

"She Was Skipper of the Shore-Crew"

Notes on the History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Newfoundland

Marilyn Porter

Volume 15, 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt15cri02>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Porter, M. (1985). "She Was Skipper of the Shore-Crew": Notes on the History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Newfoundland. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 15, 105-124.

“She Was Skipper of the Shore-Crew:”

Notes on the History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Newfoundland

Marilyn Porter

OUR CURRENT INADEQUATE KNOWLEDGE of the generation and maintenance of the sexual division of labour has generally limited the discussion either to broad generalizations or to extrapolation based on highly specific examples.¹ What we do know suggests that there is a tension between the remarkable consistency of the *general* lines of the sexual division of labour and the degree of variation that prevents the establishment of “universal” rules. Within the broad patriarchal relations of dominance and subordination, there is an almost infinite variation in both gender relations and the sexual division of labour. Nor is the pattern fixed in any single society. Sexual divisions are constructed, negotiated, and endlessly challenged. Recent work by anthropologists and sociologists has focused on ways in which patriarchal relations operate through the institutions of marriage and the family and in relation to capitalist productive relations.² Historians have contributed a growing body of detailed studies which show subordination mediated through family patterns, economic and technological organization, religious and political ideology, and many other factors.³

¹ The latter is probably the most useful to the development of theory. Some of the best work has been done by anthropologists, for example, essays in the collections of R. Reiter, *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York 1975); M. McCormack and M. Strathern, *Nature, Culture and Gender* (Cambridge 1980); K. Young, *Of Marriage and the Market* (London 1981). The former is often restricted by its dependence on the somewhat arbitrary comparisons thrown up by Murdock and White's (1969) Standard Cross Cultural Sample, for example, M.K. Whyte, *The Status of Women in Pre-industrial Societies* (London 1978); P. Danday, *Female Power and Male Dominance* (Cambridge 1981).

² See C. Delphy, *The Main Enemy* (London 1978); J. Finch, *Married to the Job* (London 1983); S. Walby, “Patriarchal Structures: the Case of Unemployment,” in E. Garmarnikow, ed., *Gender, Class and Work* (London 1983).

³ Recent examples would include B. Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (London

M. Porter, “She Was Skipper of the Shore-Crew”: Notes on the History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Newfoundland,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (Spring 1985), 105-123.

Newfoundland rural outports are maritime communities, dominated economically and ideologically by fishing. While fishing is no longer the mainstay of the province's economy,⁴ it is the mainstay (together with fishing-related government transfer payments) of the 900-plus outports scattered along the 6,000 miles of island coastline and the Labrador coast — that is, of the rural population.⁵ Despite an offshore fishery and the increasing numbers of long-liners and small privately owned trawlers (some 800), which can venture further from their home ports, most outports are still dominated by a traditional inshore fishery carried out in small boats (usually crewed by male agnates) operating close to their home ports. A few exceptional women take an active part in fishing,⁶ and many more are involved in the fishery — processing fish in the fish plants or providing supplementary services. But by and large, the traditionally rigid sexual division of labour is unbreached. In addition, physical conditions in the outports are tough, and "male" activities such as hunting and woodcutting still play a large part in the rural economy. In short, the ethos of "fishermen" is a rugged *male* identity, and it is clamped firmly over the image of outport life.

This association of maritime communities with a rigid and extreme sexual division of labour is a commonplace of anthropological literature,⁷ yet studying gender relations and the sexual division of labour in Newfoundland rural communities raises certain problems. Rigid and extreme sexual divisions have been traditionally interpreted as giving rise to oppressive male dominance. J. Tunstall gave a classic account of the negative consequences of seafaring domestic relations among the Hull fishermen and similar tendencies have been reported from Aberdeen and San Diego. J. Zulaika, writing about Portuguese fishermen, describes similar manifestations but makes some interesting and

1983); S. Oldfield, *Spinsters of this Parish* (London 1984); D. Gittins, *Fair Sex: Family Size and Structure 1900-1939* (London 1982); and P. Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War* (London 1982).

⁴ Today fishing only contributes 12 per cent of the net value of production (Economic Council of Canada 1980) and employs only 13 per cent of the labour force (G. Munroe, St. John's 1980). For statistics on the composition of the fishing fleet see *Setting a Course*, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador (St. John's 1978).

⁵ This essay ignores the growing proportion of the population who live in St. John's and the other urban centres. In 1981, out of a total population of 567,681, 332,898 were classified as dwelling in urban areas, 154,820 in St. John's. The position of women in St. John's is also interesting historically, but I have not had space to investigate it here.

⁶ Estimates vary, but there are probably not more than a couple of dozen full-time fisherwomen. Nearly all of them do it because of unusual family circumstances, for example, a family of daughters with no close relatives to take over the boat and gear. A few wives fish with their husbands in the smaller crews; more since a recent change in UIC regulations made this a profitable adaptation.

⁷ For example, see R. Firth, *Malay Fishermen: Their Peasant Economy* (London 1946); M.E. Smith, *Those Who Live From the Sea* (New York 1977); R. Andersen, *North Atlantic Maritime Cultures* (The Hague 1979); J.A. Acheson, "The Anthropology of Fishing," *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1981).

sensitive comments on the relationship between the demands of a tough seaman identity and its expression in sexual relations. Male anthropologists working in Newfoundland with this implicit understanding have stressed women's heavy work load, male authority in the family, male-biased inheritance rules, and the practice of exogamy.⁸

Yet it is not quite like that. Recent feminist studies⁹ have found outport women to be relatively independent, politically and economically, and to suffer apparently little marital violence or overt male hostility outside the home, and moreover, to be in possession of a vibrant and positive women's culture. In puzzling this apparent contradiction in previous papers, I have focused on a number of countervailing forces, of which the women's considerable economic leverage deriving from their continued share in the fishery seemed to me the most salient. However, it is also noticeable that all of the studies of male oppression associated with maritime activities have been based on communities where men are at sea for considerable periods of time. This is not true of most Newfoundland fishermen, and is certainly not true of the traditional inshore cod fishery. P. Thompson,¹⁰ working in Scotland, has argued forcibly that the considerable variations in gender and family relations between Scottish communities are associated with different patterns of childrearing practices and economic adaptations. In this research note, I have approached the problem more circuitously: to see if it is possible, by using

⁸ See J. Tunstall, *The Fishermen* (London 1962); M. Gray, *The Fishing Industries of Scotland* (London 1978); P. Thompson, *Living the Fishing* (London 1983); M. Orbach, *Hunters, Seamen and Entrepreneurs* (Berkeley 1977); J. Zulaika, *Terra Nova* (St. John's 1981). For male anthropological accounts of Newfoundland outports, see J. Faris, *Cat Harbour* (St. John's 1972); M.M. Firestone, *Savage Cove* (St. John's 1978); for a more questioning perspective see R. Andersen and C. Wadel, eds., *North Atlantic Fishermen* (St. John's 1972).

