleet fell from a total of 685 vessels in 1922 to 515 by 1936, including a drop in the number of steam trawlers from 492 to 433.[14]

As table 1 also shows, however, the national catch of demersal fish increased by more than a third during the interwar period. The driver for this was the expansion of 'distant-water' trawling off the coasts of Iceland, and subsequently off the North Cape of Norway, around Bear Island, and in the Barents Sea. Distant waters had accounted for 20 per cent of British white-fish landings in 1913, but by 1935 accounted for 45 per cent.[15] The main centre for distant-water trawling was Hull, where during the 1920s and 1930s fishing companies invested in a new generation of large trawlers to exploit the far northern grounds. The fish they returned with were coarser and of lower value than those from home waters, but found a ready market through the fish-and-chip shops that absorbed around half of British white fish supplies at this time.[16]

Distant-water fishing was profitable, and Hull presented 'an air of enterprise and confidence' in marked contrast to the stagnation evident in other major ports,[17] but it fed into the general trend of falling prices and was blamed at some other ports for the problems then afflicting them.[18] This was not wholly fair, because the markets

11 Imperial Economic Committee, 19; Economic Advisory Council, 38.
12 Scottish Sea Fisheries Statistical Tables, 1922 and 1936.
13 Hill, 'Brixham Trawlers, 151–6; Thomson, 'Brixham Sailing Trawlers', 176–85; Porter, 'Devon's Fishing Industry, 245–6.
14 Sea Fisheries Statistical Tables.
15 Duncan Commission, 7–8.
16 Economic Advisory Council, 37. Fish landed at Hull, which by the late 1930s was exclusively a distant-water port, wholesaled at 12s. 4d. per cwt, as opposed to an average of 22s. 11d. landed by Aberdeen's largely home-water fleet. See Duncan Commission, 13.
17 Duncan Commission, 14.
18 See for example Hansard, HC Deb 18 Nov 1937, vol. 329, cc 597–713. See especially the

for distant- and near-water fish were semi-separate and the linkage between supplies from distant waters and falling prices for other fish was unclear, and in any case the near-water producers' problems stemmed in part from overfishing and dwindling catches.[19] Nevertheless, overproduction was a genuine problem, as the government's Economic Advisory Council acknowledged in 1931 when it wrote that 'We are . . . confronted with a situation in which the fish which the British trawling industry can market is substantially below its productive capacity'.[20]

By this time the onset of global economic depression had made matters worse still. Amid this crisis many of the economic shibboleths of the nineteenth century were abandoned. Britain came off the Gold Standard and introduced Imperial preference tariffs in 1931–2.[21] Moreover, *laissez-faire* was edged out in favour of more interventionist economic policies, and the creation of bodies designed to rationalize industries, and to boost demand and support prices, especially of foodstuffs. Under the Agricultural Marketing Acts, for instance, marketing and minimum-price schemes financed by levies were introduced by bodies such as the Milk and Potato Marketing Boards.[22] During the 1930s some of this thinking was applied to fishing, albeit in a distinctive form to accommodate the industry's peculiar circumstances.

The interventionist government, 1933–5

Fishing, in Britain as in most developed countries, was and remains a very small part of the national economy, but had political implications disproportionate to its size. In the first instance, fishermen had been seen since at least the sixteenth century as a strategically important labour force, because they could be used to man the navy in wartime.[23] Steam trawlers had added another strategic dimension because of their usefulness as patrol craft and minesweepers.[24] Moreover, fishing was a valuable source of protein, and it generated employment in areas of the country where jobs were scarce, especially during the 1930s. For these reasons government was generally keen to protect the industry. Meanwhile, fishing had an international dimension absent from other industries of comparable size. It frequently involved working in waters adjacent to other sovereign states, leading to disputes over access such as that which had culminated in the 1909 Anglo-Danish agreement on fishing around Iceland, and even fishing on the high seas required international cooperation to police the fishing grounds and, increasingly from the late nineteenth century, to address the problem of overfishing.[25]

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comments of Douglas Thomson (Aberdeen South), George Garro-Jones (Aberdeen North) and Pierse Loftus (Lowestoft).

19 The National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA): MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Ninth Meeting, 24 Mar. 1939.

20 Economic Advisory Council, 39.

21 Middleton, 'Government and the Economy', 456–89.

22 Burden, 'Agriculture', 112-34; Brown, 'The State and Agriculture', 181–98; Duncan Commission, 68.

23 Barback, *The Political Economy of Fisheries*, 3–4.

24 TNA: MAF 23/5/1, White Fish Commission: Commission Papers, The Importation of Foreign-Caught Fish into the United Kingdom, The Case for Reduction: Joint Memorandum by the Fisheries Secretary and Chairman of the Fishery Board for Scotland, Apr. 1938.

25 Barnes, 'The Law of the Sea'.

It was these considerations, coupled with the economic depression, that drove the first significant exercise in government intervention, the Sea Fishing Industry Act of 1933.[26] This represented effectively a three-stranded approach to the industry's problems. The first strand was conservation of fish stocks. The International Council for the Exploration of the Seas, of which Britain had been a member since 1902, had recommended a range of conservation measures for the North Sea, including tighter restrictions on landings of undersized fish, and minimum net mesh sizes to prevent their capture. These measures were incorporated in the 1933 Act, making Britain the first ICES member state to implement them.[27]

The second strand of the government's approach was restriction of imports, which reflected the international trend towards protectionism at the time and followed on from the Import Duties Act of 1932, which had imposed tariffs on imports of a wide variety of imports, including some foodstuffs.[28] The Sea-Fishing Industry Act empowered the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries to impose restriction on fish imports, and an order to this effect was made the same year. This restricted imports to 1¾ million hundredweight, a 10 per cent reduction on their 1930–2 level.[29] Coupled with foreign exchange difficulties for the largest importer, Germany, which never managed to fulfil its quota between 1934 and 1938, this did afford the domestic industry some relief from competition.[30]

