

A Woman's Touch: Domestic Arrangements in the Rural Newfoundland Home.

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Abstract/Résumé

Cet article décrit d'abord le rôle de la femme dans les habitations des petits villages de pêcheurs, puis la façon dont elle perçoit l'organisation de la maison, les diverses fonctions des pièces, la décoration et les habitudes quotidiennes.

After describing the role of the woman in the Newfoundland outport house, this paper considers her sense of relation to plan, room function, decoration, and daily custom.

This paper will look at the work roles of men and women in pre-confederation rural Newfoundland and move from those roles to a consideration of women's perceptions of the house and their function in its organization. From that general viewpoint the paper will consider women's perception of the functions of the individual rooms as well as their decoration and arrangement.

First it is necessary to explain both the method used to gather information on this topic and the context within which the contribution of women to the interior design of the house should be examined. Because there is little written information available on Newfoundland's material culture and even less that focuses specifically on women, the comments are based on a series of interviews held with twelve men and women from rural communities in the eastern and southern areas of Newfoundland. The informants ranged in age from fifty to ninety-five and spoke of outport life from 1900 to 1960.

These interviews gradually shaped my perceptions of the topic; it became increasingly apparent that the organization of the house interior was a function of the overall role of women in a family-based fishing economy, which characterized most of rural Newfoundland prior to confederation. Informants repeatedly spoke of a partnership between men and women whereby the husband worked on the sea and the wife on land. Each person's work was seen as a necessary complement to the work of the other — in Salvage, for example "the women tended the sheep... sometimes the men helped with the shearing, more times not since they'd be busy with other things...the women 'ed wash, card, and spin wool and knit their men sweaters and mits and even wool underwear... it was cold out on the sea, you'd need all that or you'd freeze to death." All three male informants made the point that most work on the land — work they regarded as quite difficult, that is, cooking, gardening, child rearing and managing the house — was

predominately the woman's responsibility. The man's work was either on the sea or in the woods. This sharp division of labour was seen as the most efficient way to accomplish a lot of work. These responsibilities affected the way men and women organized their daily lives and where they worked. For the most part men were taken away from the family house while almost all of women's work was in or near the home. This coloured their views on the home, both in terms of the level of attachment and the function they saw for it.

The men interviewed saw the house as the woman's domain. One male informant stated: "the house, that was the woman's to do as she liked. I had my daybed." Women echoed these feelings in remarks, such as "men never did anything in the house... they were never around the house," or "men were always too busy with other things... they left the house and garden and the fish to the women... a man had no time for the house... in the evenings in the winter I s'pose they'd be home." Women whose husbands were away for long periods of times expressed themselves even more strongly: "What do you mean what did the man do in the house?... sure you never saw a man from May until October unless they were old or bad in the head... what would a man know about the house?" Another woman informant stated, "In the house the woman was boss, she organized the home to suit her and her work." These comments indicate two attitudes about the home: because the men were away from the house so frequently both partners saw the house as the woman's territory, and women saw the home as the headquarters for their work. This second point is an important one as it involved a perception of the home as both a centre for family life and a work-place.

Even though the house was perceived by both partners as the woman's territory, there were many factors which helped to determine how she organized her home. The

overriding consideration for all the female informants was how their homes could best be set up so they could efficiently carry out their daily chores. This influenced which rooms were used and how objects were positioned. But though this was always uppermost in their minds there were several other influences affecting the use and design of the house interior. Informants referred to three of these — weather, poverty, and social pressures.

Much of rural Newfoundlanders' existence was determined by the weather. During the winter the harshness of the climate meant that homes needed to be heated for six or seven months. The main source of heat came from wood cut by the men. To economize on fuel people usually heated only one room: the kitchen, which had to be heated since all the food preparation was done there. This meant that all other daily work activities and family socializing was also carried out in the kitchen. A male informant from Fortune commented that "everyone would be in the kitchen in the winter... there was no where else to go... if you went inside the hall door you'd freeze to death." In the summer months the fishing season was at its height which entailed work for all family members. Men were out on the sea for much of the time and women were engaged in a variety of chores which took them in and out of the house. A woman from Fortune explained it this way: "In the summer a woman 'ed be too busy to spend any time sitting... she had too much work to do what with the garden and the fish and cooking ... why she'd have no time to be anywhere but the kitchen or outdoors." The demands of the season thus determined how the home was used and more particularly which rooms were used by the family. The rigours of the winter weather combined with the work requirements of the summer meant that the family essentially lived in one room. Marguerite Linthorne of Bonavista recalled that "in many homes the key was turned in the lock (to the hallway) when you came down in the morning and wouldn't be opened any more until the evening... there was no reason to leave the kitchen."