⁹ The explicitly feminist academic studies are few. I would include D. Davis, "Social Structure, Sex Roles and Female Associations in a Newfoundland Fishing Village," (unpublished paper 1979); D. Davis, *Blood and Nerves* (St. John's 1983); D. Davis, "The Family and Social Change in the Newfoundland Outport," *Culture*, III, 1 (1983); E. Antler, "Women's Work in Newfoundland Fishing Families," (unpublished paper 1976); E. Antler, "Maritime Mode of Production, Domestic Mode of Production or Labour Process: an Examination of the Newfoundland Inshore Fishery," (unpublished paper 1977); C. Benoit, "The Poverty of Mothering," (M.A. thesis, Memorial University); C. Benoit, "The Politics of Mothering in a Newfoundland Village," (unpublished paper 1982); A. Matthews, "The Newfoundland Migrant Wife," in A. Himelfarb and J. Richardson, *People, Power and Process* (Toronto 1980); M.B. Porter, "Women and Old Boats: the Sexual Division of Labour in a Newfoundland Outport," in E. Garmarnikow, *The Public and the Private* (London 1983); M.B. Porter, "The Tangly Bunch: the Political Culture of Avalon Women," in *Newfoundland Studies* (forthcoming). There is also considerable descriptive evidence in autobiographies and folklore accounts, for example, Greta Hussey, *Our Life on Lear's Room* (St. John's 1981); H. Murray, *More than 50%* (St. John's 1979); H. Porter, *Below the Bridge* (St. John's 1979); E. Goudie, *Women of Labrador* (St. John's 1973).

¹⁰ P. Thompson, et al., *Living the Fishing* (London 1983).

historical material, to clarify how current gender relations and sexual divisions of labour arose. A number of caveats have to be entered.

There is a considerable quantity of material on the early history of Newfoundland (from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century), but no serious work has been done on women in this period, and we are left with tantalizing glimpses, extrapolation, and plain guesswork about the lives of the early female settlers. All that we can be sure about is that women *did* come from the times of the earliest settlements, both as wives and daughters, and as single women who came as servants. Inevitably all their lives were both hard and hard working, and there are indications that certain traditions and divisions of labour that are current on the island today originated then. But the argument that follows is based on the more certain evidence of demography and patterns of settlement, until we reach the better-documented nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The island of Newfoundland has always been characterized by considerable variation in climate and geography, which dictates variations in fishing patterns and strategies. There are also variations relating to the relative strengths of different denominations and sects in different areas, and to the origins of the first settlers and subsequent arrivals. All this has consequences for gender relations and the sexual division of labour, but because of the paucity of the material on women we cannot, as yet, make province-wide generalizations. I have, therefore, indicated which area of the island each piece of evidence relates to and how far it can be taken to be generally applicable. Most evidence comes from the northeast coast, and can only be applied with caution to the south coast, the southern shore, or the northern peninsula.

Nevertheless, I would argue that it is only by taking a larger perspective that we may be able to understand the current negotiation of gender relations.

I

"Soe long as there comes noe women they are not fixed:" Settlement, Expansion, and Permanence

ALTHOUGH EUROPEAN FISHERMEN from England, France, the Basque Country, Portugal, and Spain were exploiting the bountiful supplies of cod over the Grand Banks in the summer months by the end of the fifteenth century, if not earlier, there was no attempt at permanent settlement until 1610 when the London and Bristol Company of the Colonization of Newfoundland established a settlement of 40 men at Cupids, Conception Bay. Manifestly women were needed to establish a settlement and in August 1611, sixteen women arrived, and by March 1613 the first recorded child was born.¹¹ Apart from that we know little of who they were, why they came, or what their lives were like — save that in the prevailing conditions there was no room for slackers of either sex. The story is repeated for the Welsh settlements at

¹¹ A son, to Nicholas Guy, related to John Guy, but the mother's name is not recorded.

Renews (1618), the Bristol settlement at Harbour Grace (1618), and Calvert's more successful venture at Ferryland (1620). Throughout it is arguable that tough and hard working though the women were, it was less relevant to the development of their economic independence and mutual respect than their role in settlement as such.

A signal feature of settlement in Newfoundland up to the end of the eighteenth century was the demographic sexual imbalance and the effect the absence of women had on the speed and success of settlement. There was a huge preponderance of men on the island, especially in summer when the seasonal migrants (wholly men) far outnumbered the winter residents. Small groups of men (and a very few families) wintered over for one or two seasons. Even among the permanent residents the number of male apprentices and servants far outnumbered the imported women. Significant as they were, the servant girls were in no way sufficient to produce a balanced population. It produced problems of order in St. John's¹² and prevented further settlement on the frontiers. As a naval captain put it succinctly in 1684, "soe long as there comes noe women they are not fixed." This situation was a double-edged sword to the authorities. Those on the ground complained bitterly about disorder "for the permanent growth of a colonial population every single man who is sent out in excess of the number of single women is absolutely useless."¹³ On the other hand, the English government did not want growth of the colony and was reluctant to admit that it had grown as much as it had, in which case the answer was simple — restrict the number of women immigrants. While there seems to be no evidence that this measure was ever tried, it does seem to have been on the agenda for some time.¹⁴

In any event, the pattern of a large summer (male) migration and a much smaller resident population continued through the eighteenth century, and so did the friction between them. In 1675, 1,200 people wintered on the island; by 1730 it was 3,500; by 1750 it was 7,300, and by 1753 it had risen tenfold to 12,000. The proportion of women at the beginning of the century was only 10 per cent (instead of a "normal" 25 per cent) and children only accounted for 25 per cent (instead of 50 per cent). By the end of the century these proportions had risen to 13 per cent and 33 per cent respectively and they climbed to normal proportions a few years later. As G. Head puts it, "the wintering population was approaching normal characteristics and no longer contained an overwhelming mass of single male labourers. With women and children the attachment to the island was firmer."

