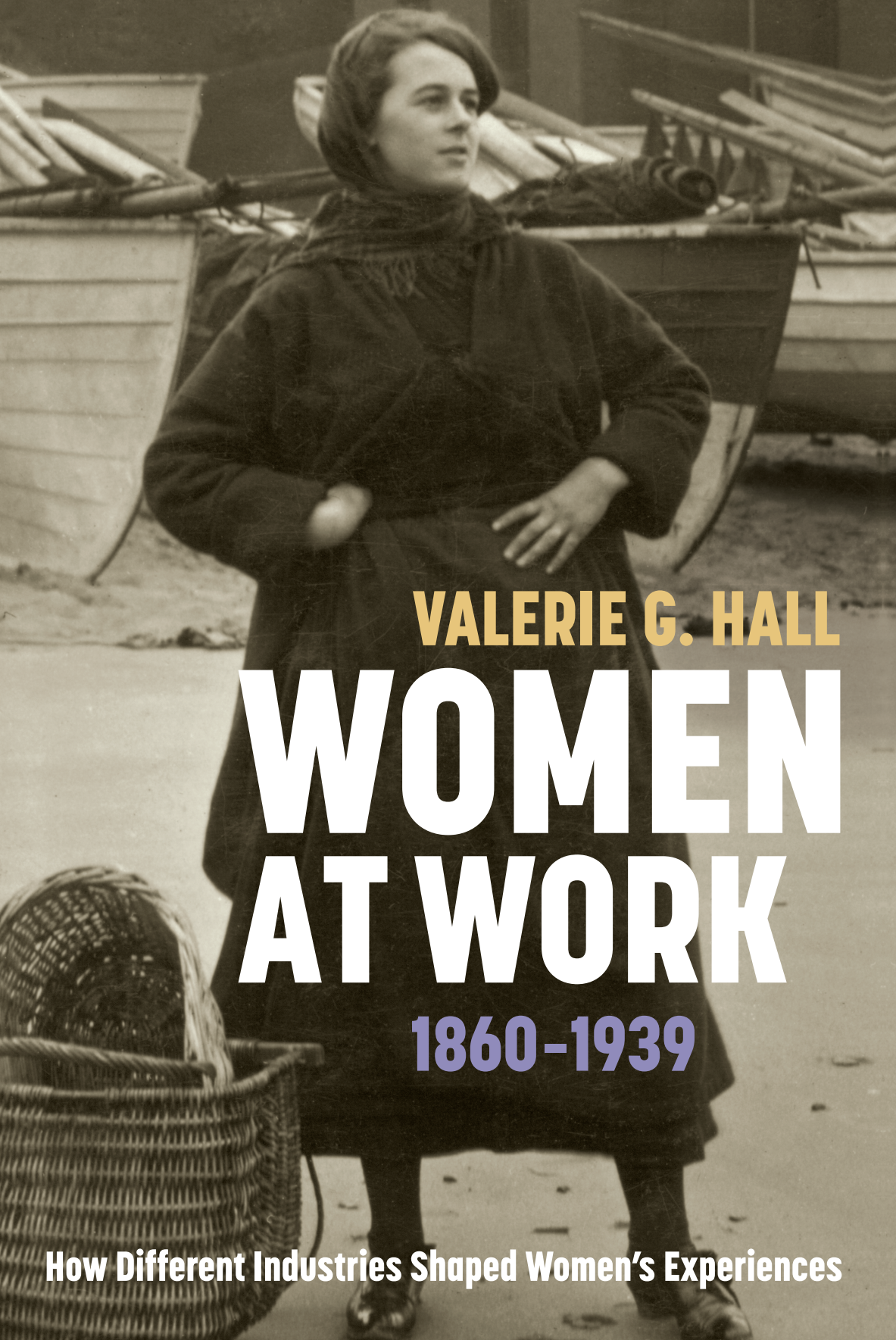


VALERIE G. HALL

WOMEN AT WORK

1860–1939

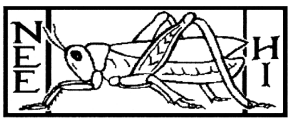
How Different Industries Shaped Women's Experiences

Regions and Regionalism in History

16

WOMEN AT WORK, 1860–1939

HOW DIFFERENT INDUSTRIES SHAPED WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES



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This series, published in association with the AHRB Centre for North-East England History (NEEHI), aims to reflect and encourage the increasing academic and popular interest in regions and regionalism in historical perspective. It also seeks to explore the complex historical antecedents of regionalism as it appears in a wide range of international contexts.