These habits of using the home are in fairly sharp contrast to those of Newfoundland families today. The notion that the home might afford privacy to family members seemed foreign to the people interviewed. A female informant from Fortune, replying to a question about privacy in the home, said: "There was no time for that sort of thing then... people were too busy... by the time you were finished your work all you'd want to do is sleep." Marguerite Linthorne responded to this question by saying that "people didn't use rooms in the same sense as they are used today." To Mr. Heffern of Salvage, "the house was where the men slept and the women worked."

This should not be taken to imply that women were uninterested in making their homes comfortable but that they believed the idea of the home as a "family nest" necessarily took second place to the demands of work and climate. When women did have the time to furnish their

homes they had to improvise a great deal. As Alice Lacey of Wesleyville pointed out, "every cent counted in those days... nothing went to waste... everything was used." Only the well-to-do could afford to purchase decorative objects for their homes, and most women were obliged to make such objects as curtains, tablecloths, embroidery work, cushions, floor mats, and quilts. The women reserved time in the evening for this type of handwork or got together in someone's kitchen during the afternoons in winter. For most women this handwork, especially mat-hooking, was a pastime they looked forward to as a break from their everyday routines. Anne Pardy of Boat Harbour West remembers: "You know, I can see myself sitting down, and I used to be at the mats, and my husband, he used to be lying down, you know, and I couldn't get the nights long enough... My dear, I was right dying to be at that work! And when I'd go a little, have so much done, you know, and then I'd sneak it out and look at it and see how nice it looks and I couldn't sleep thinkin' about it."

Added to the restrictions placed on people by poverty was a strong sense of the need to conform. Prior to confederation most rural Newfoundland communities were extremely isolated and removed from outside influences. In order to live successfully in these outports it was considered crucial to fit in with others, and informants continually stressed the importance of being seen to be the same as everyone else. One place this attitude manifested itself was in organization of the home. A woman informant from Fortune stated: "you wouldn't want to put on airs... everyone would think you were proud... then we were all the same..." This type of statement was repeated by all the women interviewed: "all the homes were the same then" (Marguerite Linthorne); "everyone was poor in those days and everyone had the same, no one was different" (Bessie Heffern, Salvage); "all the women had their homes the same" (Alice Lacey).

Another consequence of the isolation was a general fear and distrust of the outside and a feeling that women had only each other to rely on. This sense of collectivity was reinforced by the fact that most of them had lost a family member through accidents at sea. Women frequently alluded to the potential hardship for a wife whose husband was killed or who was injured herself and could not look after her family's needs. Most female informants had the somewhat fatalistic attitude that these were events over which one had no control. However, it was also thought essential to prepare oneself for such eventualities, which involved maintaining one's position with other women so that they could be relied on in the event of trouble. This was accomplished by conforming to the accepted modes of behaviour for women, and because the arrangement of the house was an obvious manifestation of this conformity it was considered important. It also involved having one's house organized so that another woman could easily work there. Marguerite Linthorne expressed it this way: "Everyone had their kitchens the same... if there was trouble in the

home someone could come in the house and do for them... they would know where everything would be." Another female informant stated that "if there was trouble in the home you'd want it so someone could come in and know where things were." Another remembered going in someone's home to help and "it was just the same as my kitchen."

This perception of conformity as applicable to the whole house is also applicable to each room as well as to its decoration and arrangement.

People normally entered the house through the back porch. Hilda Murray calls this area a "cold, basically cheerless place," and my informants confirmed this view. It was used as a barrier for the cold and a storage area for items women used on a habitual but intermittent basis, such as the washing-machine, butter-churn, and spinning-wheel.

The porch led into the kitchen or "the heart of the house." All the woman's activity was centred in this room: cooking; sewing; clothes washing and, in the winter, drying; bathing; food preservation (bottling and canning); carding, washing, spinning, and knitting of wool; hand-work (embroidery, quilting, and mat-hooking); and socializing. As one woman informant from Fortune stated: "you did everything in the kitchen, there was nowhere else then." Marguerite Linthorne reported that "the kitchen was really the house in those days, you did all your work there."

The most attention therefore was lavished on the decoration of the kitchen. Since it was the centre for the woman's work it was set up to allow for the most efficient use of space. However, it was also the gathering place for the family, the area where visitors were entertained, and for that reason women wanted their kitchens to be comfortable, friendly rooms which conformed to the generally accepted way in which a kitchen should be organized.