The necessity of women to settlement was clear, but the growth in the number of women had another important consequence. The "planters" (estab-

¹² In 1766 St. John's, the rate of single Irish men to available women was as high as 17:1, quoted in C. Grant Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland* (Toronto 1976), 87.

¹³ Quoted in J. Mannion, ed., *The Peopling of Newfoundland* (St. John's 1977), 19.

¹⁴ See J. Halton and M. Harvey, *Newfoundland, the Oldest British Colony* (London 1883), 43.

lished fishermen with their own boats) ceased to import large numbers of "youngsters" (servants from Europe) and relied instead on their families. It is likely, given the tradition of active female involvement, that wives had always helped out on shore at peak times, but evidence suggests that the heyday of family production began in the late eighteenth century.¹⁵

I will examine the Newfoundland family fishery in more detail below, but first I want to complete the record of women's more basic contribution to the colony — as sexual partners and founders of families. Bonavista Bay and Trinity Bay had had scattered settlements in the eighteenth century (of 450-900 and 1,500 respectively in 1772) and a few pioneers had already moved north to Notre Dame Bay and Fogo. On the south coast, settlement was centred on St. Jacques, Fortune, and Grand Bank at the east end, and on Port aux Basque in the west, and these gradually extended to meet at Burgeo and Ramea, although the total resident population of the south coast continued to be small (about 600 in 1763).

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, new settlements were established not by new immigration from England but by families moving to a "summer station" on a less frequented stretch of the coast — as far as the northern peninsula, and later Labrador.¹⁶ If the family was happy, they might well settle there. Those families then had children and the ensuing marriageable girls attracted further settlement. In one example, on the extreme northwest tip of the island, a tiny group of Englishmen in a merchant's employment survived until the Watts family arrived, with two sons and two daughters. One daughter married William Buckle in the late 1890s and they founded the Buckle family that spreads across Labrador to this day. The other daughter, Mary, married a naval deserter, Alexander Duncan, who changed his name to his mother's maiden name of Gould. They had three sons (from whom are descended the numerous and powerful Goulds of the Flowers Cove/Port au Choix area) and nine daughters "who grew into beautiful girls" providing a sudden bonus supply of eligible wives for the young English settlers. These couples spread along the coast from Eddie's Cove to St. Margaret's Bay, populating all the coves.¹⁷

The demographic contribution of women to settlement has been recognized both by contemporary authorities and spelt out in recent studies,¹⁸ although the

¹⁵ Similar arrangements in family economics have been documented in pre-industrial France and England by, for example, L.T. Tilly and J.W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (New York 1978). For citations see C. Grant Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland*, 141, 232, 82, 218.

¹⁶ There are several excellent first-hand accounts of the Labrador summer fishery, one especially by G. Hussey, *Our Life*, who did not settle there, but makes clear the process by which it happened. See also F. Barbour, *Memories of Life on the Labrador and Newfoundland* (New York 1979).

¹⁷ M. Firestone, *Savage Cove*, 23.

¹⁸ See J. Mannion, *Peopling of Newfoundland*; G. Head, *Eighteenth Century New-*

feminist implications have not been. But the economic contribution of "the skipper of the shore crew" has been more slowly recognized. It is to her that we now turn.

II

Women's Work in the Fishing Settlements

THE BEST DOCUMENTED AREA is the northeast coast and much of the discussion that follows is taken from there. The situation, for example, on the south coast where the trap fishery never developed, was significantly different. Moreover, the evidence is too sparse for any legitimate conclusions to be drawn as to whether the consequences of women's different roles in the fishing economy were as great as might be expected. At this point, all I am attempting is a description of the sexual division of labour as it developed, especially on the northeast coast, together with certain congruences with women's position as observed today.

A further caveat needs to be entered when collapsing such a long period as that between the beginning of the nineteenth century and Confederation (1949). Clearly there were profound technical changes (such as the introduction of the cod trap, and of engines), social changes (such as the more widespread education), and political changes (such as the rise and fall of the Fishermen's Protective Union in the early twentieth century).¹⁹ Nevertheless it seems that the essential pattern of the sexual division of labour did remain relatively constant, and in this discussion I shall stress that continuity. It is in this context that I am using material such as Greta Hussey's autobiography to illustrate patterns that existed long before. It should, however, be reiterated that the context in which they occurred was changing.

The outpost communities were always (up to the influx of federal money in 1949)²⁰ on the brink of survival. A bad year could push whole settlements into

foundland: G. Hancock, "English Migration to Newfoundland," in J. Mannion, *Peopling of Newfoundland*.

¹⁹ The cod trap is recorded as early as Bonne Espérance 1868 and seems to have been widespread by the later 1870s. Inboard engines did not become common until 1920s. Social changes arose mainly as a consequence of missionary activity. See W. Wilson, *Newfoundland and its Missionaries* (Cambridge 1866); D.W. Prowse, *A History of Newfoundland from English Colonial and Foreign Records* (London 1895). For various interpretations of the Fisherman's Protective Union see W.F. Coaker, *The History of the FPU in Newfoundland 1909-29* (St. John's 1930); B. Neis, "Competitive Merchants and Class Struggle in Newfoundland," *Studies in Political Economy*, 5 (1981); J. Feltman, "The Development of the Fishermen's Union in Newfoundland," (M.A. thesis, Memorial University, 1959); I. McDonald, "W.F. Coaker and the Fishermen's Protective Union in Newfoundland Politics, 1908-25," (Ph.D. thesis, London University, 1971).