The third strand, again reflecting a trait apparent across British industrial policy of the day, was an attempt to support the market for fish, and to adapt the industry to cope with the changed climate. In addition to restrictions on imports, the 1933 Act empowered the Ministry to restrict landings by the domestic fleet in order to shore up prices and prevent market gluts. During the previous year some Hull trawler owners had introduced a voluntary scheme to limit landings from northern waters during the summer months, and these were now given statutory force by the Sea-Fishing Industry (Restriction of Fishing in Northern Waters) Order, which prohibited landings of fish from Bear Island and the Barents Sea between June and September.[31] Market support was coupled with a serious attempt to drive through reform, and to this end the Sea Fish Commission was appointed in December 1933 to enquire into the problems facing the industry and make recommendations for addressing them.[32] It was chaired by Sir Andrew Rae Duncan, a businessman, member of the government's Economic Advisory Council and key adviser to the governor of the Bank of England, of which he was also a director. Duncan had also served as chairman of the Central Electricity Board, helped to drive through construction of the national power grid, and had experience of restructuring industries through his involvement in National Shipbuilders Securities, which was at that time engaged in reducing surplus capacity in the shipbuilding industry. As an 'able arbitrator of conflicting capitalist interests' and with experience of an array of industries,

26 23 & 24 Geo. 5, c. 45.
27 Russell, 'Size Limits and Mesh Regulations', 1–32.
28 22 & 23 Geo. 5, c. 8
29 Duncan Commission, 11.
30 Reid and Søndergaard, 'Bilateral Trade and Fisheries Development', 108–28.
31 Duncan Commission, 11.
32 Great Britain. Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Report on Sea Fisheries 1933*, 70–1; Robinson, *Trawling*, 159–60.

Table 2 Age distribution of the trawling fleet, 1934

Age	*Hull*	*All Other Ports*	*Total*
Under 10 years old	156 (47%)	138 (10%)	294 (18%)
10–14 years old	30 (9%)	20 (2%)	50 (3%)
15–29 years old	53 (16%)	392 (30%)	445 (27%)
20–24 years old	37 (11%)	303 (23%)	340 (21%)
25 years old and over	54 (17%)	465 (35%)	519 (31%)
Total	330	1,318	1,648

Source Duncan Commission, 18.

Duncan was well suited to take on the task of surveying and reforming the complex, fragmented and often fractious fishing industry.[33]

The Sea Fish Commission turned its attention first to the herring industry, whose plight was by that point 'desperate'.[34] In the wake of its first report the Herring Industry Board was set up in 1935, tasked with developing the industry through marketing initiatives to increase demand for its products, minimum prices and vessel subsidies to support catchers' incomes, research and development into more efficient catching technologies, and grants and loans to subsidize investment.[35] The Board did not immediately revolutionize the herring fishery's prospects, but did promise an improvement in the future, and served as a model for future intervention elsewhere.

From Sea Fish Commission to Sea Fish Industry Act, 1935–8

The Sea Fish Commission then turned its attention to the white fish industry. This was broadly defined to encompass all sea fishing other than for herring and salmon, so the commission's remit covered both inshore and deep-sea fisheries, whose equipment ranged from open rowing boats to the latest steam trawlers, and which targeted a wide variety of species. Moreover, the commission was tasked with investigating the fisheries at every stage from catcher to consumer, and therefore had to mount a detailed investigation of the distributive side of the industry.[36] All of this took time, and it was not until 1936 that the report appeared. It focused on the deep-sea trawl fisheries, which accounted for the bulk of national white-fish landings, and only a few pages were devoted to inshore fishing. Nevertheless, its diagnosis of the underlying issue applied all across the industry.

> It is clear that . . . there is not in this important food product a remunerative return to the producer, or a satisfactory result in quality and price to the consumer; and that, while those engaged in the distributive Sections are not gaining undue profits, intermediate marketing expenses are . . . a heavy burden.[37]

More specifically, the report pointed out a series of major problems. The first of these, as outlined in table 2, was the ageing fishing fleet, especially in the trawling sector.

33 Grieves, 'Duncan, Sir Andrew Rae'.
34 Hansard, HC Deb 06 December 1933 vol. 283, cc 1655–724.
35 Reid, 'Managing Innovation', 281–95.
36 Duncan Commission, 5.
37 Duncan Commission, 56.

1	Paid by Port Wholesaler to Trawler Owner		100
2	Port Wholesaler		
	Wages and salaries	8	
	Carriage and packing	11	
	Other expenses and profit	4	
		23	
3	Amount paid by Inland Wholesaler to Port Wholesaler		123
4	Inland Wholesaler		
	Wages and salaries	8	
	Carriage	6	
	Other expenses and profit	7	
		21	
5	Amount paid by Fishmonger to Inland Wholesaler		144
6	Fishmonger		
	Wages and salaries	27	
	Carriage and packing	6	
	Rent, rates etc	9	
	Other expenses and profit	10	
		52	
7	Amount paid by Consumer to Fishmonger		196

Figure 1 Price structure for fish, 1934, source, Duncan Commission, 54

At no port besides Hull was more than a fifth of the fleet less than a decade old, and at Grimsby, Aberdeen, Milford Haven and Lowestoft more than a third of the fleet was a quarter-century old or more. The cost of new trawlers had risen since the war, and with low profits prevailing throughout the industry there was no spare capital for most to replace their fleets of pre-1914 trawlers, which were becoming worn-out, expensive to maintain and unpleasant, at best, for their crews. Indeed, in a few cases their efficiency was visibly declining as owners lacked the resources even to replace damaged gear. This was hardly sustainable in the long term.

The second problem was the inefficiency of the distribution chain, which manifested itself in high prices to the consumer even while the catchers lost money. Using company accounts the commission attempted to piece together a price structure, as detailed in figure 1.