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WOMEN AT WORK, 1860–1939

HOW DIFFERENT INDUSTRIES SHAPED WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

VALERIE G. HALL

THE BOYDELL PRESS

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I dedicate this book to my three sons,
Russell, Steven and Michael, and to my grandchildren.

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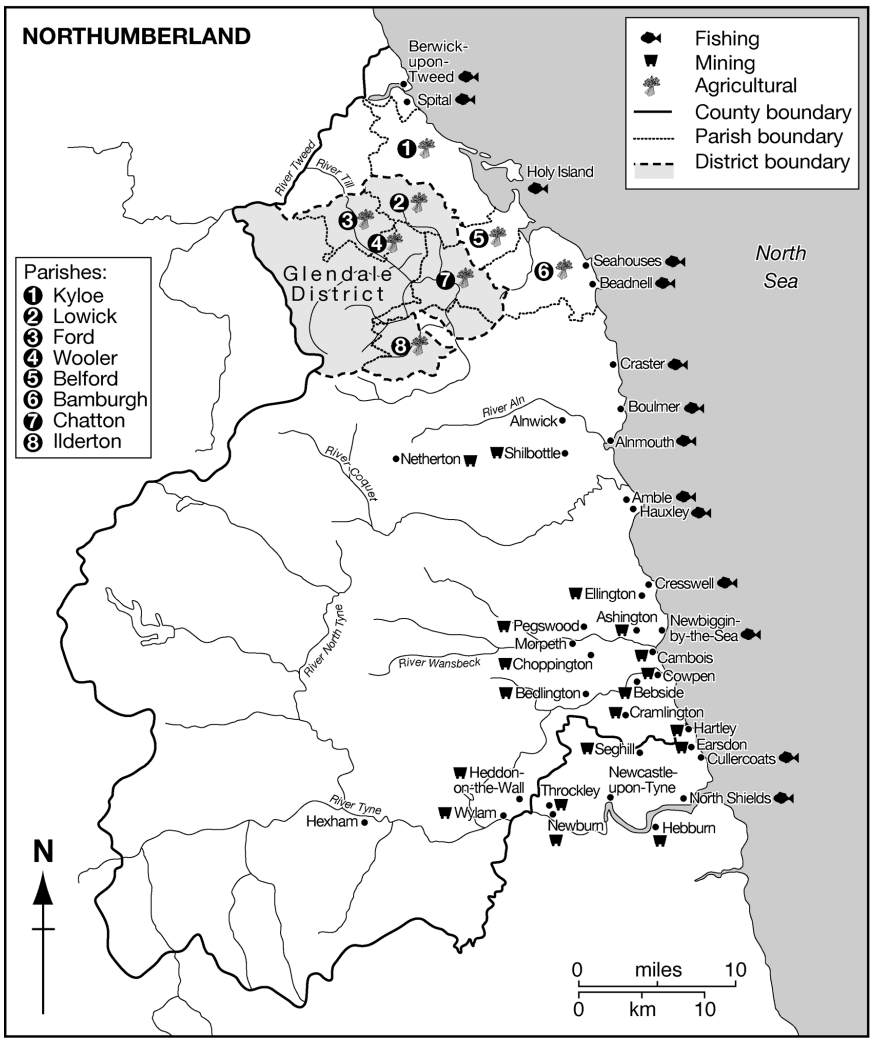
Map 1. Map of England and Wales delineating the County of Northumberland



Map 2. Map of Northumberland showing selected mining and inshore fishing communities, rural districts and parishes

Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mining, inshore fishing and agricultural labouring communities often figured in the national consciousness, people drawn by the drama and danger faced by miners and fishermen and by the picturesque qualities of all three groups. The representations of these groups were highly ambivalent. Some were positive. In the case of mining and fishing communities, we frequently read expressions of admiration for the bravery of miners and fishermen and sympathy for their losses in times of tragedy. Agricultural labourers, often called hinds, profited from the romanticisation of the countryside that had begun in the eighteenth century in, for example, the paintings of John Constable or in their role as 'quaint carriers of English folklore'.[1]