²⁰ Even then their economic vulnerability made them liable to various "rationalizations," for example, J. Smallwood's Resettlement Programme in the 1960s which

starvation or emigration. I stress this because it was women who, as always, had the prime responsibility for feeding, cleaning, and caring for themselves, the men, and the children. It would have been hard in those wild conditions even in prosperity: in poverty it was an enormous task.

A complication that affected many families was a pattern of transhumance. Families who lived out on the exposed headlands would often "winter in" the head of the bay where there was more shelter and more wood. They lived in "tilts" — crude shacks which nonetheless, women had to make habitable. Conversely, many families lived "at home" in the winter but moved in the summer to "summer stations" or "outside" to fish. These places were often hundreds of miles away "on the Labrador." Greta Hussey describes her mother packing everything the family might need in "the Labrador box" for four or more months. They took "pots, pans, dishes, cooking gear and most of the rough grub that we lived on, such as salt beef, dried peas, dried beans, hard bread, sugar, butter and salt pork."²¹

The range of domestic activities Newfoundland women undertook as a matter of course accords closely with descriptions given of the lives of rural women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in other parts of America and Europe.²² Feeding the family included most of the care of the animals — a few cows, sheep, goats, horses, and later chickens, who needed hay and roots to help them survive the winter. The garden was a major responsibility. Men usually did the actual digging, but women cleared or "picked" the ground of stones, planted and weeded it, and defended it against animals. Then they gathered the vegetables and dried them or preserved them (sometimes in salt) in a root cellar, as they are recorded as doing in Edward Winne's letter from Ferryland in 1622.²³ They practised rotation of crops and despised shop-bought seed because "the flies would eat it." Besides, a woman was considered lazy "if she did not grow her own seeds."²⁴

If the family kept cows or goats, then the wife made butter. A major food gathering activity was berry picking, and while men sometimes did this, it was primarily the task of the women and children. Most of them relished the opportunity to get out on the barrens and the marshes. Blueberries, partridge berries, the succulent bake apples, marsh berries, currants and cranberries,

resulted in the extinction of several hundred of the smaller or more remote outposts and the relocation of the inhabitants to more "convenient" locations. See C. Wadel, *Marginal Adaptations and Modernization in Newfoundland* (St. John's 1969); N. Iverson and R. Matthews, *Communities in Decline* (St. John's 1968).

²¹ G. Hussey, *Our Life*, 5.

²² For example see M. Chamberlain, *Fewwomen* (London 1975); F. Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (London 1945); S. van Kirk, "Many Tender Ties": *Women in the Fur Trade, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg 1980); B. Light and A. Prentice, *Pioneer and Gentle Women of British North America 1713-1867* (Toronto 1980).

²³ Quoted in G.T. Cell, *Newfoundland Discovered: English Attempts at Colonization, 1610-1630* (London 1972).

²⁴ H. Murray, *More Than 50%*, 18.

raspberries and blackberries were all gathered on different parts of the island. Many of them were sold, and a family might well provide itself with its winter supplies of flour, margarine, sugar, molasses, beef, and pork with its "berry-note."²⁵ In passing we should note that this is, in effect, a cash contribution to the family income. The rest were bottled or "jammed down." And so we enter the kitchen. The Newfoundland housewife was honour-bound to set a meal before any member of the family (or visitor) the moment they entered the house. Like many of the practices noted here, it survives today. Everyone had at least four meals a day, and in summer it often rose to seven or eight — a man's light snack in the early morning, breakfast about 7:30-8:00, a mug-up at 10:30-11:00, dinner at 12:00-1:00 p.m., mug-up at 3:30-4:00, tea at 5:30-6:00 p.m. and a mug-up before bedtime at 10:30-11:00 p.m. "Mug-ups" consisted of tea, bread and butter, and "relish" — left over fish or home-made jam, and the last meal of the day, "the night-lunch," was often quite substantial. Main meals, not surprisingly, revolved around fish and potatoes, but salt pork, salt beef, figgy duff and pease pudding, thick soups and dumplings were common. Game-meat or birds were a coveted extra. A glance at any traditional Newfoundland cookbook will show that housewives stressed quantity and weight above all else, but they were ingenious in ringing the changes on limited ingredients.

Bread-making was both a major chore and a woman's pride: "the knowledge of breadmaking was one skill all marriageable girls were expected to possess" and little girls would stand on chairs to make the "barm" or dough. Most housewives baked at least once a day; large families needed two bakings.²⁶ Before commercial yeast was introduced in the 1920s, women grew their own hops. Greta Hussey made her own yeast from hops and raw potato because she was dissatisfied with the bread made from shop-bought yeast. In times of dire poverty they would mix potatoes with the flour to eke it out.

Men's suits always seem to have been bought when possible, but most other clothes were homemade. It was another task made more obviously complicated by poverty. Coats had to be "turned," flour sacks had to be transformed into pillow cases, aprons, and tablecloths, and in the poorer families, into dresses and shirts brightened by embroidery. "The coloured thread was inexpensive and with a bit of skill and a few hours work, plain flour sacking was made very attractive."²⁷ Quilting was less developed than it was in the United States, but hooking mats developed into a folk art.²⁸ This developed because the women covered bare floors with mats of brin "hooked" with pictures or designs using any brightly coloured rags they could find, thus saving the last scraps of an old garment. The results fetch high prices today and

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁸ See G. Pocius, "Hooked Rugs in Newfoundland," *Journal of American Folklore*, 92, 365 (1979).

are an enduring testimony to the skill and resourcefulness of Newfoundland housewives.

