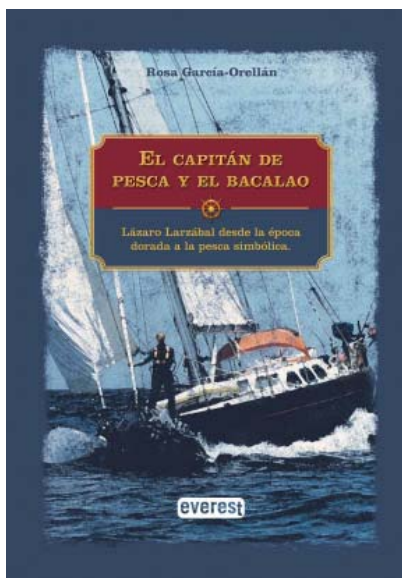


# Sleeping with One Eye Open

Rosa García-Orellán's biography of a Basque fishing captain follows him from his start as a 'cabin boy' in the 1950s, to 2008, when the writer interviewed him



COD AND THE FISHING CAPTAIN: LÁZARO LARZABAL, FROM THE GOLDEN AGE TO SYMBOLIC FISHING Rosa García-Orellán, Everest León 2011. 199 pages. ISBN 978-84-441-0304-4

Since 2004, when the first edition of the book *Hombres de Terranova* (“Men from Newfoundland”) was published, the end of the industrial method of pair trawling for cod has been in sight. This fishing technique, in which two vessels trawl with a single net, experienced its golden age in the decade of the 1960s. From the 330 pages and the 306 accounts and life stories contained in *Hombres de Terranova*, emerge 74 alternative voices, which show the circumstances under which fisheries activities were developed, speaking for three generations and thereby placing in context over 70 years of fishing activity.

The captains in the Spanish fleet worked in teams hunting for the fish shoals, in the same way that Portuguese, French and Russian captains did. In 2006 Rosa García-Orellán, the author, met Lázaro Larzabal, a captain from the Spanish cod fleet who was atypical, having explored the Grand Banks alone. He had never worked as part of a team, but made his own innovations in fishing. In examining his experience through this biography, Rosa García-Orellán reveals a new perspective on the world of seafaring in the era of Lázaro Larzabal.

In February 2006, the author started to record interviews in Bayona, Pontevedra. At that time, Lázaro had been commanding vessels for around 50 years and was then in charge of the cod pair trawler *Leon Marco* based in Vigo. Guided by Lázaro, we follow the course of cod pair trawling in the northwest Atlantic from 1962 to 2008, when pair trawlers began to withdraw from fishing, making way once again for single-vessel trawling, with very few

vessels. By following Lázaro's training and early beginnings in fishing, the biography makes us enter a different world and a different environment.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first covers Lázaro's infancy and family memories, his formative years in the nautical fisheries schools and his passage from the *boniteros* (tuna fishing vessels) to taking command of trawlers in Ondárroa. The second chapter is dedicated to Newfoundland, the third covers Norway, and the last deals with fishermen's culture.

Lázaro, whose professional career extends from 1952 to 2008, has over 50 years of uninterrupted work in seafaring. Son and grandson of trawler fishermen, his family circumstances take us back to the start of the expansion of industrial fishing based on pair trawling in the Basque coastal ports, and its expansion along its northern coasts.

All life is interlaced with contexts and reference points; we are all mediators of our time, and Lázaro's biography allows us to observe how the world of fishing lives with a large variety of contexts and reference points. Situations like the 1936 civil war, the post-war period and subsequently being orphaned mark the life of our protagonist. It was the women in his domestic entourage who pushed him to become a fishing captain—he became what his father and grandfather were before him.

## Cabin boy

In 1952 Lázaro was the youngest pupil in the nautical college. In the same year, armed with his college certificate, he worked aboard three *boniteros*, but his

age forced him to abide by the tradition of the youngest member aboard the vessel becoming the “txó” or cabin boy, who has to serve the crew as well as learn to stitch nets. His father’s encouragement of the value of sport and discipline influenced Lázaro’s approach to vessels in his future professional career. Being orphaned made him responsible for the economic care of his family, and forced him to abandon sailing, his passion, and decide to continue in industrial fishing where more money could be earned.

Lázaro’s sea-going experience during this initial phase is interesting. From working on tuna vessels mid-way through the last century, he made the change from trolling vessels to using tanks with live bait for fishing—a genuine attempt to install new technology to address a range of problems that needed solving. Space on board the fishing vessels then was highly restricted, with crews of 12 to 14 manning vessels of only 14 m in length.

Dolphins along the Basque tuna coasts were seen as “sheep dogs” as they rounded up shoals of anchovies from below, bringing them to the surface and making them visible for the vessels, signalling when it was opportune to shoot the net so as to catch the anchovies as bait for tuna. Dolphins were never hunted for profit, which was prohibited by the fishermen’s *cofradia* (union); they only fished dolphins for food and any excess would be kept in the vessel to be shared with the rest of the fleet. It was not long before radio was introduced into the tuna fleet, which meant better communication amongst the fishermen, which also contributed to safety at sea. Throughout the decade of the 1950s, technology was being introduced into the tuna fleet that allowed them to fish for tuna at farther distances.

Experience aboard the Ondárroa trawlers forged the aptitudes and skills needed by a fishing captain to master a vessel. Under French captains Lázaro learned about trawling innovations, and thanks to his explorer’s nature, which combines knowledge, intuition and leadership

capacity, he began to make hugely successful catches. He becomes a star much in demand among fishing vessel owners. However, in 1966, Lázaro decided to make his first trip to Newfoundland, assisting the fishing captain Ángel Aldanondo to convert two single trawlers of the *Pesqueras Españolas de Bacalao Sociedad Anónima (PEBSA)*, the Spanish cod fisheries company, the *Santa Elisa* and *Santa Marina*, for pair trawling. The stakes for this trip were high.