The images of the women of these communities, frequently found in literature and art, were mostly sympathetic and often dramatic. In *Germinal* by Émile Zola, we read of women huddled at the pit head waiting for news of the men and boys trapped below ground in the flooded pit. This reminds us of the horrendous Hartley Pit disaster of 1862 in Northumberland in which 262 men and boys from one village were entombed. When found, the bodies of the boys were clinging to their dead fathers, who had left hurried notes pinned to the bodies of their sons. This event garnered much sympathy, as did the tragedies which befell the fishing communities. In the late nineteenth century, colonies of artists at Cullercoats in Northumberland and Staithes in Yorkshire, and photographers such as Frank Meadow Sutcliffe in Whitby, believing that they had 're-discovered' a peasantry and particularly fascinated by the women of these communities, often depicted them in tense, even dangerous, situations. One picture, for example, shows women staring desperately out over the churning ocean to see if the boats were going to be able to make it to shore, out of danger. Another has the lifeboat women straining to pull the lifeboat back to shore through the high waves.[2] Such images were not just the product of the artists' imaginations. When a storm blew up and the boats were out at sea, the whole community would run to the shore to watch their progress. The pattern of family boats, with three men and a boy from the same family as crew, led to the frequent loss of whole families at a time. Though lacking such dramatic elements, depictions of women in

1 Karen Sayer, *Women of the Fields: Representations of Rural Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995), p. 24.

2 For these images, see Chapter 4, pp. 108 and 110.

agricultural labouring families have also been poignant. We think of Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, set in Dorset. Thomas Hardy describes Tess, after her fall as a result of the birth of her illegitimate child, as reduced to what he describes as degrading field work, pulling turnips from the frozen ground, her hands red and raw, her companions rough, coarse and masculinised women. If the degradation is more a literary trope than reality, women field workers in any part of the country endured hard, gruelling work in bad weather. Indeed, such labour on the part of women continued in Northumberland until after the Second World War.

Yet, reflecting the ambiguity of middle-class attitudes towards the lower classes, observers frequently depicted all three groups in negative terms: mining and fishing communities as 'races apart' from civilized society, alien and inbred; agricultural workers backward and unintelligent, referred to as 'Hodge'.[3] The women in these three communities shared in the negative assessments. The variations in their depiction, from the sympathetic to the outright negative, reflected the biases and ideologies of middle-class observers. Such observers read into women rampant sexuality, the potential danger they and their husbands posed to the social order at times of industrial strife, the social chaos arising from their supposedly disorderly homes and, in the case of the female agricultural workers and fisher girls and women, the crossing of gender lines. The result was anxiety and, at times, panic on the part of the observers. At other times, tragedies and hardships suffered by the three groups of women superseded the negative images of them. This ambiguity was most obvious in the case of fisher women whom people, at times of tragedy, regarded with great sympathy, while at other times they were viewed with suspicion and even disgust.

I will focus on these three groups of women – those in coal mining, inshore fishing and farming communities – in Northumberland, the northernmost county in England, in the period 1860 to 1939. These women lived in communities which were based on very different industries: coal mining, pursued in Northumberland since Roman times, was a heavily capitalized industry whose labour force had been proletarianized since at least the end of the eighteenth century. By 1870, it was the main non-agricultural industry in the county, employing 17,000 men and supporting a population of around 119,000, not counting those people working in the service area in the mining towns and villages. The next industry, inshore fishing – that is, fishing on a daily basis within six to seven miles of the shore (as opposed to deep-sea fishing) – was also of long vintage, having been pursued on a commercial basis since medieval times. Inshore fishermen used a coble, a small boat which was fast, capable of being sailed near the wind and ideal for launching off the beach in communities which lacked harbours.[4] The industry

[3] Sayer, *Women of the Fields*, p. 23.