The commission's figures were of necessity tentative, and at each stage of the distribution chain a large number of operators of varying efficiency served a range of markets, so the price structure could only ever be a rough average. Nevertheless, it was the first serious attempt to understand how the price of fish increased as it moved along the distribution chain.[38] In doing so it cleared each section of the industry, especially the powerful wholesale merchants, of the allegations of profiteering sometimes levelled against them, but it also highlighted more fundamental problems. There were several stages through which fish had to move before reaching the consumer, and although the mark-up added at each stage was minimal, the cumulative

38 Duncan Commission, 55.

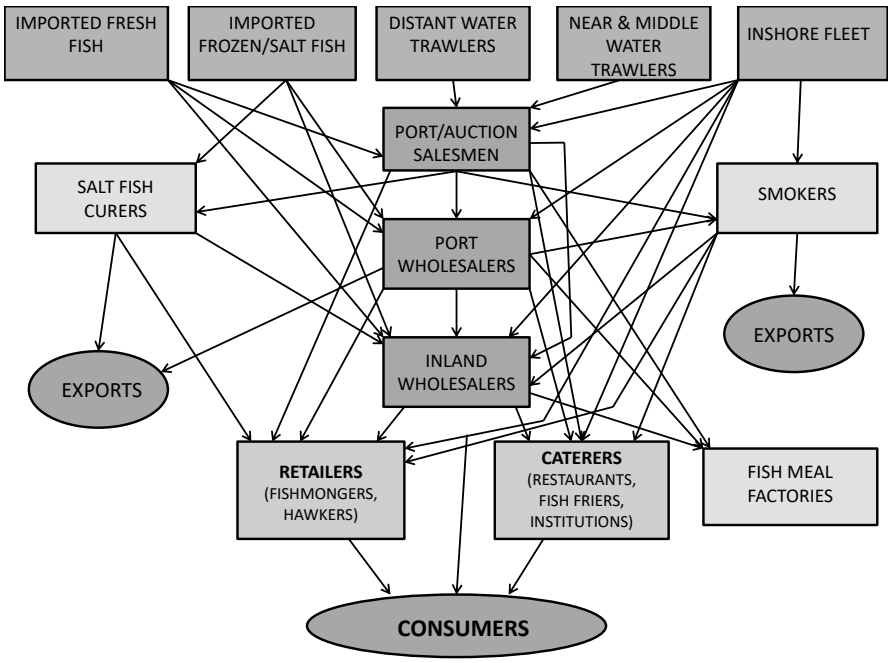

Figure 2 The distribution of fish
Source TNA, MAF 209/709, Cabinet Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Scotland, Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Minister of Food, 19 Jun 1950.

effect was almost to double the price of fish between quayside and consumer.

Moreover, at several stages there were too many and too small players. Part of the catchers' problem was that small trawling firms lacked capital to invest in better equipment, while a man with a little knowledge of the wholesaling business and a small amount of credit could set up on his own with little more capital than a box, a hammer and a pocketful of nails.[39] At Grimsby, there had been 510 wholesale merchants in 1913; by 1934 this had grown to 729, but during the same period the average quantity of fish handled by each had dropped from 6,349 to 4,666 cwt, with a commensurate drop in turnover. Many were operating at a loss.[40] The sector was unstable, with a high rate of bankruptcies, and a growing reputation for sharp practices such as pilferage, 'topping' of inferior fish with a layer of prime to increase its price, buying rings to force down prices, and former employees of established firms setting up on their own and poaching their erstwhile employers' custom. This also applied in some sections of the fish distribution system not covered by the price structure, such as fish smoking and curing, many firms engaged in which were small, undercapitalized and operated from cramped and sometimes insanitary premises.[41]

Another problem was the sheer complexity and fragmentation of the industry, illustrated in figure 2. Fragmentation increased the difficulties of co-ordinating

39 Kelsall et al, 'The White Fish Industry', 123.
40 Duncan Commission, 38.
41 Kelsall et al, 'The White Fish industry', 124–7; Duncan Commission, 37; TNA: MAF 23/3/6, White Fish Commission: First Report for the period 11 Jul. 1938 to 31 Mar. 1939, paragraph 81.

a complex industry in which the interests of merchants, processors, retailers and catchers rarely aligned, ports jockeyed for position against one another, and different parts of each sector quarrelled and blamed one another for their difficulties. As one civil servant with long experience of the industry put it in 1938,

> The main weakness of the industry has lain hitherto in its lack of cohesion; rivalries between ports; rivalries and bitter competition within ports. In particular, there is a quarrel always ready to blaze out between the near water and the distant water people.[42]

Most sectors of the industry were organized into trade associations, both within ports and at a national level, but these were far from comprehensive in coverage and relations between and sometimes within them were often not good. Local trawler owners' associations in England and Wales, for instance, were represented by the British Trawlers' Federation (BTF), but within it there were disagreements between near-water and distant-water trawler owners, while those in Scotland were not part of the organization at all, and their own representative bodies did not enjoy a harmonious relationship with the BTF.[43] Meanwhile, inshore fishermen, and catchers and distributors at many smaller ports, were not covered at all. Under these circumstances, 'unity of outlook and loyalty to an agreed course of action' were very difficult to achieve.[44]

The partial exception was Hull. Here a relatively few powerful trawler owners, merchants (of whom there were fewer but operating on a larger scale on average than at comparable ports) and others had been able to cooperate in introducing a series of measures to adapt the industry to the changing climate. The fish brought back by the distant-water trawlers was filleted at the port rather than being sent to market whole, and the resulting offal was processed through the Hull Fish Meal and oil Company, which was owned by a consortium of trawler owners and merchants. Similarly, the ice factory, cod-liver oil plant and trawler insurance company were mutual ventures.[45] There had been discord, not least an acrimonious dispute between wholesalers and trawler owners over the minimum price scheme introduced by the latter in 1931.[46] Nevertheless, as the Sea Fish Commission pointed out, the relative cohesiveness of the industry in Hull was a clear advantage.

The commission concluded that the industry at a national level was not capable of reorganizing itself, and accordingly recommended the establishment of a 'development commission' to drive reform.[47] There were clear precedents for this under the Agricultural Marketing Acts, which informed the commission's recommendations for the establishment of the Herring Industry Board three years

42 TNA: MAF 23/6/1, White Fish Commission: Proceedings, Report by Mr H. G. Maurice on Visit to Hull and Grimsby, 17–19 Aug. 1938.

