

# The Fisherwomen of Fife

## History, Identity and Social Change

*Reginald Byron and Deirdre Chalmers*

Byron, Reginald and Deirdre Chalmers 1993: *The Fisherwomen of Fife. History, Identity and Social Change. Ethnologia Europaea* 23: 97–110.

In maritime households in the North Atlantic region, a number of ways have been devised for coping with the economic instability which arises from the household's reliance upon a resource that cannot be kept under direct human control. Depending upon the local labour-market opportunities, these coping strategies include the participation of women in a range of productive activities which augment, or stabilise income from the men's efforts at sea. The involvement of women in small-scale farming and fish-processing work has been well documented in the literature; less well known are cases where women were migrant labourers for at least part of their careers, and where the successful establishment of a new household depended upon the migratory labour of women. The occupational patterns of women in the Fife Coast fishing villages, although they have now passed into history, continue to be important element in the sense or the past that local women have, and in the ideas they have about themselves in comparison with other women who do not share a fishing background.

*Professor Reginald Byron, PhD, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University College Swansea, Singleton Park, Swansea SA2 8PP, Great Britain. Deirdre Chalmers, PhD, formerly of the Department of Social Anthropology, The Queen's University of Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN, Northern Ireland.*

This paper discusses the historical roles of women in fishing in the East Neuk of Fife: the villages of Anstruther, Cellardyke and Pittenweem, which lie on the east coast of Scotland, between St Andrews and Edinburgh. Our material derives from a field research project which sought to understand how women perceive their part in what is still, for some, a very distinctive way of life. East Neuk fishing people, particularly women, have a marked propensity to invoke the past: for many, their notions about themselves, and their way of life, are rooted in a sense of history. In the first part of the paper, we give an account of the East Neuk and its fishery, based largely upon our informants' narratives; we then consider some of the ways in which this interpretation of history informs the view that East Neuk fisherwomen have of themselves, and how these views are related to the far-reaching

changes that have recently occurred in the economy and social composition of the East Neuk villages.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, herring fishing was emerging as a major activity along the Fife coast. The herring fishery had two seasons: the summer months, when the men fished in the Firth of Forth; and the early autumn, when they moved down the east coast of Britain to East Anglia, landing their catches at the ports of Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth. The summer fishing season in the Forth, which was called the "Lammas Drave", peaked in the 1860s and went into a gradual decline thereafter, but the autumn herring fishery continued until after the Second World War, enjoying its most successful period between the wars. In addition to the herring fishery, some of the East Neuk men took part in the winter season of cod fishing, which took



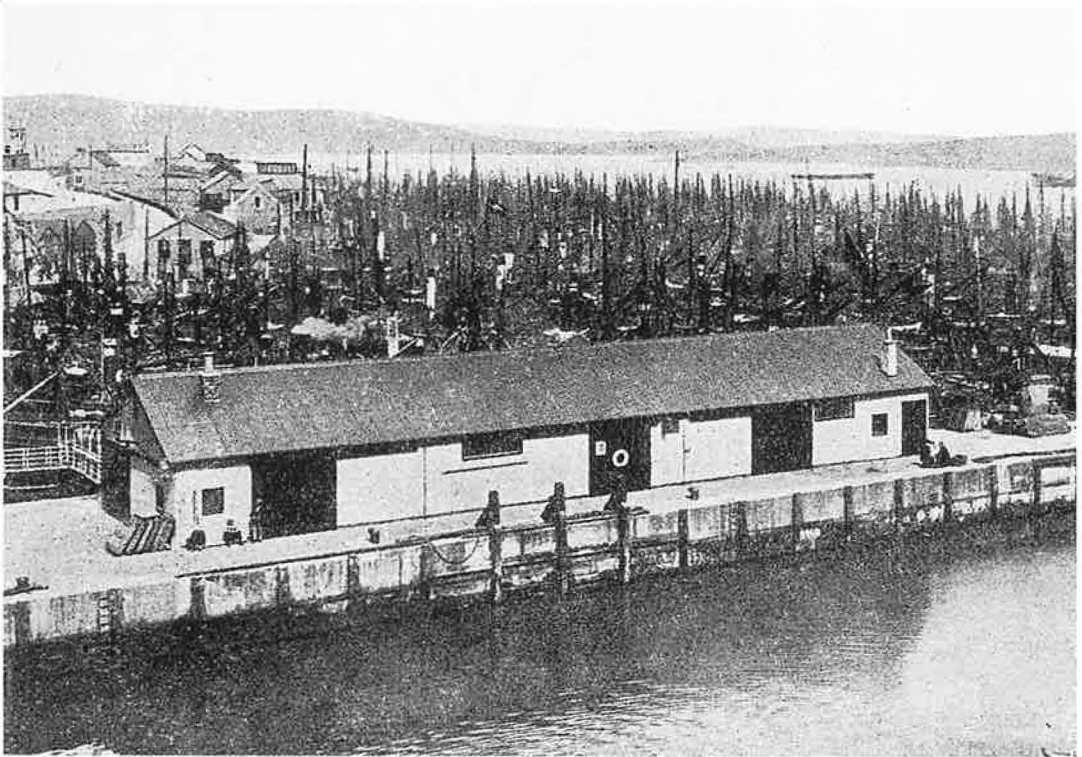
Low tide at the harbour. The villages of Anstruther and Cellardyke are contiguous. The spire to the extreme left is in Anstruther; the fishers' cottages on the right are in Cellardyke. – Scottish Fisheries Museum.