Some women made sails or "twine" for the nets but such work is usually conspicuous by its absence in women's tasks — a sign and a symbol of the separation of worlds that began exactly at the shoreline, or landwash. Some women could card and spin wool straight from the sheep; but all women could knit and the list of garments that had to be turned out is staggering. Murray cites "knitted petticoats, long stockings, vamps (ankle length socks), corsocks (balaclavas), mittens, cuffs, gloves, vests, long johns and sweaters." In addition, there was the mending, a much less attractive task and one heartily hated by the young cooks who went on the Labrador fishery.²⁹

Washing started with carrying water and splitting wood — both women's tasks. Before the 1930s, they made their own soap from rotten cod livers and wood ash. They took care to "blue" and bleach their whites — and even after scrubbing boards were introduced, some women would not use them because they were "hard on the clothes." The production of a faultless line of washing was another indication of a woman's pride. Even today there is a correct order in which to hang clothes on the line that newcomers flout at their peril. Health was another female concern, and most women knew some folk remedies, but the real skill resided with the midwives. Two or three women in each community won the confidence of the women with their skill and patience, at a time when doctors were frequently unavailable. Their work needs a separate account.³⁰

Houses gradually became more complex (and larger) but some features endured (and still endure today). They were made of wood by the men of the family. A man's pride rested on his ability to build his own boat and house as surely as the woman's did in her "domestic" skills. The central room was the kitchen in which virtually all family activity took place, and in which the many visitors were received. Houses were kept spotless. They were repainted or repapered inside at least once a year and the kitchen was done spring and fall including repainting the floor linoleum. G. Hussey records repapering their Labrador house with newspaper or religious tracts each year when they arrived. Floors and steps were scrubbed daily. Mats and bedding were aired. One of the heaviest and least popular jobs was washing the heavy winter bed covers when summer eventually released them. Lamps were trimmed and polished, stoves polished. There is an endless list of such recurring tasks.

The enormous extent and weight of the work, as well as the variety of the

²⁹ G. Hussey, *Our Life*, 44.

³⁰ In comparing M. Chamberlain's material (*Fenwomen*) with my own, I tentatively put forward two generalizations. Firstly, Newfoundland midwives never developed as many erudite skills, either herbal or surgical. They managed on commonsense and humility. Their hallmark was their accessibility. They would willingly buckle down and sort out the rest of the family or climb into bed with the mother for a warmup and a giggle. See C. Benoit, "The Politics of Mothering," for some further comments.

skills and the standards of excellence the women maintained are impressive, but they are not unique. What marks out the Newfoundland women was that into this crowded schedule came the fishing. The timing and length of the fishing season varied around the coast as did the species pursued and the methods used. The south coast, for instance, could pursue a winter fishery free of ice. Its proximity to the Grand Banks also made it a natural headquarters for the banking schooners.³¹ On the northeast coast, the seal hunt was an important part of the economy. Herring were important on the south and west coasts. Shellfish were increasingly caught, and lobster-canning factories were established on the northern peninsula in the nineteenth century.

But these were all supplementary to the inshore pursuit of "King Cod." In most parts of the island, cod came inshore in pursuit of caplin in early summer and remained until fall. The traditional English approach had always focused on this catch, taken from small boats first with hook and line, and later in cod traps.³² Boats were under pressure to catch as much as possible in the short season — up to five boatloads a day. The crews did not have time to deal with the much more complex and time-consuming operation of drying the fish onshore. While the shore operation never became "women's work" the way baking was, it did become an area in which women developed skills and expertise. Above all, in the context of the full-fledged trap fishery it involved considerable authority as the "skipper," that is the fisherman's wife, had charge of the whole process, including the hiring and supervision of labour.

Essentially, the fish, each one of which could weigh up to ten pounds or more, were processed along an assembly line. Each load was pitchforked up onto the stage. There the "cut throat" began the operation, the "header" removed the head and guts, and "splitter" (the most skillful operator) removed the backbone. The fish were then washed and the "salter" put them in layers into barrels of salt. After a few weeks, the fish were "made." First they were washed and then carried out to the flakes where they were dried and stacked. It was an operation calling for timing and experience to spread the fish out at the correct time and then build stacks of the right size so that the fish stayed in perfect condition throughout the process.³³

³¹ While this was the original method of exploiting the cod resource, it seems to have been neglected by the English settlers until its revival in the eighteenth century (Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland*, 203-6). Andersen has studied it in its heyday at the end of the nineteenth century. R. Andersen, "The 'Count' and the 'Share': Offshore Fishermen and Changing Incentives," in R.J. Preston, *Canadian Ethnology*, 40 (Ottawa 1978); R. Andersen, "The Social Organization of the Newfoundland Banking Schooner Cod Fishery," (unpublished paper 1980).

³² There are numerous accounts of both the technology and the economics of the inshore cod fishery. See, for example, M. Firestone, *Savage Cove: NORDCO, It Were Well to Live Mainly Off Fish* (St. John's 1981).

³³ There are excellent descriptions of the first stage in G. Hussey, *Our Life*, 38, and W. Wilson, *Newfoundland and its Missionaries*, 211, which shows the continuity of the methods used.

It was first taken up with a small fish placed over a large one, both back up. Care had to be taken with the big "pickle" fish when taking them up for the first time, especially if it were a Saturday. Sunday might be hot and the big ones might sunburn if left unshielded. Next evening we put four fish together, head and tails. Then small "faggots," then larger "faggots" [that is rectangular piles nicely rounded on the top]. When the fish dried hard they were put in a big round pile.³⁴

While this process was carried out by all fishing families, the degree of division of labour and the timing varied according to whether the crew was a hand-lining crew or a trap crew. It was immensely hard work. Wilson reports one woman saying "If I had but two hours sleep in 24, I could stand the week's labor; but to do without rest for nearly a week is too much for my strength."³⁵ This was in addition to their usual work, which at this time of year included the preparation and clearing of seven meals a day for the equally exhausted fishermen. Luckily this intensity only lasted for two to three months with a gradual tailing off in the fall.

III

Economy and Authority: "The Woman was more than 50 per cent"

NOT SURPRISINGLY, MALE writers have largely failed to recognize the strategic importance of women's economic contribution to the fishery until Ellen Antler made a serious effort to estimate the cash value of the women's contribution to the fishery. She argued that the drying of the fishing added \$2,400 to the value of the season's catch in Labrador, \$1,500-2,000 in Conception Bay. Other writers have tried to put monetary or proportional values on the total amount that women's work contributed to the family income. Alexander reckoned it was at least half.³⁶ But to most outside authorities, this was an invisible reality. The economic unit was the family, and the head of that unit was the fisherman. Combined with ideological pre-eminence of the fisherman as a catcher of fish, it has helped to obscure not only the real contribution of women but also our understanding of the sexual division of labour in the outports.