The decade of the 1950s saw pairs of smaller vessels of 180 tonnes appearing on the Newfoundland Grand Banks. A decade later, once they were successfully established, they began developing towards using stern ramps. According to Lázaro, pair trawling, due to the seabed conditions where he was working, caught the largest, most commercially prized, cod. It was the hunt for large cod that encouraged vessel owners in PEBSA to try pair trawling with the *Santa Elisa* and the *Santa Marina*. The stakes were high, since these were large vessels, 100 m in length, which must be co-ordinated with precision, using hydraulic steering during fishing manoeuvres (shooting, hauling and handling the net).

In 1968, as the captain in charge of these boats, Lázaro broke the record for landings in the port of Vigo: 1,760 tonnes of salted cod based on

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Lázaro Larzabal on deck. Son and grandson of trawler fishermen, his professional career extended from 1952 to 2008

the preparation of 4,048 tonnes of fresh cod. There was no desalination equipment aboard the vessels then, and the cod had to be worked by hand on deck. That was the largest landing ever made by a pair trawl operation in the Spanish fleet, and it has never been beaten. Those were the golden years for pair trawling, and Spain moved from being a fish-importing country to an exporter. An interplay of factors contributed to this change, including fleet expansion, pushed by the State through shipping credit policies, new navigational methods and electronic fish detection, and on-board freezing technology.

The continued success of pair trawling depended on exploring the seas, and in that era of *Mare Liberum* they not only explored the Grand Banks from Boston to Greenland but also the Norwegian banks. The changing technology of the vessels, as well as the imposition of the 200-mile limit by coastal States created a new framework for the cod fleet, making it necessary to apply new strategies.

Life on board the trawlers revolved around work: time was divided

and those of vessel owners pointing to their need for the activity to be profitable, and the voices of biologists and public administration officials completing the picture.

As regards fishing culture and trawling, “fishermen are like farmers, they want the fields to be fertile so they can harvest crops”. Fishermen consider that once the sea bed is cleared of corals, shoals of fish can move in, and this makes for an interesting interaction between the positions taken by biologists and fishermen. There is much reflection about the reasons for the collapse of the cod on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. While several causes have been cited, the fact that cod populations are not recovering is an issue that should not be mixed up with the overfishing that produced the collapse.

For the Spanish biologist Antonio Vasquez, first of all, it is the ecosystem that has changed; a second possibility is that the ecosystem does not allow for the recovery of collapsed species. There are also views like those of the Canadian biologist George Rose, who maintains: “Climate change may be more of a threat than overfishing, given that while we might be able to come up with some solutions for overfishing, for climate change, at the rate global warming is going, we can’t.”

The repercussion that the collapse of cod had for the Newfoundland fisherman is also dealt with in this book, given that cod is a very important charismatic species for the east coast Canadians whose settlements were built on the “Atlantic gold”, the cod. The book shows how they were struggling to cope with the cod fishing moratorium.

Captain Lázaro reflects that despite the dependence on high-tech gadgets these days, fishing gear and instinct still play an important role, though much less so today than mid-way through the last century.

### **Different voices**

Apart from the voices of fishermen, the voices of the vessel owners, who need to ensure that their activities

**Lázaro’s biography also reflects on the exploitation of marine resources, with the voices of fishermen describing their activity and the state of the sea...**

between periods of work and periods of rest, but once fishing started, there was a rhythm marked by the catching and handling of fish. Lázaro exercised authority and power on his boat, but he also experienced moments of extreme solitude when taking decisions on accidents, deaths, mutinies and when cod did not appear for more than 10 days. Those were the times when he had to make decisions all alone. He also had to confront storms of force 12 on the Beaufort scale.

Lázaro’s biography also reflects on the exploitation of marine resources, with the voices of fishermen describing their activity and the state of the sea;

LÁZARO LARZABAL

remain profitable, also emerge in the biography. By 2008, after over a decade of globalized markets for fishery products, there is a definite paradigm shift, where pair trawling is giving way to single-boat trawling, with single vessels equipped with high technology making pair trawling no longer profitable.

The work described in this book already belongs to museums, in the sense that pair fishing cannot continue in the new fisheries framework. However, its history in industrial fisheries is of great interest for marine biologists such as Antonio Vázquez or Enrique Lopez Veiga, for whom the future will require us to “make fields in the sea”. As George Rose points out, rather than managing fisheries on a species basis, we must manage them as marine ecosystems. Currently, all these proposals are relevant in fisheries exploitation at the global level, with a population that has tripled since the Second World War, and with globalized markets that force us to look at oceans in their entirety.

The sentiments and the life of the fisherman is the main thread that runs through the book, so it is apt that this short account should finish with the words of Lázaro himself: “On board, we sleep with one eye open, and this lasts for the entire fishing campaign. You can’t afford a lapse in concentration or discipline, as being off your guard will put all the others at risk, and this we know. Those who don’t know the sea are unaware of what takes place there and how we work on board ... those hours, dark and black, for all you can say about them, they go unseen. And what is more, seeing them and feeling them is very hard. So we really respect the sea”. 🐟



Dockside in Vigo. In 1968, Lázaro broke the record for landings in the port of Vigo by a pair trawl operation, which remains unbeaten

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