them northwards to the Faroe Islands on trips lasting up to three weeks; others fished closer to home for white fish.

To give some indication of the part played by the East Neuk fishers in the Scottish fishing industry as a whole during the nineteenth century, the official figures for the Anstruther district, in 1883, show that the combined value of boats, nets and lines was one-eighth of the total valuation for Scotland. In the same year, the following numbers of people were employed in fishing in the Anstruther district: men and boys as fishermen, 3,491; fish curers 46; coopers 76; and a catchall category of "others connected" 2,362. It seems likely that most of these "others connected" were women, whose categorisation in this way by no means did justice to their contribution to the economy of the East Neuk. The women certainly were not idle while their menfolk were at sea. In addition to running the home and looking after the children, the fishermen's wives, mothers,

sisters and daughters would have been involved in a number of unpaid activities connected with fishing, and might have a waged job as well for at least part of the year. Until the 1920s, East Neuk women worked as gutters and packers for the herring boats landing their catches at Pittenweem and Anstruther during the Lammas Drave in the Firth of Forth, or what remained of it. Other local women travelled to herring ports round the coasts of Britain, to work as "herring lassies".

The fishing people of the East Neuk were cottars, who lived in small houses along the shore in a cluster of isolated villages surrounded by farmland, yet they had no agricultural holdings to supplement their subsistence, or to fall back upon in times of scarcity in the fishery. They relied exclusively upon cash earnings which were, for the most part, seasonal and unstable. Although earnings could be reasonably good at peak times during the year, there were other periods when little



The steamer pier at Lerwick. The harbour beyond, on a Sunday, is a dense forest of the masts and funnels of hundreds of steam and sailing drifters. In the distance to the left are the herring girls' barracks. – Scottish Fisheries Museum.

or no cash was brought into the household. The standard of living for the majority of East Neuk fishing families was poorer than that of the farming people in the immediate vicinity and the miners' and shipwrights' families in the more industrialised parts of Fife nearer the Firth of Forth.

Those women who stayed at home during the summer could bring in some cash by renting out their houses to visitors from the cities. During the two-week Glasgow holiday, or "Glasgow Fair", up to 2,000 industrial workers and their families might arrive in the East Neuk in the years before the Second World War. The fishermen would be away; the wives and children lived in the attic, renting out the rest of the house, and perhaps providing meals for the guests. At other times of the year, the women had a more direct involvement in fishing. When the men came home after the herring season, one of the tasks done mainly by women was net-mending. Each fisherman was

responsible for providing a certain number of nets for the boat (as his contribution to the boat's "fleet"), and after each season's use, the nets would need to be dried, mended and re-tarred. A fisherman who had no wife, sister, mother or daughter to mend his nets would have to pay a net-mender out of his share of the catch. At the turn of the century, net-menders were paid 1/- per day for twelve hours' work, plus meals, if they worked in the fisherman's home.

In the winter, the East Neuk women made a substantial contribution to line-fishing. The lines for haddock fishing had to be baited daily, early in the morning, so the bait would still be fresh when the lines were set at sea. Each of up to 1,800 hooks had to be baited individually by hand with cut-up pieces of horse mussel or lugworms, then the hooks arranged and line coiled in the baskets to prevent snags and tangles when the men set them. This messy, time-consuming and pains-