Josiah Hobbs, who gave the title to Hilda Murray's book, was not alone in his estimation that "the woman was more than 50 per cent. . . . I should say, a woman, in a fisherman's work, was half the procedure." Whenever they are

³⁴ H. Murray, *More Than 50%*, 16.

³⁵ W. Wilson, *Newfoundland and its Missionaries*, 212.

³⁶ Estimates of both the quantity and the value of the family catch appear in E. Antler, "Women's work in Newfoundland fishery families" (unpub. 1976), G. Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland*; Alexander, *The Decay of Trade: an Economic History of the Newfoundland Salt Fish Trade, 1935-1965* (St. John's 1977) and O. Brox, *The Maintenance of Economic Dualism in Newfoundland* (St. John's 1969). The whole exercise is more ideologically useful than analytically pertinent in that under conditions of simple commodity production, the "value" is embodied in the product, rather than in the direct remuneration (via the wage). Nevertheless the effort to demonstrate that women's (and children's) labour contributes specifically to the value realized by the family unit was an important contribution.

asked, Newfoundland men unhesitatingly credit women with at least half the work of the family. There is an air of something like awe in the folklore descriptions older men give of the women of their youth.

The handling of what little cash actually passed in outport families reflects this trust. Women handled the "berry money," as we have seen. They also bartered the occasional dry fish for something they needed at the store. The end of the season reckoning when the fish were "shipped," that is sold to the local fish merchant, was in the hands of the man, but when he had "settled up" he gave this money to his wife.³⁷ Money earned "away" was passed to the wife and all household transactions were handled by her. Contemporary evidence bears this out. D. Davis working on the south coast records women handling all the domestic finances, referring major decisions to their husbands as a formality to rubber stamp their approval. Furthermore, they consider wages that they earn "theirs to spend as they see fit."³⁸

All this suggests that women have earned, and been granted, a place in the economic unit of the family as nearly equal partners. Yet, much evidence in the handling of family budgets suggests that while women often "manage" money it need not necessarily imply real control.³⁹ This suspicion is reinforced in Newfoundland by the fact that whatever arrangements were made within the family, external economic relations were carried out by, or in the name of, men.

There is, in addition, the tradition of male-dominated fishing communities, the "authoritarianism" of Newfoundland fathers and the extreme sexual division of labour. Both historically and in contemporary Newfoundland there are particular difficulties in establishing the dimensions of "power" and its relation to "authority." The pervasive egalitarian ethic and the consequent avoidance of authority in outport communities have often been remarked on.⁴⁰ Coupled with a stress on individualism (which is interpreted as individual families) this means that there is virtually no possibility for leadership or the exercise of power within the community. Even minor success is penalized, but on the other hand, if an individual or a family (or a community) feels wronged then voluble public protest is in order. When we look at the distribution of power in Newfoundland it is also important to remember that prior to Confederation, outport communities, in common with rural communities elsewhere, were not only politically powerless but economically marginal, with each individual family equally exploited by merchant interests.

³⁷ H. Murray, *More Than 50%*, 24.

³⁸ D. Davis, *Blood and Nerves*, 101.

³⁹ See J. Humphries, "Class Struggle and the Persistence of the Working Class Family," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 1, 3 (1977); R. Pahl, *Divisions of Labour* (London 1984).

⁴⁰ In, for example, J. Faris, *Cat Harbour*; D. Davis, *Blood and Nerves*; L. Chiaramonte, *Craftsman-Client Contracts. Interpersonal Relations in a Newfoundland Fishing Community* (St. John's 1970).

Some writers suggest that women (partly because of their stronger status) are less susceptible to the egalitarian ethic. In a previous paper, I pointed to one way which women had found of defining to the ethic but escaping its consequences. D. Davis, who worked in a community that was not characterized by exogamy, found women powerful in defence of their families and their own positions in the house, but less effective in public associations and penalized if they trespassed into the male sphere.⁴¹ Even today it makes little sense to talk of either men or women having power in a situation when the communities themselves have such a minimal public voice.

Patriarchal assumptions permeate nineteenth-century accounts and later anthropological work. Faris, for instance, simply states "In a fishing community one might reasonably expect a sharp division of labour along sexual lines, and Cat Harbour is certainly no exception," going on to observe that virilocal residence and exogamy reinforce such divisions. Faris has been criticized for his assumption on a number of grounds. Stiles⁴² and Davis, who worked on the south coast, which never operated the trap fishery in family units as they did on the northeast coast, both point to much closer and more reciprocal husband/wife relationships. Regional differences are certainly important, but here I want, rather, to stress Faris's dubious assumption that the people of Cat Harbour, especially the women, gave priority to men's work in the same way that Faris himself does.

Both Firestone and Faris produce some evidence for what they see as extreme male authority in the home. It is worth quoting the passage in which Firestone states:

The family is patriarchal. Decisions pertaining to family activities are ultimately those of the father . . . and plans of a group of brothers working under their fathers are finalized by him. In the house the woman gets a drink for her husband from the water barrel or food on demand. . . . The man tells his wife to do whatever it is that he wants in a matter of fact way — neither a command nor a request — and she complies.

He concludes "there is no question as to the man's authority nor to the woman's subordination."⁴³ He cites as corroborative evidence a woman saying "it is best when the wife does what the husband wants." But in the very next quotation we hear a woman saying "a good woman here is one who is obedient and doesn't try to tell the man what to do . . . at least the men would say that." Thus, even on the evidence Firestone gives us, there are some contradictions. Firstly, economic decisions relating to the fishing crew might well have been taken by the skipper without infringing on the way in which domestic decisions were taken. Secondly, the apparent servitude of women in the matter of providing food applies not just to the men of the house, but to everyone, including

⁴¹ D. Davis, *Blood and Nerves*.

⁴² G. Stiles, "Fishermen, Wives and Radios: Aspects of Communication in a Newfoundland Fishing Community" in Andersen and Wadel, eds., *North Atlantic Fishermen*.