43 TNA: MAF 23/5/1, White Fish Commission: Commission Papers, Report of Visit to Aberdeen, 22–3 Aug. 1938.

44 Duncan Commission, 15.

45 Robinson, *Trawling*, 150–1; Kelsall et al, 'White Fish Industry,' 153–4.

46 Hull History Centre (hereafter HHC): Hull Fish Merchants' Protection Association Papers, Minutes of General Meeting, 29 May 1931. These records are at present uncatalogued and are therefore referenced only by organization and date.

47 Duncan Commission, 67–9.

previously.[48] It is probable, too, that the commissioners were impressed with Hull as an example of what effective organization could achieve. To this end, the commission recommended that its development commission be set up to 'assist the industry in the development of comprehensive organization within each section and for the industry as a whole'.[49]

The powers of this development commission were to be wide-ranging, if largely consultative. It was to be afforded powers to register participants in different sectors of the industry, and to introduce licensing schemes to limit entry and therefore cut out overcapacity. Licensing also offered the opportunity to withdraw licences from participants guilty of malpractice, or breaching the regulations the body was to be empowered to make on matters such as handling, grading and labelling of fish, minimum market prices, and procedures for its sale. It was to be empowered to require participants to maintain records and accounts, to be produced upon request, again with penalties and withdrawal of licences for those who failed to do so. It would also fund and encourage research and development, publicity schemes and market development work. The development commission was not intended to replace existing trade associations and would therefore be expected to work in consultation with and to co-ordinate between them. For instance, although it was to be empowered to develop marketing schemes in its own right, in the first instance it was hoped that these would come from within existing organizations and simply be approved and co-ordinated by the commission. As the Sea Fish Commission report put it, 'if collective machinery at the centre is to be a natural and vigorous growth, as it should be, it must have its roots planted firmly in local and sectional organisation'. Finally, the development commission was to act as a representative of the industry as a whole, which it had previously lacked.[50]

The reaction of the industry to the proposals varied. Some, perhaps especially the struggling near-water trawler owners, saw the proposed development body as a potential lifeline, albeit with reservations about the possibility of 'an excess of regulation.[51] Others were more implacably opposed to government interference in their business. Among them were the powerful Hull merchants, whose trade association noted that 'none of us asked for the Sea Fish Commission investigation or for legislation', but did also state that if the establishment of a development body was inevitable their interests would be best served by ensuring they were represented as fully as possible.[52] Others felt that the proposed body would act more in the interests of capital than labour, and, although the fishing industry was but weakly unionized, the Trades Union Congress pressed successfully for union representation on the development commission's advisory council.[53]

48 Great Britain, Sea Fish Commission for the United Kingdom, *First Report: The Herring Industry* (London, 1934), 38.

49 Duncan Commission, 68.

50 Duncan Commission, 69–77.

51 TNA: MAF 23/5/1, White Fish Commission: Commission Papers, Report of Visit to Aberdeen, 22-3 Aug. 1938; *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 31 Mar. 1936.

52 HHC: Hull Fish Merchants' Protection Association Papers, Minutes of Meeting of Members, 4 May 1937.

53 *Hull Daily Mail,* 9 Dec. 1937; TNA: MAF 23/4/6, White Fish Commission: Representation on Joint Council, List of Members of Council, 13 Jun. 1939.

These differing responses reflected varying political reactions to the proposed development commission. Some left-wing MPs, mainly Labour politicians such as Dingle Foot, opposed it as espousing the 'vicious principle of limitation of production started by the hated Agricultural Marketing Acts', while others called for the nationalization of the industry so that it could, 'instead of operating on behalf of private interests making private profits . . . operate and function on behalf of the whole people'. Such figures strongly supported the calls for the interests of labour to be fully represented.[54] More *laissez faire*-minded MPs disliked government intervention on principle and criticized the 'enormous' powers which the development commission would wield, with Conservative Maurice Petherick even going so far as to describe it as 'a sort of haddock Hitler'.[55] Nevertheless, the Bill was passed by Parliament and came into law on 2 June 1938 as the Sea Fish Industry Act of that year. Planning was already under way in Whitehall for the establishment of the development commission, and in July 1938 came the formal appointment of what by then had become the White Fish Commission.

Establishment and personnel

The commission consisted of five members. In line with the recommendations of the Sea Fish Commission, it was an independent body composed of outsiders to the industry, with a strong grounding in 'business experience gained in other spheres'.[56] Civil servants working on the composition of the commission during late 1937 concluded that in addition to business experience, understanding of accountancy, economics and fisheries science would be desirable in potential members.[57] Accordingly, the commission's chairman was renowned statistician and businessman Sir William Palin Elderton. With him sat Professor Alexander Gray, an economist at the University of Edinburgh and veteran of several Royal Commissions; George Dallas, Chairman of the Labour Party, trade unionist and member of the Livestock Commission and the Council of Agriculture for England; and Thomas Darling, who had extensive business experience, especially in the field of insurance.

The vice-chairman of the commission, and the man closest to the fishing industry, was Henry Gascoyen Maurice. Maurice was a career civil servant with long experience of fishing. He had been head of the Fisheries Department of the Board of Trade from 1912 until its transfer to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in 1920, after which he served as Fisheries Secretary until his retirement in 1938.[58] He was one of the British Delegates to the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas from 1912, and served as President from 1920 until his retirement in 1938, during which time he had played a leading role in the agreement of conservation members for North Sea fish, as well as chairing the conferences on overfishing and whaling

54 Hansard, HC Deb 18 Nov 1937, vol. 329, cc 597–713, see remarks of Dingle Foot and Emmanuel Shinwell; see also *The Times*, 19 Nov. 1937; *Hull Daily Mail*, 9 Dec. 1937.