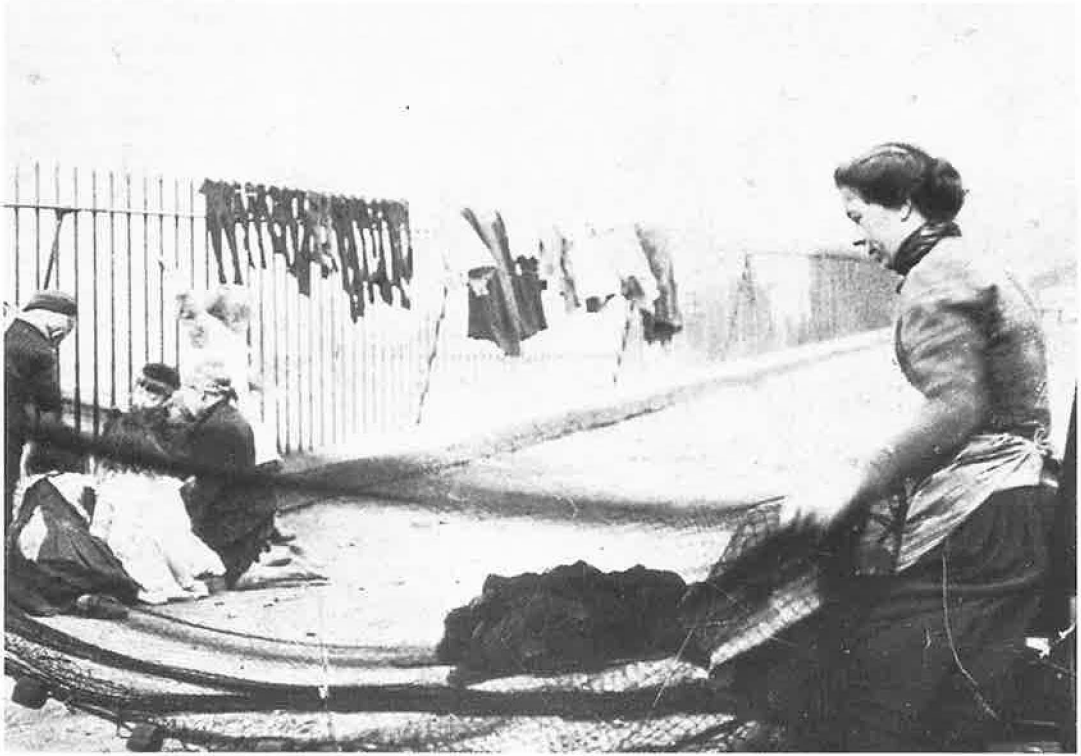
Two women (at left) mend, while the men tie the nets to the "buss rope" in the streets of St Monans, Fife. — Scottish Fisheries Museum.

taking task was a part of the lot of most fishermen's wives and daughters during the haddock seasons the length of the Forth coast, until the adoption of the seine net in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Unmarried women, or those without small children to look after, were employed in small numbers at Robert Watson's oilskin factory in Cellardyke, started in 1859. Fifteen of the 26 girls who left the Cellardyke school in 1920 went to work at Watson's. Other women, including widows with young or elderly dependants, converted the front rooms of their terraced cottages into shops, taking in dressmaking, tailoring and mending, washing and pressing, serving tea and meals, or selling groceries, clothing and other things. Knitting was another occupation for women: most was done to supply their menfolk with warm clothing to wear at sea, but knitted goods could also bring in cash. The East Neuk fishermen wore many layers of knitted garments, including long

drawers, seaboot stockings, socks, jerseys ("ganseys") and mitts. The amount of knitting needed to equip a man for fishing was prodigious: he would need six or seven of each item for the long trips away from home, and the outfit would have to be renewed every year. One advantage of knitting over other, fishing-related domestic tasks was that it was a portable activity; women could gather with friends and socialise while they worked. Girls were able to knit by the age of six or seven, having learnt by copying their mothers, and would soon be knitting socks and mitts for their fathers and brothers, imitating their mothers in the way they sat with their friends, chatting while they knitted.

The most significant way in which East Neuk women were involved in the cash economy of fishing before the Second World War was as "herring lassies". Every year, during the season, from sometime around the middle of the nineteenth century until the late 1930s



Net-mending. One of the regular, seasonal tasks of a fisherman's wife until the 1950s. – Scottish Fisheries Museum.

(and again for a few years on a reduced scale in the late 1940s and early 1950s), there was a complex pattern of migratory labour to and from the herring ports all round the coasts of Britain, involving young Scottish women, the wives, sisters and daughters of the fishermen of numerous communities, notably the East Neuk villages. There are still several women in Pittenweem, now in their eighties who, in their time, were herring lassies, travelling the length of Britain from Suffolk to Shetland, and remember this way of life.