Most kitchens contained a wooden table and chairs which were positioned by the window, a day-bed along one wall, and a stove with a wood-box. Some rooms had a rocking-chair and if there was a new baby in the family there would be a wooden cradle. Children's toys were kept in a wooden box under the day-bed. Depending on the size of the kitchen, there might be a cupboard or sideboard which was used for storage and show. According to one woman informant, "you put your cups and mugs up for everyone to see what you had."

Women bought and made several materials to decorate this room. An oilcloth was purchased for the table which was in turn covered by a handworked tablecloth. My female informants stressed that it was essential for the oilcloth to be covered. One woman informant remembered being shocked when visiting someone who was "too lazy to make a tablecloth for her family.... they ate right off the oilcloth...

just imagine." The walls were papered and painted. Every spring women would paper their kitchen walls because of the damage caused by dirt and steam from washing and drying clothes in the kitchen during the winter. Most women chose wallpaper containing what they called "kitcheney-type" designs: cups and saucers, flowers, or pots and pans. Curtains were made out of a variety of fabrics from flour sacks to lace. Every kitchen contained calendars and pictures obtained from local businesses. As one woman informant described it, "every year you'd go around first thing to all the shops and get a calendar from everyone to put up in the kitchen.... some people would have their walls covered." In addition to these decorations, people often hung religious pictures or insignia related to clubs they belonged to.

Of all the decorations, the most important were the mats. Greta Hussey of Port de Grave remembered that "in some kitchens the floors would be covered. Everyone made a couple of mats each winter to put on their floor." Materials used for kitchen mats were different than those for other rooms of the house. Women stressed the foolishness of anyone who put anything but a "scrap mat" (a mat of odds and ends) on their kitchen floor. As one woman explained, "Sure you'd have to make new mats every year for the kitchen, you'd never use anything good for that."

Adjoining the kitchen was the pantry. This room was used as a general storage area for everything related to food preparation and some families actually ate in the pantry. The hallway from the kitchen led into the parlour. Since it was normally only used for pivotal events in the family's life such as weddings, christenings, or funerals, it is not surprising that my informants saw it as having little consequence in their daily lives. Some people used terms such as "death house" or "dead box" to describe it because of the practice of many rural families of laying out the dead in the front room or parlour. A Fortune woman remembered that "you'd never look into someone else's front room in those days unless you were asked."

All those interviewed had similar furniture and hand-made or purchased decorations for the parlour. The furniture included a couch, several varnished chairs, an oil lamp, parlour stove, and centre table. Materials were for show rather than use; curtains were made from lace, but in times of mourning they were replaced by heavy black blinds. According to Mrs. Heffern, the blinds were put "all the way down for six months, half-way up for the next six." Sometimes family snapshots or what some called "good pictures" adorned the walls. Every parlour contained a "fancy mat" or mat made from the best materials available. The designs for the parlour mat frequently consisted of abstract symbols. Pride of place was reserved for a large Bible containing all the important documents pertaining to the family which was never touched except on special occasions.

Upstairs were the bedrooms. Although my female informants emphasized that they never were in their friends' or family members' bedrooms except in unique circumstances such as the birth of a new baby, they were fairly sure that all bedrooms were arranged identically. Furniture consisted of a bed, commode, and bureau or "dressing case." Women handmade the feather mattresses and pillows as well as the quilts and sheets for the bed. At the bottom of the bed was a "valence" or piece of handworked cotton which went around the edge of the bed to the floor. As one informant said, "in those days you'd never want someone to see under the bed" — perhaps because the chamber pot was often kept there.

In examining the details of each room a picture gradually emerges in which the influences mentioned earlier in this paper can be seen. A woman may have organized her house to suit herself and her work, as Marguerite Linthorne said, but this organization was tailored by social and economic factors generally found in rural Newfoundland prior to confederation. Since that time changes in the province's economic life and a more sophisticated communications system have no doubt had consequences for the interior arrangement of an outport Newfoundland home — an interesting topic for future study.

NOTES

1. Colleen Lynch, *The Fabric of Their Lives: Hooked and Poked Mats of Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's: Memorial University Art Gallery, 1980), 22-23.

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INFORMANTS

Laura Knee, Twillingate, aged 50, Elizath Manuel, Twillingate, aged 84, Alice Lacey, Wesleyville, aged 65, Mr. and Mrs. Heffern, Salvage, both aged 84, Marguerite Linthorne, Bonavista, aged 65, Bessie Hillier, Fortune, aged 95, Female informant, Fortune, aged 65, Female informant, Fortune, aged 62, Mrs. Beasley, Burin, aged 84, Male informant, Fortune, aged 62, Male informant, Fortune, aged 66, Female informant, Fortune, aged 45, Greta Hussey, Port de Grave, aged 55, Male informant, Bonavista, aged 55.