55 Hansard, HC Deb 18 Nov 1937, vol. 329, cc 597–713, see remarks of Maurice Petherick.

56 Duncan Commission, 70.

57 TNA: MAF 23/4/4, White Fish Commission: Suggestions for Members, W. B. Brown to H. G. Maurice, 3 Dec. 1937.

58 TNA: MAF 23/4/4, White Fish Commission: Suggestions for Members, Biographical Notes on Members of the White Fish Commission.

in London in 1937 and 1938.[59] Maurice had not been a member of the Sea Fish Commission, but he had played a leading role in instituting its recommendations, and was involved in setting up the commission and recruiting its members from the outset. Indeed, the suggestion that it should embrace expertise in marine science and accountancy had come from him.[60] Highly experienced and widely respected within the fishing industry and among the international community of fisheries scientists, Maurice brought to the commission the ideal blend of expertise and administrative acumen.[61]

The commission was intended to be an independent body able to take a broad view of the industry and transcend sectional interests. However, the Sea Fish Industry Act provided for the establishment of an advisory council to link the commission to the industry and advise it on matters of current concern. Again, this was modelled on the bodies established under the Agricultural Marketing Acts, and the Livestock Advisory Council was used as the template for what became the White Fish Industry Advisory Council.[62] The council's members were appointed by the Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries rather than the commission itself, but Maurice was heavily involved in establishing the Council and selecting its members. Every section of the industry and each port sought to secure the greatest possible representation, and in some cases Maurice intervened personally to pacify those aggrieved at being passed over.[63] Care was also needed in selecting people who would not cause undue dissension, although when one effective but potentially controversial individual was put forward, Maurice supported his appointment on the grounds that 'The Council's meetings are likely [. . .] to be in the nature of dog-fights – so that a little scrapping more or less will not make very much difference'.[64] Establishment of the Advisory Council was some way behind the commission itself, and the first meeting did not take place until July 1939.[65]

Activities of the commission, 1938–9

Inevitably, much of the commission's activity during the first year of its life was devoted to gathering information which it would need in the formulation of future initiatives. In the first place this took the form of visits to ports and the major inland wholesale markets. As early as August 1938 Maurice visited Hull, Grimsby and

59 'Obituary, Henry Gascoyen Maurice', 3–6.

60 See TNA: MAF 23/4/4, White Fish Commission: Suggestions for Members, H. G. Maurice to W. B. Brown, 17 Nov. 1937; Maurice to Hogarth, 5 Jan. 1938.

61 Wilcox, 'Maurice, Henry Gascoyen'. See also Schwach, 'Internationalist and Norwegian at the same time', 40–1.

62 TNA: MAF 23/4/6, White Fish Commission: Representation on Joint Council, see Minute Sheet, 27 Jan. 1939.

63 TNA: MAF 23/4/6, White Fish Commission: Representation on Joint Council, see for example H. M. Harrison to H. G. Maurice, 23 Jun. 1939; Glasgow Wholesale Fish Traders' Protection Association to White Fish Commission, 20 Jul. 1939; Fleetwood Fishing Vessel Owners' Association Ltd to Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 19 Jul. 1939.

64 TNA: MAF 23/4/6, White Fish Commission: Representation on Joint Council, R. G. R. Wall to A. T. A. Dobson, 19 Apr. 1939.

65 TNA: MAF 23/5/3, White Fish Commission: Commission Papers, Report on First Meeting of White Fish Industry Joint Council, 28 Jul. 1939.

Aberdeen for discussions with trawler owners and other interests.[66] Later visits were more structured. The commission visited the Humber ports and Lowestoft two months later and held formal meetings with trawler owners, wholesale merchants, trawler officers, deckhands and engineers, and certain companies involved in retailing or processing fish.[67] Smaller ports, too received visits, among them a tour of ports such as Whitehills and Macduff in northeast Scotland and a visit to inshore fishing ports of the southwest, including the formerly dominant port of Brixham, whose condition Elderton described as 'pitiable'.[68] Away from the ports, members of the commission visited Billingsgate wholesale market in December 1938 and followed this with tours of markets in several major towns and cities, among them Blackburn and Manchester the following February and Birmingham in July.[69]

The commission also took pains to meet with national trade associations and others connected with the industry. On the catching side it held protracted discussions with the British Trawlers' Federation, and also with their chartered accountants, which dispelled suspicions that some near-water owners with interests in ancillary industries such as ice-making and trawler supplies might be hiding profits there, and confirmed to them that 'the picture was as black as had been painted'.[70] It also held discussions on the general state of the industry and matters of immediate concern with organizations on the distributive side. In March 1939, for instance, the commission met with the National Federation of Fish Friers to discuss well-worn complaints such as the quality of fish supplied to them, but also a shortage of juvenile labour in the trade and perceived prejudice by local authorities against the opening of new fried fish outlets.[71] The commission was able to offer only limited assistance in the short term, and in many cases had no power to remedy the complaints made to it, but in the longer run it intended this information to feed into initiatives of its own and advice to government on future legislation.

Alongside the collection of information went development of two of the major policy measures recommended by the Sea Fish Commission. The first of these was registration of participants, 'an essential preliminary to the organisation of the

66 TNA: MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Second Meeting, 30 Aug. 1938; see also TNA: MAF 23/5/1, White Fish Commission: Commission Papers, Reports of Visits to Hull, Grimsby and Aberdeen, 17–19 and 22–23 Aug. 1938.

67 TNA: MAF 23/5/1, White Fish Commission: Commission Papers, Reports of Visits to Hull, Grimsby and Lowestoft, 28 Oct., 1–4 Nov. 1938.

68 TNA: MAF 23/5/3, White Fish Commission: Commission Papers, Report of Visits to Aberdeen and other Ports in North-East Scotland, 14–6 Jun. 1939; MAF 23/4/2, White Fish Commission: Memorandum on White Fish Industry by Chairman of Commission, Jul. 1939; MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Tenth Meeting, 26 Apr. 1939.

69 TNA: MAF 23/5/2, White Fish Commission: Commission Papers, Report of Visit to Billingsgate Market, 13 Dec. 1938; Report of Visits to Blackburn and Manchester Fish Markets, 2-3 Feb. 1939, Report of Visit to Birmingham Fish Market, 18 Jul. 1939.