As the shoals of herring were locally more abundant in some places than others, and seasonally moved about the North Sea, so the fleets of herring drifters tended to congregate and to move round the coasts during the season, off-loading their catches in the nearest convenient port. At Lowestoft and Lerwick, and places in-between, hundreds of herring drifters crewed by men from all over Britain might gather at the height of the local season,

landing thousands of tons of herring. The fish was landed the day it was caught, and had to be processed immediately, or it would spoil in the summer heat. First, the fish had to be gutted and then preserved or "cured". The most common way of doing this was to pack the herring in salt in sealed wooden barrels. Since all this work was done by hand, the amount of shore-side labour needed was enormous by modern-day standards, requiring gutters and packers by the hundred and scores of coopers and porters at the main landing-places.

The curers, that is the middlemen, contractors or merchants who organised the processing of the herring and hired the labour, were largely Scots, who tended to prefer girls of their own localities as gutters and packers. Herring cured by the Scottish method had an excellent reputation on the international market, dominating the trade to the Continent, with large volumes of exports going to Poland,



Scottish fisherwomen at Lowestoft, Suffolk, the main port for the East Anglian herring fishery. – Scottish Fisheries Museum.

Russia and the Baltic countries. Girls started work as gutters at the age of fifteen or sixteen, and might continue seasonally for ten or twelve years, until they married in their middle or late twenties. After a woman began to have children, matters became more complicated, but from necessity many continued nevertheless, leaving small children in the care of a grandmother, and taking along school-aged children. Schools permitted children to accompany their mothers on their travels on condition that the children were put in a school on arrival at the port, to ensure they completed their legally-obligatory annual number of days' schooling. The Pittenweem school records show that 40 to 50 children were accom-

panying their mothers on their migrations each season during the early years of this century.

There were a number of competing curers who recruited girls in the East Neuk, but there were differences in rates of pay and conditions of work. In general, girls from the same village preferred to take their "arles" or contract-money in groups, so that they would be travelling and working amongst friends. The "arles" guaranteed them a job for the season. Since there were differences in pay and conditions, and the places they might be sent, the older and more experienced women sought jobs with particular curers, and relationships of mutual loyalty developed between them.

A gutter at work. On her thumb and fingers can be seen, indistinctly, the "cloots" or bandages the women wore to protect against cuts. - Scottish Fisheries Museum.



The curer was obliged to provide transport to the ports. When travelling north or south for the summer and autumn gutting, the girls wore their smartest outfits, sending their trunks of working-clothes ahead. Their trunks would also contain enough boiled and bleached "sarks" or white cotton chemises to last the season, for they were unlikely to have the time or find the facilities to do their linens once they arrived on the herring stations. The travelling conditions were usually crowded and slow. The girls travelled in specially-chartered trains; from the Buchan coast trains brought them east, to Aberdeen, where more carriages were added as the train proceeded south, down the Fife coast stopping at every fishing village

along the way. Or, trains took the East Neuk girls north to Aberdeen, thence by steamer to Orkney and Shetland: a voyage frequently marred by bad weather and rough seas.

A herring lassie's working day began at daylight. A crew consisted of three women, two gutters and one packer. In the open air, near the harbour where the fish were brought ashore, the women stood round a long wooden trough (*farlin*), into which the fish from the boats were dumped. A nimble-fingered girl, it is said, could gut sixty fish a minute, slitting open the belly and neatly removing the guts in a single swift pass of the knife, flicking the guts into a tub and tossing the fish into one of at least five different sections appropriate to



Women at the “farlins”, Castlebay, Barra, in the Outer Hebrides. Note that this is a temporary station set up on the beach; the season here was brief. – Scottish Fisheries Museum.

its size and grade (*smaa', matje, full, mak' full, torn belly*). The packer tended the barrels, arranging the fish in layers, adding salt, replacing the filled barrels with empties. The curer's agent checked the barrels at intervals to make sure the herring was of the right quality and the barrel was properly packed before it was sealed by a cooper. The work was hard on the legs, backs, and especially the hands. Rubber gloves were virtually unknown in this work. The girls bound their fingers with strips of cloth (*cloots*) which they tied with their teeth, but cuts were inevitable, made very painful because of the salt, and often became infected. Their clothes became saturated with fish oil, blood, salt and rain, and covered with a silvery patina of fish scales. Although they wore heavy leather boots and oilskin aprons over their woollen skirts and short-sleeved jerseys, it was impossible to keep clean and dry.

