

Unit 10: Video 1 Transcript

Q5: How were economic and social roles gendered in the 18th and 19th centuries, and how did they change? What were the principal forces driving that change?

A: Looking at gendered roles in the 18th and 19th century, I think that Newfoundland, like other places that were attached to Britain in some way, underwent that same sort of ideological move towards what would ultimately be the sort of 19th century bourgeois ideals about gender. You have the man going out into the workplace and dirtying his hands, and the woman being in the home, looking after the family and knitting by the fire, and so on, and being removed from that sordid world. But she could be there to—so that her husband could sort of spiritually replenish himself at the end of the day. So that is moving in, in terms of the mucky-mucks in Newfoundland. It gradually moves in. But on the ground in fishing communities, that had very, very little traction, very, very little traction, especially since you had so few middle class people in the communities anyway to even—to say, “Oh, well, we should be living like them.” Most people shared responsibility and decision making, and the gender relations were quite different. Now I can speak more certainly about Irish Newfoundland families than I can about English. But I think you will find many similarities, although there are some particular aspects that will be different.

But when you look at these women coming out to the fishery and think about what they contributed to the fishery and ultimate settlement of the island. I mean, they were totally written out of history until just recently, which is why I did my work. There had been some sociologists who were saying, “Hey, what’s going on? We can see this pattern. Why aren’t they in the history books?” But when I started my work, there really—in the history discipline, there was very little work done.

They came out to work in the fishery, as I’ve said. They had multiple roles. They were fishing servants. They became mistresses of fishing households where they had to juggle all the resources of the household as well as do work in the fishery. Some were laundresses and seamstresses. Some were community healers. Many of them had property and ran businesses in their own right. And of course all these local magistrates said, “Well, whatever. [laughs] This is what we need, so we’ll go with that, even though the law might be saying we shouldn’t allow this to happen.” They did. They were living in the real world. So they also then became the reason that all these

colonies—communities, populations stabilized because you had a very transient male population. When you look at the comings and goings of fishing servants, you won't find the same men in the same harbour very consistently. And they may come back to Newfoundland, but they'll be out working for somebody else. So to stabilize the communities, the women were actually very, very central to that process. And you see a lot of the early marriages involving transient men coming and living in the communities of their new wives.

They, very quickly as I say, became mistresses of fishing households, and that was so, so crucial in Newfoundland at a particular period. You have the resident fishery coming up. You've got the migratory fishery dying down. But that resident fishery was something that still involved an employer who hired men to go into the boats and hired men to do the work on shore. But they started to falter. And in the Napoleonic War period, in particular, when the wages went through the roof and the fish prices went through the roof, that was grand. But when the prices went down, the wages stayed up, and that planter fishery would have fallen too if it hadn't been for women who had been gradually moving themselves into the shore production of the fish. So that ultimately these women were doing the very same work that the shore crews had done for the planter fishery. The men were out in the boats catching. The women were getting the fish, you know, splitting and salting it. Making sure that it had the right amount of salt for the right kind of market. Drying it. This would be a process that would take many, many weeks. They would have to go down many times during the day to make sure that the flies weren't on the fish. What were the chances of that? Or that it wasn't getting sunburnt. Keeping track of which piles were dry and which were still damp. I mean, it was a process, and there was a lot of responsibility there. If they didn't do that curing properly, then that fish could not be sold. Didn't matter how much they caught. And in the older fishery, there was a position called the Master of the Voyage, and he was responsible for the shore crew. Well, the mistresses of fishing households did that same work. That Master of the Voyage was paid the same as the Master of the Boat Crew. So that's how important the work was. But that doesn't—that didn't make it into the history books. Because they were doing such essential work and a lot of other work as well, I mean, they had to do this and look after the children and do cooking. Cleaning, eh, not so much in those days. But a lot of outdoor gardening, looking after livestock, hay making, all these very physical tasks. Bringing water two miles from a well, five gallons of water. That's hard work. But they loved to do it, which is really interesting because when you listen to the oral traditions, people took pity on somebody who was too sick

to go down to the flake to make fish. They loved to do it. They loved to be contributing to the family's survival.