70 TNA: MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Seventh Meeting, 15 Feb. 1939; Tenth Meeting, 26 Apr. 1939.

71 TNA: MAF 23/5/2, White Fish Commission: Commission Papers, Note of Meeting with National Federation of Fish Friers, 1 Mar. 1939.

industry', of which the commission began consideration at its very first meeting.[72] It was clear from the outset that it would be a protracted process, and although the Sea Fish Industry Act was very specific about what businesses were required to register and what information was needed from them, there were various problems of definition to address. The commission debated, for example, whether friers who also sold limited quantities of fresh fish should be required to register also as fishmongers.[73] There was also debate over the level at which the registration fee, which was intended to defray a part of the commission's costs, should be set, and whether it should be charged for the year 1939–40 as well as the part-year 1938–9.[74] Predictably, too, enforcement soon emerged as a problem. Although the commission felt that reputable businesses would be pleased to register to give themselves *locus standi*, it was clear that others would seek to evade their obligations, and there was extensive debate over how best the laggards should be chased up, especially as the police declined to assist.[75] Nevertheless, by the time the commission completed its first report, 3,832 fish producers representing 5,951 boats had registered, and applications for registration had been received from 47,671 wholesale merchants, friers, fishmongers and processors. By that time nearly £9,000 had been collected in registration fees.[76]

One of the commission's principal aims was the development of schemes to assist the industry to market its products. The commission lacked sufficient information to develop them at this early stage, and in any case the intention was that in the first instance the industry should develop its own. Among them were the fishmongers, whose trade association submitted a draft marketing scheme to the commission as early as September 1938. This provided for the election of a Board to regulate the marketing, labelling and grading of fish. It would operate its own registration scheme and raise contributions to fund itself, make loans to members and invest in promotion and research.[77] During 1938–9 the commission and the fishmongers' trade association discussed various aspects of the draft scheme, seeking to work out exactly what the respective powers of each were, and whether it was legally possible to develop a separate scheme for Scotland, which after some debate was deemed illegal.[78]

Marketing schemes such as these might have effected some improvement within each sector, but the commission was concerned that each was trying to protect its own

72 TNA: MAF 23/3/6, White Fish Commission: First Report for the period 11 Jul. 1938 to 31 Mar. 1939, paragraph 11.

73 TNA: MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Third Meeting, 17 Nov. 1938.

74 TNA: MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Eighth Meeting, 1 Mar. 1939.

75 TNA: MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Third Meeting, 17 Nov. 1938; Tenth Meeting, 26 Apr. 1939.

76 TNA: MAF 23/3/6, White Fish Commission: First Report for the period 11 Jul. 1938 to 31 Mar. 1939, paragraphs 10-36.

77 TNA: MAF 23/1/5, White Fish Commission Fishmongers' Marketing Scheme, Records of amendments to marketing scheme, 1938; Draft Scheme for Regulating the Marketing of White Fish by Fishmongers under the Sea Fish Industry Act 1938.

78 TNA: MAF 23/1/5, White Fish Commission: Fishmongers' Marketing Scheme, see Minute Sheet, 21 Dec. 1938.

territory and that they would not amount to a more fundamental reorganization and rationalization of the distributive side of the industry.[79] Nevertheless, the discussions were at least constructive, whereas the question of a marketing scheme for producers quickly caused a renewed rift within the trawling sector. Some near-water trawler owners began working on a marketing scheme almost as soon as the commission was established, and by November 1938 were considering the question of affording power to license vessels to the board that would administer the scheme, in an effort to cut overcapacity.[80] This was strongly opposed by some other firms, however, and was dismissed out of hand by distant-water trawler firms, whose representative was alleged to have rejected it before even reading the document placed before them.[81] Little progress had been made by the time another scheme, which provided for the laying-up of a third of near-water trawlers, was advanced in spring 1939. The commission initially suspected that this plan, whose origins were unclear, was either an attempt by trawler firms to press government for a subsidy, or had been drawn up by the distant-water interest in an attempt to bully the near-water owners into joining a voluntary scheme under their control, which had come into force in 1938.[82] Later it became apparent that the proposals had probably originated with Sir John Marsden, of Grimsby firm Consolidated Fisheries Ltd, but they were bitterly opposed by other sections of the near-water interest, many of whom were likely to refuse to cooperate. The Commission concluded that the interests of the industry would be best served by steering the owners towards a statutory scheme under its own control.[83] However, it was obliged to obtain some of its information from the trade press, and to request successive drafts of the scheme from owners and scrutinize them in an attempt to gauge opinion in the industry.[84] It was clear that although the trawler owners were deeply divided, many, especially the distant-water owners, were suspicious of the commission and preferred to control their own affairs. Some, too, disliked the input of the White Fish Industry Advisory Council, which Marsden described as 'a legalised form of uninformed criticism'.[85] Persuading them to co-operate on a national, statutory scheme with commission approval would be extremely difficult.

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79 TNA: MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Ninth Meeting, 24 Mar. 1939.

80 TNA: MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Fourth Meeting, 24 Nov. 1938.

81 TNA: MAF 23/5/2, White Fish Commission: Commission Papers, Interview with F. Parkes, 8 Feb. 1939.

82 TNA: MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Tenth Meeting, 26 Apr. 1939; Eleventh Meeting, 22 May 1939; MAF 23/3/6, White Fish Commission: First Report for the period 11 Jul. 1938 to 31 Mar. 1939, paragraph 51.

83 TNA: MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Twelfth Meeting, 14 Jun. 1939.

84 TNA: MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Thirteenth Meeting, 1 Jul. 1939; MAF 23/5/3, White Fish Commission: Commission Papers, Note of Meeting with Sir John Marsden, 4 Jul. 1939.

85 TNA: MAF 23/3/6, White Fish Commission: First Report for the period 11 Jul. 1938 to 31 Mar. 1939, paragraph 51; MAF 23/5/3, White Fish Commission: Commission Papers, Note of Meeting with Sir John Marsden, 4 Jul. 1939.