After an hour's break for their midday meal,

the girls would work until their evening meal at six or seven o'clock. Depending upon the amounts of fish being landed, they might have to turn out again after their meal to work as long as the light lasted – which could be midnight in June. The pay, in the 1920s, was typically 1/- a barrel, divided amongst the three women in the crew, or 4d. each; what this meant in terms of an average or typical weekly wage could vary greatly, depending upon the supply of fish, the number of hours worked, and the skill of the gutters; but, given a skilled crew, a plentiful supply of fish and a ten-hour day, about 20/- (say between 15/- and 25/-) per woman would have been likely, giving a weekly wage of 120/- or £6/0/0 for a six-day week. This would have been a not inconsiderable wage for a young woman in the 1920s, but of course maximum earnings would not have been possible week in and week out; because of variations in the supply of fish, and





Women gutting herring at Peterhead, on the Buchan coast of Scotland. Note the presence of children. — Scottish Fisheries Museum.

their movements, the season might last only a two or three weeks in some places, perhaps even a few days in others.

The conditions in which the girls lived, and how they were regarded by the local people, was also rather variable. One Pittenweem woman, who was a herring lassie between the wars, told of the way that townspeople tended to be suspicious of girls travelling round the country, assuming they must be “loose women”. The English, in particular, could be very prejudiced toward the Scots girls. This woman still remembered going to a doctor in Great Yarmouth because of her infected and swollen hands, and the doctor saying that she didn’t look like a herring lassie because she was too clean and well-dressed. She resented the fact that when she arrived in Great Yarmouth or Lowestoft with the other herring girls, and tried to find lodgings, they would be accepted by landladies only in the most dilapi-

dated parts of town. She still remembered sleeping in beds infested with bugs, with three girls to a four-foot-wide bed.

Yet the prejudice, miserable lodgings and gruelling work did not prevent the girls making the best of it and enjoying themselves when they could. Another Pittenweem woman, also in her eighties, related memories of life in the East Anglian ports as had been told to her by her father, who was a herring fisherman before the First World War. The men on the drifters would each take a bottle of whisky and a “Yermouth bun” on their autumn trip to Great Yarmouth. Since there were ten men in the crew and ten weeks in the season, they could have “tea” with cake every Sunday, in harbour. They would invite herring girls aboard their boats to share their meal, and have a “cayley” (*ceilidh*) in the evening with liquid refreshments, away from the disapproving gaze of the townspeople.

In the Scottish ports, there was less prejudice, but living conditions were often rudimentary in the extreme. During the early years of the century, many herring stations were no more than rough, temporary camps in isolated places. In the bigger places, like Lerwick, the girls stayed in wooden huts or barracks, sleeping in triple bunk beds. To make these crude buildings more home-like, the girls would wallpaper them at their own expense, and sometimes bring rugs and curtains from home. There were no showers or running water, so they made elaborate arrangements of trunks and curtains to screen off a corner for bathing themselves from buckets and tin washtubs. On Sundays, the girls cleaned and tidied their huts. One Pittenweem woman said that she always took her wind-up gramophone and records with her to Shetland, and there were always other girls or fishermen who brought fiddles, mouth-organs or accordions. The cayleys at the weekends gave the girls a chance to relax and to mix with young men of their age from the drifters at the port; one example, of many, is a woman now married to Pittenweem fishermen who had grown up in a Moray Firth fishing town, and had met her future husband while she was working as a herring lassie in Shetland. Her closest friend was also from the Buchan coast; they had become friends while working for the same curer, and had married two young men who were crewmates on one of the many East Neuk boats based at Lerwick during the seasons of the 1920s and 1930s. Although the life of a herring lassie may have had its lighter moments, the chance to meet new friends, and perhaps have appealed to a sense of adventure in some girls, it was undoubtedly hard, dirty work which earned them very little esteem amongst people who were not connected with fishing; perhaps only their disfavour. Why, then, did they choose to follow this occupation, and way of life? Part of the answer lies in the nature of the organisation of small-scale fishing, and another part the alternatives that were available to women in the East Neuk.

The inescapable condition of relying directly upon the exploitation of wild, undomesticated resources over which the household has no

control is an unstable income. Without any means – to assert a proprietorial interest in the fish, or a territorial claim upon a patch of the sea, fishermen have no way of conserving or banking the resource upon which they depend to guarantee a predictable income from day to day, week to week, and season to season. To cope with economic uncertainty, fishing households strive to strike the best balance over time, doing what they can with what they have. Successful household management is a much greater test of flexibility and ingenuity than it is in a farming or urban household, where either labour and capital provide a more predictable return, or other means of livelihood are more readily available locally.