⁴³ M. Firestone, *Savage Cove*, 77.

female visitors. I suggest that rather than reflecting subordination, it arises out of poverty and the extreme skill needed to produce sufficient food and drink. It has become part of the housewife's pride that she can, and does, supply what is necessary. When I see it today, I do not notice subjugation, but rather a sense of quiet confidence in the women's control of the kitchen and the house. Thirdly, it is hard for a feminist to escape intimations of connivance in the last quotation. She was, after all, talking to a man, Firestone, who would, she assumed, also "say that."

A more overt example of patriarchal practice is that of remuneration within the family for women's work in the shore crew. Women who were hired from outside the family were paid, but while the sons who fished received a share (or more likely a part share) of the voyage, the daughters who worked on shore got nothing. On the other hand, girls who worked outside the home did not have to contribute to the household, whereas boys did.⁴⁴ Again it was part of the economic structure organized around a patrilocal fishing crew. As Faris's unsympathetic male informant puts it, "Maids leave, so why should they get anything." What we see here seems to reflect an awkward transition from the time that a household is dependent on a daughter's labour to the time when another household is dependent on her labour as a wife. At this level, the Newfoundland situation seems to confirm the stress that Levi Strauss and his followers put on "the exchange of women" as fundamental to the social organization of male dominance. Yet, as M. Mackintosh has pointed out in connection with Meillassoux's arguments, because he regarded female subordination as a fact and not a problem, he slipped into illegitimate theoretical assertions that confused the relations of human reproduction with the process of the reproduction of the whole society and this led to a deduction of social relations from production relations.⁴⁵ Mackintosh, rightly, insists that we "should seek rather to grasp the way in which specific forms of these oppressions operate, how they are maintained and reinforced, how they are overthrown or why they are not overthrown,"⁴⁶ and this brings us back to the women of Newfoundland and the problem of an extreme sexual division of labour.

In many ways, this seems to be the crux. Partly because it is so expected in a maritime society, both male and female writers have tended to take it for

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁵ M. Mackintosh, "Reproduction and Patriarchy, a Critique of Meillassoux," *Capital and Class*, 2 (1977), 121.

⁴⁶ See M. Molyneux, "Beyond the Housework Debate," *New Left Review* 116 (1979) for a similar prescription. This brief reference makes a connection with a substantial theoretical debate, contributions to which have been made by theoretical debate, contributions to which have been made by V. Beechey, "On Patriarchy," *Feminist Review* 3 (1979); F. Edholm, *et al.*, "Conceptualizing Women," *Critique of Anthropology* 3, 9110 (1977); L. Bland, *et al.*, "Relations of Production: Approaches Through Anthropology," in Women's Studies Group, *Women Take Issue* (London 1978). This research note is an attempt to provide the kind of substantive data the debate calls for.

granted. There are, and probably always have been, exceptions, but the sexual division of labour in the outports is now and always has been extreme. There are clearly and geographically limited spheres of activity. Lists of "men's tasks" and "women's tasks" hardly overlap at all. Social, cultural, and political life is largely carried out in single sex groups.⁴⁷ Responsibilities within the household are quite separate. The problem lies in assessing what the consequences of this are, and this is compounded by the primacy accorded to the male activity of fishing. Because of the patriarchal structure of the wider society from which the outports come and in which they continue to be embedded, this carried with it (and still carries) various overt indications of dominance over the female spheres.

As the material under discussion has indicated, however, the extreme sexual division of labour in Newfoundland communities has been combined with women's vital and acknowledged economic contributions to the household economy, with the tradition of their vital role in settlement and with an ideology of egalitarianism. One consequence of this has been that women express their autonomy, control, and authority within "separate spheres." These spheres are not coterminous with the usual delineations of "public" and "private." Indeed, the whole concept rests on the interrelationship and interdependence of men's and women's economic efforts in both the household and the fishery. Rather there are various physical boundaries, which, together with the sexual division of labour, allow women both the physical and ideological space they need. One of these is the shoreline, or "landwash." Men controlled the fishery at sea; women the fishery on shore. I would suggest that the acceptance of that boundary in such matters as women not going in the boats, or even making the nets, reinforces their control of the shorework and its importance in the recognition of their economic cooperation. Even more important was women's control of the house and everything in it, including the kitchen. The distinction between "public" and "private" in Newfoundland outports did not happen between "outside" and "inside" but between the kitchen, which was public, and the rest of the house, which was private. The kitchen was not just an extension of the community, but in effective terms, the centre of it. No one knocked at a kitchen door. Anyone could come and go as they pleased — but were forbidden to pass into the "private" areas of the house. Only "strangers" or those in authority knocked (and sometimes entered by another door). In the absence of community meeting places, the kitchens were the places in which the community met, that is, publicly interacted, held discussions, and came to decisions. Even where alternatives were available, the absence of any effective heating except the kitchen stove would not encour-

⁴⁷ It should be noted that Thompson's evidence from Scotland, and all the material gathered on fishing communities elsewhere, stresses the sexual division of labour and separation of sexual spheres. What varies are the consequences. See P. Thompson, paper presented to ASA Symposium on Women in Fishing Economies, November 1983.

age much conversation to take place there.⁴⁶ In this context it is vital that the kitchen was readily and obviously acknowledged to be the women's domain. It was impossible to exclude them in those circumstances. Present-day observation shows male conversation being carefully monitored by the women who often disguise their interest behind ceaselessly working hands. Coupled with the egalitarian ethic it helps to explain the much-noticed practice of "waiting-on-men." In this way, the women can easily intervene in the men's conversation without apparently leaving their own sphere and thus can exert a correct authority of their own.