[4] John Salmon, *The Coble: A Few Papers Written During Leisure Hours of the Winter of 1884–5* (South Shields, 1885).

had expanded in the decades around 1870. Unlike mining however it was based on small, family owned – and operated – entrepreneurial enterprises. In 1871, the number of fishermen amounted to no more than 450, resulting in a fishing population of around 3,150. Agricultural labourers were much more numerous at that date, amounting to 19,794, 14,038 of them men and 5,756 women.[5] It is impossible to estimate the size of the community because a household might include several workers. Also, most married women worked intermittently and were thus not counted in the censuses.[6]

Over the period of my study, 1860 to 1939, all three industries underwent significant change that transformed all three communities. Coal mining expanded nationwide around the turn of the twentieth century. By 1911, the numbers employed in Northumberland had reached 51,925 and the mining population approximately 311,550.[7] The numbers undoubtedly increased in the next few years, as a consequence of a great expansion of the coal industry, especially in exporting districts such as Northumberland. Unfortunately, we don't have the data to substantiate this assumption. But after World War One, coal mining in Northumberland and the nation entered a period of depression, ten years before the Great Depression, becoming the 'sick industry' of the inter-war years. The number of miners had declined by 1931 to 46,008, many of whom were on part-time work.[8] By 1939, the number in Northumberland was 40,675 and the population around 203,375.[9] The same pattern is clear in the much smaller inshore fishing industry which boomed from the mid nineteenth century up to the first years of the twentieth century as a result of copious herring stocks, but waned thereafter. By the 1930s, the number of inshore fishermen had declined to around 140, about 25 percent of what it had been. By the mid 1930s the community averaged probably no more than 3,500.[10] Agricultural communities too declined in numbers, partly because of new technologies but also due to the attraction of urban areas which drew young men and women from the isolated farms. Though it is difficult to estimate the numbers of agricultural labourers at the end of the 1930s, we can assume that it was around 17,000.

5 The numbers of miners, fishermen and agricultural labourers are taken from the *Census of England and Wales, 1871, Vol. III, Ages, Civil Conditions and Birth Places of People* (London, 1873), Tables 11 and 12. The numbers of all three groups are difficult to assess and some, notably of inshore fishermen, are estimates. The figures for numbers of people in the mining and fishing communities are gained by multiplying by seven, assuming an average of five children per household. Later community sizes are gained by multiplying by six, assuming an average of four children per household.

6 See discussion of the deficiencies of the censuses, pp. 12 and 13.

7 *Census of England and Wales, 1911, Occupations and Industries* Part II (London, 1913), Table 24. Again, the exact numbers of miners are difficult to assess, because different censuses include different groups of workers connected to the mine.

8 Barry Supple, *The History of the British Coal Industry, Volume 4: The Political Economy of Decline* (Oxford, 1987), Table 9.4.

9 Jack Davison, *Northumberland Miners: 1919–1939* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1973), p. 278.

10 These figures are estimates. The 1931 census gives a number of 163 for fishermen but that includes river fishermen, and there was further attrition of inshore fishermen in the 1930s. *Census of England and Wales, 1931, County of Northumberland* Part II (London, 1935), Table 2.

My decision to study these three groups of women grew out of the differences I perceived in their experiences. It is well known that one cannot treat women as an undifferentiated group. Middle-class women and working-class women had little in common except for bearing children. But working-class women were not a monolithic whole either, as was once thought.[11] Over the last few decades, scholars of women's history have revealed a more complex picture. While many have written about working-class women in general, others have chosen to focus upon single groups of women. To list just a few: Nicola Verdon's *Rural Women Workers in Nineteenth-Century England*[12] has revealed the specificity of the experience of women farm workers; Eleanor Gordon's *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland*,[13] the industrial actions of the jute workers of Dundee; and Jane Long, in her essay 'Women and White Lead Work', the hardships faced by women white-lead workers in Newcastle upon Tyne.[14] Numerous essays in collections such as *Women, Work and Wages in England, 1600–1850,* edited by Penelope Lane, Neil Raven and K.D.M Snell[15] and *Women's Work: The English Experience 1650–1914*, edited by Pamela Sharpe,[16] have added greatly to our knowledge of different types of women workers. Comparisons of the experiences of different groups of working-class women have been rare, however. Exceptions are Carol Morgan's *Women Workers and Gender Identities, 1835–1913: The Cotton and Metal Industries in England*[17] and Miriam Glucksmann's *Cottons and Casuals: The gendered organisation of labour in time and space*.[18] The latter contrasts the experience of full-time textile workers and the casual, part-time workers who provided services for them. It remains true however that there is a deficit of studies which compare different types of working-class women.