To have some means of smoothing fluctuations in household income is highly advantageous, and such mechanisms are frequently found in fishing communities. Thus, in some places, we find an emphasis upon extended groupings of kinsmen and neighbours, share systems, and joint patrimonies. In others, crofting or farming may be combined with fishing; while the men go fishing, the women look after the farm, which provides subsistence produce and cash from the sale of the farm's products. In the East Neuk, the occupational pluralism of women, including migratory labour, was a response to the same problem. Advantage lay with households that could find ways to enlarge the pool of labour and capital available to them; who could deploy their human and capital resources more flexibly; and set aside savings for a rainy day while at the same time contriving to keep scarce resources working to endow the next generation.

In the East Neuk, where the fishermen were cottars, without access to agricultural land to fall back upon when the income from fishing was low, or the household's needs were at a peak, the economic contribution of women was vital. Some amelioration was possible by means of intra- and inter-household exchanges of labour in the non-cash sphere (knitting, net-mending, line-baiting, housekeeping and child-minding), which provided some short-term benefits to the household. As a longer-term strategy, most households found it necessary to deploy as much as possible of their

available labour in the cash sphere. The opportunities for women in the waged labour market were limited in number. In the locality itself, there was a little seasonal net-mending, a few jobs in the oilskin factory, shop assistants in Anstruther, or domestic service. Few, if any of these would have offered wages as high as those potentially available to migratory labourers in seasonal fish processing, and some of these jobs would have been unsuitable for a fisherman's wife because they would have interfered with her other commitments. For a married woman, to be a herring lassie in the summers could work out rather neatly. Her husband would be away on a herring boat anyway, and the house could be let to summer visitors. The children, if she took them with her, might also find some money-making employment on the herring stations during their holiday. On her return in the late summer or early autumn, there would be the net-mending to do, and her husband's outfit of sea-going clothes to knit for the winter. Then, for most of the winter season, she would be busy for at least part of the day baiting the lines for the haddock fishery.

To an unmarried woman, the relatively high wages that were possible in the migratory work must have been attractive. While she would be expected to contribute a part of her wages to her parents' household and to cover her own keep, she could set aside part of her wages for her "drawer" (trousseau) or, not uncommonly, the deposit on the purchase of a house. Her fiancé might have been putting aside his savings to purchase a share in a fishing boat, to give himself and his family a greater security of income. Such jointly-capitalised marriages, and households, may have been relatively common; if so, this would account for the relatively late age at marriage before the Second World War, at about 26 or 27 for women and 30 for men. For a woman, then, it took ten or twelve years of working and saving in order to be in a position to marry and set up an independent household with sufficient resources to cover the costs of having at least the first child; for a man this period of accumulation was twelve to fifteen years. Whether the wife needed to, or could go back to work as a

herring lassie after the arrival of children depended upon a greater number of variables, and how the household subsequently developed: how well "set up" her husband was in the summer and winter fisheries: whether or not he had a share in a family patrimony with his father and brothers-in-law, and the luck of his crews from season to season and from year to year; whether or not the wife had a mother, sisters or sisters-in-law nearby upon whom she could call for help, whether the household contained any other dependents, such as an aged or infirm parent; whether there were children, how many, how they were spaced; and what aspirations the couple had for themselves and their children.

There have been dramatic changes in female employment in fishing, and fishing-related activities, over the last fifty years. The herring industry went into a decline after the Second World War. By the late 1950s, drift-netting was rapidly on the way out, and would be virtually extinct in the British Isles within ten years. Nowadays, it must be nearly 30 years since an East Neuk fisherman's wife mended a herring net and 40 to 50 years since any local woman followed the fleets, living the life of a herring lassie. The adoption of the seine net, for the winter haddock fishery, beginning in the late 1930s, did away with the hooks and lines and baiting. Only one woman was encountered in the locality who was still baiting lines into the 1950s; for the rest, baiting lines is a childhood memory of women in their sixties or seventies. And it has been decades since an East Neuk fisherman went to sea with a complete outfit of woollens knitted by his wife or mother; his kitbag now contains only factory-made work clothes bought from the fisherman's cooperative store and charged against his income tax. Today, the sole remaining evidence of the involvement of East Neuk women in the local fishing industry is amongst the photographs and displays in the Fisheries Museum in Anstruther. The role of women in fishing, to all intents and purposes, is a thing of the past.