And because they were such important contributors, the families and the communities respected them. They had a lot of say in what went on everywhere. And they were very powerful, not to be messed with. Husbands really respected—they always sought their wives' opinions. There may be areas when somebody—one might have more expertise than the other, but it wasn't seen as, "Oh, it's because I'm the smart, rational man and you're just the poor woman." It wasn't that. It was based on expertise in the place. And oftentimes there was mixing and matching of roles. It was nothing for a husband to cook meals while the wife was doing something else. So there's that kind of—yeah, sort of—I mean, you don't want to call it equality, because there's a larger, legal structure out there and a larger social structure that is saying that men are the heads of the households and women are subordinate. But on the ground, where it's playing out, I don't think that these women would have thought of themselves as being oppressed because of their gender, if they had known what the word was. They may have thought that they were oppressed because of their class in terms of the merchant vis-à-vis them. But not—I don't think they would have felt that sense that they were anything other than just one of the important people in the work crew.

So you see them—and they are also very physical outside the house. They'll get into wrangling with people over property or employment disputes if they don't agree with the way that they're being treated by their fishing employer, for example. They'll fight over property lines. They'll defend their property against—you know, if a deputy sheriff is coming to collect on a debt. And you do—again, you see this kind of pattern in other sort of more plebeian or popular class households. It was a treat to see them in the court records so much. And initially when you go in to read court records, you're thinking, "Oh, my, look at these poor women." And then you think, "No, wait now, they're really mixing it up here." And I realized when I started tracking the assault cases, for example, again, assault cases and women. Right away your mind goes, "Okay, the woman is the victim and the man is the perpetrator." No, no. [laughs] In terms of assaults that women were involved in, they almost—they're virtually almost the victim almost as often as they were—they were the perpetrator rather, almost as often as they were the victim by a proportion of 86 to 100. So—and they didn't—they weren't just assaulting each other, right. They were assaulting men as well. I mean, it was just—it was rough and tumble. It was survival of the fittest and "get out of my face"

and “get out of my way.” And you don’t see the magistrates being shocked by that. Their own womenfolk, they tried to make sure that they’re respectable, and you can see that sort of pulling of women into the household. Women who once would have been out in the fields. A sign of respectability is that they could come in and not be in the fields anymore. But they don’t do that with these women because they know how important they are to the industry. So you see them—you see magistrates treating them quite—very much like they treat men in court cases. And in terms of punishment, they punish them the same way, except there are a couple of small differences. One is that—I have never come across a court case where a woman was whipped. So they obviously drew a line there. And you do see cases in which women who were sex workers were deported. So that’s interesting. But in terms of matrimonial matters, for example, again, in women’s history, you so often see in this period that women lose everything if they try to leave an abusive husband. Not there, no. They weren’t forced back into the home, into an abusive relationship. They usually got custody of the children. They got maintenance from the husband. So you can see that there’s a certain—yeah, there’s a respect for these women. They also were very important in terms of the spiritual life of the community. Not just the Holy Roman Catholic Church, but in an alternative system of beliefs and practices that did come over from Ireland. And so you see them being very central in terms of protecting the family from fairies, for example. They’re the ones that made the blessed bread that people—well, adults and children carried with them. To protect them from the fairies, you’d have a little bit of blessed bread in your pocket. They—it was their responsibility to make sure that their family was safe once they went out beyond the garden gate. You see them—a number of them with special powers. You see the significance of the iconic nature of female figures, both in the Catholic system and in this informal system. You’ve got, like, the Hag and the Badb, these are all very powerful female figures. So it’s interesting to see how respected they are in that area as well.

And ultimately I think for these women—I don’t know, I mean, my own opinion is that moving from Ireland to Newfoundland was a good shift for them. Because in Ireland, similar kinds, I think, of respect and authority for women. But when the Famine happened—and up to this point in time, I mean, the Catholic Church was forever chasing after people in Ireland, as they were—the common people, the everyday—trying to beat them into regular Catholic practice. Trying to get them to “come over the doorstep” once a year. Trying to get them to stop having wakes and dances at wakes, and this kanoodling among non-married couples and things like that. The

same was happening in Newfoundland, but in Ireland, with the Great Famine, that sort of group of cottiers and labourers, agricultural labourers and whatnot, they sort of—they disappeared from the landscape. Either they died, many did sadly, or they moved. Those were the ones who left Ireland. And what you were left with in Ireland then was a farming class that was also aspiring to respectability, just like other middle class people in the period. And so they sort of more fell into step with the Catholic Church. The people who came out to Newfoundland, by contrast—of course I mean, they had been there long before. They didn't come out because of the Great Famine. And they—their interests and their realities were different from what the Catholic Church wanted for them. And so, yeah, they were quite non-compliant for a long, long time, which I think is tremendous.