

Women's industrial work during the nineteenth century and its impact on working-class female identity in Northern towns and cities.

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Introduction – Why is this research significant?

- This research takes an interdisciplinary approach to examine the impact of the industrial revolution on working-class women's social and political identities.
- The writing of and pertaining to working-class women, both historical/archival and fictional, is used to examine how women's perceptions of themselves and their roles in society were affected by the rise of female labour in mills and factories.
- The political activism of working-class women and their perspectives on their domestic roles and position in society in relation to men have been neglected in favour of patriarchal and/or middle-class narratives. This research is important because it seeks to recover these historically repressed perspectives through literary and historical sources.

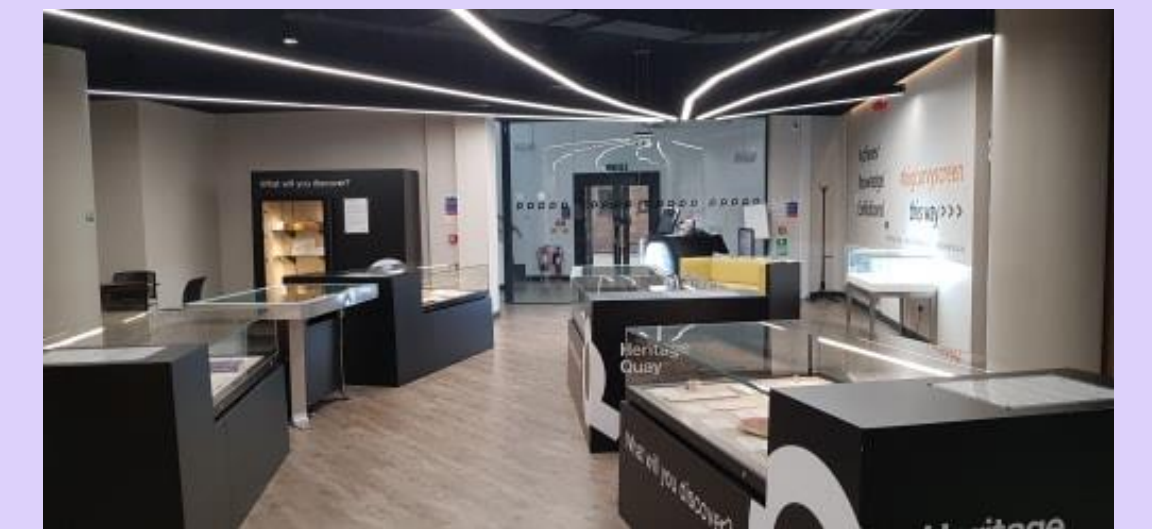
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Voices of Working-Class Women: Ellen Johnston – the 'Factory Girl'

- Poet and autobiographer born in Glasgow 1835.
- Forced into factory work by her stepfather age 11 and worked in factories in Belfast and Manchester later in life.
- She defies categorisation as either a victim of capitalism or a fallen woman.
- Her poetry expresses pride in a specific female, working-class identity as the 'Factory Girl'.
- She refuses to repent for having an illegitimate daughter, 'finding power and a transformational energy in her emancipation from the constraints of Victorian womanhood.' (Susan Zlotnick)
- She rejects the Victorian domestic ideal, considering the mill where she works her home and its workers her family.

"I would not leave thee, dear beloved place,
A crown, a sceptre, or a throne to grace,
To be a queen, the nation's flag unfurl-
A thousand times I'd be a Factory Girl!"

From 'Address to Napiers' Dockyard, Langfield, Anderston'



Huddersfield University Archives
Image: Isabel Sykes

Susan Zlotnick, *Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 218.

Roles and Representations of Working-Class Women

Worker: Patricia Johnson: "Working-class women fuelled the industrial revolution, making up as much as 60 percent to 80 percent of the workforce in light industries".

Fallen woman: In the 1830s and 40s, women working in the public sphere were seen by middle-class society as putting themselves on 'display'. They were often categorised alongside prostitutes as 'fallen women'.

Victim: Middle-class novelists such as Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, Frances Trollope, and Elizabeth Gaskell attempt to redeem the Factory Girl's image by presenting her as an innocent victim of industrialisation.

Housewife: The middle-class domestic life was not realistic for working-class women, who had to work to support their families. However, some women saw domesticity as a more attractive alternative to the hardships of factory life, especially after 1850.

Political activist: Working-class women were important to the Chartist movement between 1838-1843, prioritising working-class solidarity and male suffrage. Chartists refused to represent women's issues, and female involvement waned after 1840.

Feminist?: There is little evidence of working-class involvement in the typically middle-class feminist movements of the 1800s. Middle-class feminists spoke and acted on behalf of working-class women, but often did not accurately represent their interests.

People's History Archives, Manchester

Newcastle University Special Collections

Huddersfield University Heritage Quay

Conclusions

- The example of Ellen Johnston, along with the other female writers I studied, show that working-class women's identities just as multifaceted, conflicting, and unstable as their political, social, and economic positions.
- By constructing and presenting their unique identities through autobiographical and poetic writing, working-class women insisted on self-definition and self-representation in a society that sought to define them and repress their voices.

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