And yet, while the involvement of women in fishing in the kinds of direct and immediate ways that have been described above may be a

thing of the past, the knowledge that women have, and continue to maintain, about their past as fisherwomen remains an important social resource. It is through this knowledge, and its invocation in the processes of cognitive classification and social action, that women place themselves in relation to other people in the community, and influences the nature of their social associations. East Neuk women have a set of ideas about the past, which they use to frame their notions about themselves. This sense of history emerges in two main ways: in how they define what it is to be a fisherman's wife – which characteristically involves a historical referent; and, second, how they differentiate themselves from others, especially the "incomers" who have moved into the East Neuk villages from elsewhere: whether or not they are held to "belong" turns on the question of whether or not they share this historical experience.

When the data for this project began to be collected, the women assumed that the ethnographers' interests were historical, and that they wanted to know not about the present-day situation of fishermen's wives, but about the herring lassies. In their estimation, for someone to be interested in fishermen's wives was more relevant to the past than the present. Indeed, their expressions of how the present-day life of a fisherman's wife differs from that of, say, a schoolteacher's wife, was usually by reference to way the lot of a fisherman's wife has changed over the last fifty years, as well as by an explanation of how her husband's absences for long periods means that she has to take the main responsibility for the home and family.

For the older women in their seventies and eighties, now the grandmothers and great-grandmothers of the youngest generation of fishermen's wives, to be a fisherman's wife was to be a herring lassie, a baiter of lines, a mender of nets, a knitter of sea-going woollens; to have grown to adulthood in the 1920s and 1930s, at a time when money was scarce, and it was a real struggle to set up an independent household. It is the experience of this generation of women that is portrayed in the Fisheries Museum, though perhaps a somewhat ster-

eotyped and romanticised version of it, for it is difficult to appreciate from the tidy displays the conditions that drove young women to become migratory labourers, and to suffer the stigma that went with it. These women taught their daughters that there was nothing romantic about the past, and in the changing world of the postwar period, this legacy of hardship, together with the prosperity of the times, encouraged and provided the means for their daughters to distance themselves from the past. No longer forced through circumstance to work as herring lassies, bait lines, or take any active role in the local fishing industry, few of them actually chose to do so. They preferred, rather, to stay at home minding the children and to "make a home", luxuries their mothers never had the opportunity to enjoy. During this period, this younger generation of women began to move out of the small, terraced cottages down along the shore to newer and more spacious houses at the back of the village. To these women, the daughters of the herring lassies, a life of quiet domesticity on the middle-class pattern was a break with past.

The daughters of these women, the granddaughters of the herring lassies, have carried on much of this self-image and way of life. When discussing their roles, they most often describe themselves as being both mother and father to their children, and say that their place is to make a home for their husbands where they can relax in comfort on their rest days between fishing trips. It is rare for a fisherman's wife to have a paid job. This preference for domesticity is out of keeping with current cultural ideologies in Britain which emphasise the economic empowerment of women and the sharing of domestic responsibilities between husbands and wives. Indeed, this is one of the main things that creates and sustains a social separation between fishermen's wives and the other women in the East Neuk. Fishermen's wives are called "diehards" because, to other women, they appear irrationally attached to an outmoded wifely role: the stay-at-home, the complacent domestic, content to be dependent upon her husband and unwilling to join in with other village women in "community" activities. Ironically, of course,

seen from the perspective of a fisherman's wife, her contemporary role is the very opposite: being in sole charge of domestic decisions while their husbands are away, they see themselves as having more independence and autonomy than other women, not less; moreover, they see themselves as truly liberated, freed from the conditions their grandmothers were forced to endure.

In the East Neuk, as elsewhere in the North Atlantic region, the organisation of the domestic sphere, so vital to the survival and success of the fishing household and the fishing community as a whole, was almost exclusively the domain of women! The recent literature, notably A. F. Robertson's *Beyond the Family* (1991) has drawn attention to the relation between material conditions and household form and function, and the role of the household in social change. While fishing societies have received little direct mention, women's lives in coastal communities appear, in general, to have changed much more than men's, and women themselves can be seen to have taken the initiative in many changes in the domestic sphere. The nature and direction of these changes might be understood as attempts to resolve the tension between the ideal of the independent elementary family, and the practical arrangements, made necessary by prevailing economic conditions, that compromised their idealised perceptions of themselves as the exclusive providers of domesticity to their husbands and children.