I hope to help redress this omission. By examining the life and work of mining, fishing and agricultural women living in the same county, in reasonably close proximity, I will show how divergent the experiences of working-class women could be and how these differences were shaped by the dominant industries in their particular areas. Thus, I will stress that the experiences of women varied not only between classes but within the same

[11] Ivy Pinchbeck was an exception to this pattern. She revealed the different work experiences of women throughout the nation. Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (London, 1981; 1st edn, 1930).

[12] Nicola Verdon, *Women Rural Workers in Nineteenth-Century England: Gender, Work and Wages* (Woodbridge, 2002).

[13] Eleanor Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland* (Oxford, 1991).

[14] Jane Long, '"You are forced to do something for a living": Women and White-Lead Work' in Jane Long, *Conversations in Cold Rooms: Women, Work and Poverty in Nineteenth-Century Northumberland* (Woodbridge, 1999), Ch. 3.

[15] Penelope Lane, Neil Raven and K.D.M. Snell, eds, *Women, Work and Wages in England, 1600–1850* (Woodbridge, 2004).

[16] Pamela Sharpe, ed., *Women's Work: The English Experience 1650–1914* (London, 1998).

[17] Carol Morgan, *Women Workers and Gender Identities, 1835–1913: The Cotton and Metal Industries in England* (London, 2001).

[18] Miriam Glucksmann, *Cottons and Casuals: The Gendered Organisation of Labour in Time and Space* (Durham, 2000).

class. I will show these divergences through examining the fabric of these women's lives, employing, when possible, their own voices. At the same time, I will reveal their contribution to their families, their communities and to the economies of the industries in which they were involved.

My previous work was a catalyst for this larger endeavour. In studying women in coal mining communities in Northumberland, I found significant differences even within that one community.[19] Most of the women fell into the category I called 'domestic women' who, denied the opportunity to engage in economically productive work outside the home because of the characteristics of the coal mining industry, fulfilled an exceptionally heavy domestic and maternal role. A minority, whom I called 'political women', took on an important political role in the twentieth century, becoming the backbone of the Labour Party in their districts in the 1920s and 30s. That pattern I traced to the economic and cultural organisation of the mining communities. In a later study, I contrasted these two groups of mining women with women in inshore fishing communities, whose experiences were again different.[20] As part of family based fishing enterprises which resembled pre-industrial crafts, they performed the preparatory work at home for their fishermen husbands. Also, while women had to share the selling of fish with fish merchants by 1860, they still hawked fish in their creels and baskets around nearby towns and villages. They were as much, if not more, workers in the fishing industry as homemakers and mothers. In this new study, which aims to deal in greater depth with these two groups of women, I have added another group of women: female agricultural labourers who exhibited yet further differences. Although many of these women worked within a family unit, others were independent workers. All however performed heavy, dirty labour in fields and barns. Indeed, to be a woman in these communities was to perform work that, to many outsiders, appeared 'masculine' in nature.

Northumberland is a good choice for a local study of this kind for a number of reasons. To begin with Northumberland, set in the far northeastern corner of England, has seen little attention from historians. Further, all three industries, coal mining, inshore fishing and farming, existed alongside each other and – in a curious way – were related: as work in fishing and farming declined, many men turned to the collieries. Northumberland also had some characteristics which set it apart from other counties. Like Westmoreland and the eastern border counties of Scotland – The East and West Lothians, Roxburgh and Berwickshire – Northumberland had a unique system of female farm labour. Indeed, women were a crucial part of the farming labour force in Northumberland and remained so until after the Second World War, at least sixty years after they had disappeared from the fields of southeast England,

[19] Valerie G. Hall, 'Contrasting female identities: women in coal mining communities in Northumberland, 1900–1939', *Journal of Women's History* 2 (2001), pp. 117–31.

[20] Valerie G. Hall, 'Differing gender roles: Women in mining and fishing communities in Northumberland, 1880–1914' , *Women's Studies International Forum* 27(2004), pp. 521–30.

though women labourers were to be found in southwestern England at the turn of the twentieth century.[21] Moreover, Northumberland's early adoption of advanced farming methods – in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – had made it a favourite object of study for government commissions, whose reports yield valuable information. Happily, Northumberland's mining communities were the classic type – one-industry towns – making study easier, especially when one is using census records.