In assessing this somewhat contradictory material the most useful comparison is with the material gathered in Scottish fishing communities by P. Thompson. The crux of his argument is that the very different gender relations and economic attitudes (past and present) in Buckie, Lewis, Aberdeen, and Shetland are inextricably linked. In particular, the "moral order" of a community, its interpretation of religion, its child-rearing practices, and its attitudes to gender affects its ability to adapt and survive in different economic conditions. Regional differences have also played a complicating part in the study of Newfoundland, although it would be hard to find such overall contrasts as there are in Scotland. However, the parallels, especially the social practices described in Buckie and Shetland, are illuminating. Shetland represents the high point in both gender relations and economic success, perhaps exemplified by their positive handling of the oil activity. The situation of women there is characterized by a degree of economic involvement and genuine equality, a lack of male authority in the home, sexual freedom, and political and intellectual energy, which it would be hard to equal in Newfoundland. Nevertheless, some similarities with Shetland support the argument that women's economic participation in the fishery and the non-authoritarian domestic relations in Newfoundland are integrally connected.

In Buckie, which Thompson characterizes as "the moral order of free enterprise," individualism, a greater separation of gender spheres, greater male authority, and a more deferential religious observance, create a more immediately recognizable comparison with Newfoundland. The most notable contrast is that, in the absence of an egalitarian imperative, highly capitalized

⁴⁶ For a discussion of the role of the kitchen as the boundary between public and private, see L. Dillon, "Black Diamond Bay: A Rural Community in Newfoundland." (M.A. thesis, Memorial University, 1983). Other confirmation can be found in J. Faris, *Cat Harbour*; H. Murray, *More Than 50%*; D. Davis, *Blood and Nerves*; P. Thompson, paper to Women in Fishing Economies, records the same open community access to the kitchen in Buckie and Shetland. Faris, *Cat Harbour*, stresses that men also met in the shop in the evenings, an arena most other observers, for example, K.K. Szala, "Clean Women and Quiet Men: Courtship and Marriage in a Newfoundland Fishing Village." (M.A. thesis, Memorial University 1978), allocate to the young unmarried of both sexes. Traditionally, the "stores" — sheds on the stages — were men's meeting places, but these were (and are) untenable for most of the colder months of the year.

Buckie boats are currently among the most successful fishing enterprises in Britain. As in Newfoundland, however, Buckie women have asserted control over their own sphere, and the house operates similarly as the centre of a warm and egalitarian community — "Strangers knock, friends come in." It was an open-door community; and as today, food was always offered to a visitor — "the table was always laid for anyone who came in."⁴⁹

Too much can be made of these comparisons, but they help to set the material presented here in context. While Newfoundland outports are not unique and their experience is paralleled elsewhere, they operate in a specific historical, economic, and ideological situation and aspects of these may vary from community to community, making generalization even within Newfoundland difficult. The eventual gender relations and sexual division of labour will be the result of complex interaction of economic and ideological forces, not least of which will be women's active participation in their own lives.

What I want to suggest here is that women in Newfoundland — at least the wives of fishermen, that is the owners of boats (and that is a considerable caveat), have used their vital roles in initial settlement and in the fish-producing economy not to destroy the sexual division of labour but to establish its boundaries in such a way as to confirm their control over at least their own spheres. Inheritance did not matter if a woman gained a "woman's sphere" by marriage; nor did the ownership of a share if she controlled the household budget. Nor, and this is also important, did either matter in conditions of bare survival, when there was no surplus to be appropriated.

IV Conclusion

WE CAN SPEAK OF "traditional outport life" at least in the sense that the outlines of the sexual divisions of labour and the basis for the negotiation of gender and power come into sharpest focus at the end of the eighteenth century with the establishment of the Planter's household unit with its inshore fishing crew and shore crew as the key unit in the fishing economy. And these outlines remain until the demise of sun-dried fish as a product in the 1950s and the access of modern goods, services, cash, and opportunities in the heady post-Confederation days after 1949. Much of what is evident today is rooted in that long experience, but the precise connections still need to be specified. Here I have restricted myself to an examination of the context of the male domination of the fishery in which the signal fact of women's contribution as both settlers and shore crew serve to alert us that women were in a position to negotiate actively in the formation and development of the relations of production. In its turn, this forces a reconsideration of the consequences of the sexual division of labour and its relationship with other areas of women's interest.

⁴⁹ P. Thompson, *Living the Fishing*, 250.

We are still a long way from a wholly adequate theory of the subordination of women. But the route lies through careful examination of the evidence of different women's lives. The fishing communities of Newfoundland offer a perspective that sharpens our view of certain aspects of the sexual division of labour, and, I hope, contributes to the gradual filling out of the complex picture of negotiation, and adaptation that constitutes the reality of gender divisions.

REVIEW

a journal of the
Fernand Braudel
Center for the Study
of Economies,
Historical Systems,
and Civilizations

Editor: Immanuel Wallerstein

Review is committed to the pursuit of a perspective which recognizes the primacy of analysis of economies over long historical time and large space, the holism of the socio-historical process, and the transitory (heuristic) nature of theories.

The contents of Volume VIII (1984-85) include:

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| Samir Amin | Income Distribution in the Capitalist System |
| Ferenc Feher | The French Revolution: Between Class Identity and Universalist Illusions |
| Special issues on: | The Struggle for Liberation in Southern Africa |
| | Quantitative Studies of the World-System |
| Special section on: | From Ottoman Empire to Modern State |

Previous volumes contain articles by Anouar Abdel-Malek, Samir Amin, Giovanni Arrighi, Norman Birnbaum, Fernand Braudel, Silviu Brucan, K.N. Chaudhuri, R.W. Connell, Angiola Emmanuelli, M.E. Finley, André Gunder Frank, Johan Galtung, Ernest Gellner, Georges Haupt, Rodney Hilton, Eric J. Hobsbawm, Halil Inalcik, Ernest Labrousse, Frederic C. Lane, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Henri Lefebvre, Bernard Magubane, Sidney W. Mintz, Michel Morineau, Ramkrishna Mukherjee, James Petras, Alejandro Portes, Walter Rodney, Henryk Samsonowicz, T.C. Smout, Henri H. Stahl, Tamas Szentes, Romila Thapar, Charles Tilly, Jaime Torres, Pierre Vilar

Institutions \$60

Individuals \$25 (yearly rate)

SAGE PUBLICATIONS, INC.
275 South Beverly Drive
Beverly Hills, California 90212



SAGE PUBLICATIONS LTD
28 Banner Street
London EC1Y 8QE, England