In fishing societies, the central persons within the fundamental units of social organisation – households – were women. Not only did women play a preëminent rôle in the socialisation of the next generation, they took a direct economic rôle in production and distribution that was complementary to that of their menfolk (cf. Netting, Wilk and Arnould 1984). Because they were so often absent, the men left the affairs of the household to their womenfolk, but the women had to rely on other women to perform a range of routine domestic tasks (cf. Cole 1990). In the East Neuk, this was extended further, since the women were so often away themselves, putting extra responsibilities upon those of their female rela-

tives who stayed behind, including, sometimes, even the most fundamental daughterly, wifely and motherly duties concerned with the care of their children and husbands, younger siblings and aged parents. Because of unpredictable variation in the supply of fish, the stresses of production and reproduction in deep-sea fishing households made it extremely difficult for an elementary family to cope on its own. There were regular occasions when the demand for labour exceeded the supply, and consumption exceeded production; and there were critical moments when both occurred simultaneously. Making ends meet required that women allied themselves with others to enlarge the pool of labour available to them: to work out ways to call in extra labour when it was short supply and lend it out when it was in surplus, especially when there was a need to sell their own labour for cash. As long as the amount of labour that was required to bring in a sufficient household income or to perform routine domestic tasks exceeded the elementary family's capacity to deliver it unaided, women could not, in practice, achieve their ideal rôle as the exclusive providers of domesticity to their husbands and children. In peasant farming societies (e.g. Goody 1958, 1976; Segalen 1984, 1986) this sort of situation is merely a temporary phase in the developmental cycle of the domestic group; in deep-sea fishing societies, however, it is more often a permanent structural condition that is not ameliorated, all other things being equal, just by the passage of time: the household does not "grow up" from a child-like condition of dependency to mature self-sufficient independence, but must continue to rely upon the women of other households to perform its complete repertoire of domestic functions.

The centripetal forces of economic necessity that drew fishermen's families together, and in the East Neuk forced women to become migratory labourers, created a conflict with the desire of women to be the mistresses of their own independent domestic domains in ways that were consistent with broader cultural conventions: there was a tension between the ideal and the practical, what women wanted and what they had to settle for in order to have a

family at all. When it became feasible for them to eliminate those tasks which were the source of tension and compromise, they quickly did so in order to realise their aspirations of domestic independence. We are more used, perhaps, to handling cases where the economy can be seen to shape family relationships (cf. Thompson, 1981; Thompson, Wailey and Lummis 1983). Here, when women gradually obtained command over the means to do so, something like the inverse seems to have happened: the ideal of the independent elementary family was put into practice, re-defining the economic relationships between women, freeing them from the involuntary, compromising constraints of the labour market and interhousehold obligation.

## Note

1. Gustavsson (1981, 1982) usefully treats other dimensions of women's lives in maritime settings, including their relationship to summer vacationers. See Gullestad (1984), Frykman and Löfgren (1979) and Löfgren (1974, 1984), for instructive comparisons with urban and peasant-farming households in Scandinavia. Frykman and Löfgren (1981) provide an ethnohistorical analysis of the "gentrification" of Swedish family life since the mid-nineteenth century.

## References

- Cole, Sally. 1990: Cod, God, country and family: The Portuguese Newfoundland cod fishery. *Maritime Anthropological Studies* 3, 1: 1-29.
- Frykman, Jonas and Orvar Löfgren. 1979: *Den kultiverade människan*. Lund: LiberLäromedel.

- Goody, Jack, ed. 1958: *The Developmental Cycle in Domestic Groups*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goody, Jack. 1976: *Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gullestad, Marianne. 1984: *Kitchen-Table Society*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Gustavsson, Anders. 1981: *Sommargäster och bofasta*. Lund: LiberLäromedel.
- Gustavsson, Anders. 1986: Women and Men in the Coastal Districts on the Swedish Westcoast. *Ethnologia Europaea* XVI: 149-172.
- Löfgren, Orvar. 1974: Family and household among Scandinavian peasants. *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, 19-52.
- Löfgren, Orvar. 1984: Family and household: Images and realities: Cultural change in Swedish society. In Netting, Wilk and Arnould, eds., *Households: Comparative and Historical Studies of the Domestic Group*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Netting, Robert, Richard Wilk and Eric Arnould. 1984: *Households: Comparative and Historical Studies of the Domestic Group*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Robertson, A. F. 1991: *Beyond the Family*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Segalen, Martine. 1984: Nuclear is not independent: Organisation of the household in the Pays Bigouden Sud in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Netting, Wilk and Arnould, eds., *Households: Comparative and Historical Studies of the Domestic Group*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Segalen, Martine. 1986: *Historical Anthropology of the Family*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thompson, Paul. 1981: Life histories and the analysis of social change. In Daniel Bertaux, ed., *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Thompson, Paul, Tony Wailey and Trevor Lummis. 1983: *Living the Fishing*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.