A third, related matter which came to occupy a substantial proportion of the commission's time was the question of a subsidy to the catching sector, which had been requested and refused in May 1937 but for which demands were still being aired during the passage of the Sea Fish Industry Act through Parliament.[86] The commission was generally opposed, on the grounds that a subsidy would do nothing to resolve the near-water fleet's underlying problems and risked perpetuating the use of old and inefficient boats, although Maurice and Darling felt that there was some justification for it on grounds of national security, given that fishermen could be regarded as 'an auxiliary arm of the Navy'. Gray, meanwhile, argued that any subsidy given should be 'conditional on the industry putting its house in order', raising the possibility of tying a subsidy to adoption of a marketing scheme, and in effect using the prospect of a subsidy to force the fractious trawler owners into line. No decision was taken, but the option remained on the table to tide the catching sector over until more far-reaching reforms, especially to reduce distribution costs, could take effect.[87]

Fourth, the commission considered a range of more peripheral measures to secure improvement in particular areas, particularly on the distributive side of the industry. The quality and cleanliness of the wooden boxes that fish was transported in, for example, was widely criticized, and the commission duly began work on a scheme for mandatory introduction of non-returnable containers to improve hygiene standards and hopefully improve the quality of fish presented to the consumer.[88] It discussed new ways of preserving and marketing white fish, especially by means of canning.[89] The commission was also asked for its views on import controls.[90]

The commission's work took place against the backdrop of an increasingly threatening international situation, and government planning for the maintenance of food supplies in the event of war. The commission, focused on peacetime reorganization of the industry, was not directly involved in war planning, which was the responsibility of the Food (Defence Plans) Department of the Board of Trade, but Maurice attended several of its meetings.[91] The Food (Defence Plans) Department appointed J. T. Bennett of the London Fish Trades Association as its emergency Director-Designate of Fish Supplies, and he duly drew up a plan for regional distribution of fish from a series of depots. This depended on accurate information

86 Hansard, HC Deb 18 Nov. 1937, vol. 329, cc 597–713, see remarks of Emmanuel Shinwell; TNA: MAF 23/3/4, White Fish Commission: Informal Reports to and discussions with Ministers, Informal report to Minister on progress and subsidy, 3 Mar. 1939.

87 TNA: MAF 23/3/4, White Fish Commission: Informal Reports to and discussions with Ministers, see in particular memorandum by H. G. Maurice, 18 Aug. 1939; memorandum by Thomas Darling, 14 Aug. 1939; note of meeting with Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries and Secretary of State for Scotland, 31 Jul. 1939.

88 TNA: MAF 23/3/6, White Fish Commission: First Report for the period 11 Jul. 1938 to 31 Mar. 1939, paragraphs 76-84.

89 TNA: MAF 23/5/3, White Fish Commission: Commission Papers, Notes of interviews with British Fish Canners Ltd and Bennyfishal Ltd, 30 Mar., 20 Apr. 1939.

90 TNA: MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Fifth Meeting, 13 Dec. 1938 and Sixth Meeting, 22 Dec. 1938; MAF 23/5/2, White Fish Commission Papers, Quantitative Regulation of Imports of Fish.

91 TNA: MAF 23/2/1, White Fish Commission: Distribution of Fish in event of Emergency, report of meeting at Food (Defence Plans) Department, 21 Apr. 1939.

about who would be entitled to supply and distribute fish, and to this end Bennett requested access to the commission's papers relating to its own registration scheme. The commission bridled at this, for although the register itself was a public document, some of the additional information collected, on business turnover for instance, was commercially sensitive and had been supplied in confidence. Nevertheless, the information was eventually provided, but only after the Food (Defence Plans) Department had undertaken to treat the figures in the strictest confidence and to use them only in its war planning.[92]

The plans were needed sooner than expected, and this spelled the end of the White Fish Commission. Its fifteenth meeting fixed the date of the sixteenth for 3 October 1939, 'should no emergency arise' in the meantime.[93] Three days later German forces marched into Poland, and within a week Britain had declared war. The commission was immediately suspended and its staff diverted to war work. Its first report, deemed an 'unessential document', was never published and, in the words of Alexander Gray, marked 'the final phrase in the burial service of the White Fish Commission'.[94] It never met again, although it formally remained in existence until it was abolished in 1951 by the Act of Parliament that established its successor.[95]

Achievements and prospects

On receiving his copy of the abortive first report, Gray observed sadly that 'viewed objectively we have very little to show for all our activity'.[96] The White Fish Commission had certainly made an energetic start to its work, but it operated for only 15 months before being swept away by a tide of much bigger events. In that time it gathered a great deal of information on the industry but had no time to put it to use, and it had had little material effect by the time war broke out. Nevertheless, the question remains of whether it could have effected beneficial change given sufficient time.

On the one hand, the commission did arrive at an accurate diagnosis of the industry's principal problems, and achieved a clearer understanding of them than had previously been the case. Previous enquiries had spotted the economic difficulties facing the near-water trawler fleet, for instance, but the commission cleared away the confusion over the relationships between trawler firms and ancillary businesses, and in doing so established just how serious their position was. Similarly, it was able to go far further than the Sea Fish Commission or any other previous enquiry in establishing why the distribution system was so inefficient. As a result, by summer 1939 it was starting to consider matters such as freezer trawlers, and the possibility of

92 TNA: MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Tenth Meeting, 26 Apr. 1939; Twelfth Meeting, 14 Jun. 1939.

93 TNA: MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Fifteenth Meeting, 29 Aug. 1939.

94 TNA: MAF 23/3/6, White Fish Commission: First Report for the period 11 Jul. 1938 to 31 Mar. 1939, see E. C. Syms to George Dallas, 12 Sept 1939; Alexander Gray to E. C. Syms, 13 Sep. 1939; TNA: MAF 23/7/5, White Fish Commission: Suspension of Operations, see copy of Order in Council, 27 Oct. 1939.

95 14 & 15 Geo. 6, Ch.30. Sea Fish Industry Act, 1951.