A local study of this type is invaluable for several reasons. The kind of detailed examination engaged in here is impossible on the national level. Yet we can make important generalisations about patterns in the nation. For example, while coal mining co-existed with the textile industry in Lancashire and Yorkshire and with the pottery industry in the Midlands, mining communities in regions such as South Wales, in parts of Scotland and in many regions in other countries were largely one-industry towns. Thus, conclusions drawn from Northumberland have application to such areas. Also, inshore fishing communities, which dotted the entire coastline of Scotland and England, exhibit a remarkable similarity. While female farm labourers, called bondagers, have no parallel in our period in the rest of England (except Westmoreland, and the borders counties of Scotland), their uniqueness allows us to draw important conclusions about the factors affecting, for instance, the roles of women, the sexual division of labour and what it meant to be a woman. The communities chosen show, for example, how cultural and economic factors can take precedence over gender ideology, conclusions which have broad significance for the study of women.

It is important to study the lives and work of these women. Although, as we have seen, art, literature and public discourse have featured the women from the three communities, historians have paid much less attention to them than to working-class men who joined organisations such as trade unions and, at times, wrote autobiographies. As Jane Long has noted, working women have suffered from the 'double silence of both their gender and their class position'.[22] True, women's historians have been filling in this gap with considerable speed in the last few decades, but much remains to be done. For one thing, with the exception of the works of Jane Long and of Judy Gielgud,[23] who have studied Northumberland female agricultural labourers, historians have largely ignored these three groups of women which are the subject of my work. This study pieces together the particularities of their lives, revealing the considerable skills that were necessary to run a house-

[21] Edward Higgs, 'Occupational censuses and the agricultural workforce in Victorian England and Wales', *Economic History Review* LXVIII, 4 (1995), pp. 700–16. It was formerly thought that women agricultural labourers had disappeared from the fields in all but the northern counties in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. For a discussion of the inadequacies of the censuses as a guide to the employment of women, see pp. 12 and 13.

[22] Long, *Conversations in Cold Rooms,* p. 4.

[23] Judy Gielgud, 'Nineteenth Century Farm Women in Northumberland and Cumbria: the Neglected Workforce' (PhD thesis, University of Sussex, 1992).

hold on meagre resources, the physical and emotional burdens of constant heavy work combined with large families, the frequent pregnancies and the resulting toll of miscarriages, still births and ill health.

Another factor addressed is the important contributions made by women to the economic survival of their families. It has become clear that working-class women's participation in the world of work has been under-recorded and that census returns are an unreliable source of women's employment, as of other aspects of their social and economic position.[24] This conclusion is as true of these three groups of women as it is of other working-class women. Both fishing and farming women played an essential role in the industries in which their men were employed. In each case, the men could not have functioned in their employment without the participation of their wives and daughters. While the censuses generally recorded the work of single agricultural labouring females and sometimes that of married, female, full-time workers – though not that of the intermittent, though important, women workers – virtually none of the participation of fishing women appears in them. In the case of mining, women played no such direct economic role, yet their careful maintenance of their husbands' work clothing, boots and even bodies, their management of household resources, their taking-in of lodgers and their other small-scale entrepreneurial efforts were crucial to the well-being of their families. Such efforts of course went unrecorded.

These examinations inevitably contribute to many of the broader debates in gender history. Exploring the participation of these women in the world of work, for instance, shows that the sexual division of labour was variable and that it could change within one industry if the technology changed. This finding underscores the conclusion that other historians have drawn since the 1980s – that the sexual division of labour is a social construct.[25] Gender ideology, that is, the idea of sexual difference, defined the division of work in all three industries though tradition, technology and economics also played a role. In all three industries men monopolised machinery, as was the case in virtually all industries. Invariably, even when women were involved in the industry in which their husbands worked, and even when their labour was vital to the success of the industry, such as agriculture, the farming population regarded their work as less skillful than that of their husbands and often demeaning to men. Furthermore, if the women received payment, it was generally half as much as that given to men. This pattern was common to occupations throughout the nation and was justified by the often erroneous idea that women were not breadwinners and that their work was less skillful.

[24] For a discussion of the censuses, see pp. 12 and 13.

[25] See, for example, Eleanor Gordon and Esther Breitenbach, eds, *The World is Ill Divided: Women's Work in Scotland in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries* (Edinburgh, 1990), Intro.