96 TNA: MAF 23/3/6, White Fish Commission: First Report for the period 11 Jul. 1938 to 31 Mar. 1939, see Alexander Gray to E. C. Syms, 13 Sep. 1939.

integrating catching and port wholesale functions to cut out the 'chronic' overcapacity among merchants.[97] All of these were ideas at a very early stage, but anticipated developments that did materialize in the longer term. It may be that the commission could have driven them through more quickly than was eventually the case. On a more functional level, some of the schemes the commission began to promote were welcomed by the industry and could have effected some improvement. The non-returnable boxes scheme is a case in point, as are the co-operative marketing schemes for inshore ports it discussed in early 1939. It is significant that both were taken up in the 1950s by its successor.[98] In the end, however, much as these might have had some beneficial effect, it would have been marginal.

The scale of the task confronting the White Fish Commission was formidable. Fishing was not a large component of the national economy, but even so the industry employed tens of thousands, and several millions of pounds in capital were tied up in it. Moreover, it was highly complex and different sectors had very different problems and needs, addressing all of which was an extremely difficult task. The commission expended the bulk of its efforts on the problems of the trawling sector, especially its near-water component. Given the importance of trawling as an employer of capital and labour and provider of food this was justified, but did mean that certain sections of the industry were barely considered. The commission's records contain barely a mention of the shellfish sector, for example. Moreover, relations between many sections of the industry were poor, and getting them to co-operate a difficult task. It is telling that despite repeated requests the distant-water trawler owners refused to give details of expected landings under the voluntary restriction scheme to the National Federation of Fish Friers, despite there being no obvious reason not to.[99] Similarly, discussion of marketing schemes for catchers was always hampered by the intransigence of the distant-water trawling interest and the knowledge that even among the near-water firms any scheme that had no statutory force 'could easily be torpedoed by a few recalcitrants'.[100]

For all that, in Elderton's words, the commission was supposed to assist the industry 'towards bettering its marketing organisation' rather than 'to dragoon the industry and trade into compulsory reorganisation',[101] the sort of industrial self-government and self-directed reorganization that the commission was supposed to foster was highly unlikely to emerge. Dragooning the industry into reorganization was likely to become necessary, and yet the commission had little power to compel

97 TNA: MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Seventh Meeting, 15 Feb. 1939; Ninth Meeting, 24 Mar. 1939.

98 Great Britain, White Fish Authority, *Second Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31st March 1953*, 15–23.

99 TNA: MAF 23/5/1, White Fish Commission: Commission Papers, Note of meeting with Control Committee of the British Trawlers' Federation, 28 Apr. 1939; MAF 23/5/2, White Fish Commission: Commission Papers, Note of meeting with National Federation of Fish Friers, 1 Mar. 1939; MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Eleventh Meeting, 22 May 1939.

100 TNA: MAF 23/2/8, White Fish Commission: Discussions with near-water trawler owners re. marketing scheme, see F. Parkes to R. G. R. Wall, 16 Jan. 1939; Minute Sheet, 19 Jan. 1939.

101 TNA: MAF 23/3/3, White Fish Commission: Signed Minutes of the Meetings of the White Fish Commission, Ninth Meeting, 24 Mar. 1939.

it. Lawrence Neal, who had sat on the Sea Fish Commission, declined appointment to the commission on precisely these grounds, arguing that

> The whole scale of the job seems to me to outdistance the personnel and the support contemplated: as a result the Commission may have to content itself with acting as little more than a body for registering [marketing] schemes.[102]

In part, the commission's lack of powers of compulsion was why it was not revived when the industry again plunged into crisis in the late 1940s.[103] Its successor, which followed the same model of being an independent body linked to the industry by the Advisory Council, had far wider powers, including the right to operate vessels and equipment and to trade in fish and its products in its own right, as well as much stronger powers to introduce compulsory marketing and rationalization schemes.[104] Yet the White Fish Authority, as this body was known, wrought no fundamental change in the industry's fortunes in the first decade of its existence, and it is hard to see how the commission, with its more limited powers, could have achieved more.

Conclusion

The White Fish Commission was a product of its times. Amid the depression of the 1930s nineteenth-century *laissez-faire* and many of the other economic assumptions that had been largely unchallenged before 1914 were abandoned, and government took an increasingly proactive role in directing the fortunes of individual industries and the economy as a whole. Fishing was not a large part of the national economy but it was a significant employer, a provider of food, and its resources of ships and men were considered important to national security. By the mid-1930s the crisis in the industry was too serious to ignore. Government intervention in fishing was distinctive, in that a major component of it was conservation of the living, common-property resource it depended upon, but its other components, protection from cheap imports and market support, were analogous to policies deployed to assist other struggling industries. The White Fish Commission, like the Herring Industry Board, therefore followed precedents set in the 1920s via the Agricultural Marketing Acts. It represented the first significant attempt at government intervention in an industry that had historically been suspicious of interference. As a primarily consultative body with limited powers of compulsion, it was also a fairly tentative move. Its life was cut short by the outbreak of war, and in the short time for which it operated it could achieve very little. Whether it could have achieved more given time remains a moot point, but there are good reasons to think it could not, given the scale of the task and the limitations of its powers. Nevertheless, in one respect it pointed the way to the future, for many elements of the White Fish Commission re-emerged in a more fully developed form after the war, and to an extent remain with us today.[105]

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102 TNA: MAF 23/4/4, White Fish Commission: Suggestions for Members, Lawrence Neal to W. S. Morrison, 23 Jun. 1938.

103 Hansard, HC Deb 12 Nov. 1947 vol 444 cc495-516, see speech by Douglas Marshall (Con, Bodmin); TNA: MAF 209/709, Re-organisation of the White Fish Industry: Interdepartmental Conference, 19 May 1950; Wilcox, 'To save the industry from complete ruin'.

104 TNA: PRO, MAF 209/772, White Fish Authority: consideration of powers and functions. White Fish Industry Board: Powers Required, 14 Jul. 1950.

105 Wilcox, 'A Record of Abortive Enquiries and Empty of Achievement?'

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