

"The Tangly Bunch": Outport Women of the Avalon Peninsula

Marilyn Porter

Volume 1, Number 1, Spring 1985

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds1_1art05

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Porter, M. (1985). "The Tangly Bunch": Outport Women of the Avalon Peninsula. *Newfoundland Studies*, 1(1), 76–90.

“The Tangly Bunch”: Outport Women of the Avalon Peninsula

MARILYN PORTER

THERE IS A COMMON-SENSE assumption that “women are not interested in politics.” This has been challenged both in the past and increasingly today. On the one hand we can point to those women who *do* succeed in establishing themselves publicly and to the greater participation by women in formal parties. On the other hand we have also argued for a greater recognition of “women’s culture,” examining the ways in which women organize and do things together as a powerful alternative to “men’s politics.”

In this essay I want to examine what we mean by “culture” and “politics” in the experience of a group of rural Newfoundland women, and to see how women express their values, dreams and priorities both in their own communities and in the wider world beyond.¹

The Southern Shore stretches south of St. John’s on the Avalon Peninsula to Cape Race on the southern tip. While Newfoundland’s bays and shores vary according to their pattern of settlement and type of fishery, what I describe in this essay is not untypical of other communities in the island.

AN EVENING OF POLITICAL CULTURE

THE VARIETY, PROFUSION and energy of rural women’s voluntary associations has been documented by Dona Davis in her recent study of social structure in a Newfoundland community. In a previous account, “Women and Old Boats,” I touched on their role in creating an active women’s social life and their significance in the sexual division of labour. Here I want to look at them as expressions of “women’s culture.”

The 1981 Annual South Avalon District Meeting of the Women’s Institute was held in Trepassey at 8 p.m. on May 20th. Trepassey lies on the peninsula

closest to the oil- and fish-rich, but fog-swathed, Grand Banks. In this wild and treeless spot, the little wooden two-storey houses look scarcely strong enough to survive the winter gales, despite their bright-coloured paint.

But on a summery, sunlit evening it was a lovely ride up there. With fourteen other women, I joined the bus in Calvert, which then picked up some fifty more women from Ferryland, Aquaforte, Fermeuse, Renewes and Capahayden before trekking over the barrens to Portugal Cove South and Trepassey. At each stop delighted confusion reigned. Plump, carefully decked ladies clinked aboard, and always there was someone late, someone missing or someone in the wrong place. Were we to pick up Janet here, or would she be over with her mother in Renewes? Was Sophie working at the fish plant? It was a cheerful process that not only enabled the organizer to actually locate and collect all her members who could come, but kept all the occupants of the bus up with the latest information, either by conjecture—"she's at the plant, the caplin must be in to Calvert then," or "if she's with her mother, her husband must be still in hospital; that will be a hard-off crew," or by direct openings—"She had to go up there to cook tea because her chimney went on fire this morning." As Meg, my sponsor, said, in a voice of happy satisfaction, "Women together, they're a tangly bunch."

Settled in their seats, the women kept at least one eye on the sea to our left. As we passed notable fishing marks, like the Renewes Rock, the conversation turned to the fishing topics of the day—such as the depredations of the new in-shore draggers operating from Trepassey. Each trapskiff, moored by the buoys of the cod trap while it hauled up the heavy house of net with its catch of cod from below, was identified and its potential catch estimated by experienced eyes.

In between, the chat returned to those perennials of female communication—child-care and development, potential marriages, recent social events and knitting patterns. However, this was not a group of isolated suburban women, but the female half of a closely knit, active and productive community. I also learnt about kinship details, the power relations between different interest groups and which fishing boat had fitted new gear. There were certain "women's subjects" but they were not separated off from other matters. The surface chat was thus embedded in, and carried forward, the entire socially constructed knowledge of the community.

At the high school in Trepassey, twenty-five local members had prepared the polythene-covered "dinner" of such events (turkey salad, cookies, tri-colour jelly and stewed tea with tinned milk), as well as a daunting display of handicrafts, including a large traditional hooked mat of Trepassey (see Pocius *Textile Traditions*). Mutual cooing was interrupted by the President, Dot Mackay, who in her spare time had a part-time job as a mail-carrier, ran the Weight Watchers, helped with the Brownies, was active in the Progressive Conservative Party and brought up three sons. The paper-covered tables laid out in an H-shape had an obvious "high table," and someone had to sit at it. Dot

herself had no choice, nor had the Vice-President, but the rest of the committee ducked and feinted and, by and large, retired triumphant to their coveys of friends. Pressed women, pink of face, took their places. It prefigured the central event of the occasion.

The dinner, the speeches, the group reports, the chanting of the Women's Institute ode followed a familiar pattern. They testified to a hard-working, comprehensively active and efficiently run organization. Then came "the Voting," the highlight of the evening. A number of women had mentioned "the Voting" in tones that led me to expect some tense politics, but what actually happened was quite unexpected and it repays analysis.

Dot Mackay was clearly nervous. She checked the procedure in her book. We were to elect a president, a first vice-president, a second vice-president, and a secretary-treasurer, and each branch was to elect two members at large. No nominations had been received and none were vouchsafed now. Dot said she hoped it wouldn't be like last year, but to make it easier they could "cluster in groups" (i.e., each outport contingent together). The noise level rose in anticipation, and I heard Anna Maitland's urgent whisper that "the trouble with this is you can't nominate anyone in case they nominate you back."

Operating now from clearly defined community groups, the nominations for President began. Ferryland opened up with Joan Curran: "I nominate Meg Bond [of Calvert]." Meg Bond rose promptly to her feet and said "I decline." Now Dot Anson (also from Calvert) nominated Joyce Walsh of Aquaforte. Joyce declined, and then Vera Sullivan (of Calvert) "nominated back" Helen Waite (Ferryland), who declined, and so on for seventeen nominations, of whom fifteen declined. A ballot could now be held between the two women who had allowed their nominations to stand: last year's Vice-President, Anna Maitland of Ferryland, and Mary Kenny of Calvert. When the slips had been counted and checked, Anna won by a handsome margin.

The same procedure was then repeated for the position of first Vice-President. Mary Kenny was re-nominated and some fifteen nominations and declinations later, Dot Anson also allowed her nomination to stand. Predictably, Mary Kenny won the subsequent ballot. By the time all the four main positions were filled, each woman had been nominated at least once. The pattern was that a nominator got "nominated back" by someone from the same outport as the woman she had nominated. Only four women did not decline, and they filled the posts. It took nearly an hour to extract what were, in effect, four volunteers.

It was an outcome that satisfied everyone, and the evening wound up rapidly with some formal speeches of thanks, and we tumbled, tired, into the coach for the return trip down the now dark coast.

WOMEN'S CULTURE AND VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS

BEFORE I EXPLORE some of the implications of that evening, I need to return

to the context in which it took place. Voluntary associations are a major part of outport women's lives. Apart from the very young, newly married women, virtually all women participate in some activity. A few limit it to a weekly game of bingo or cards, and attend the numerous social events. But most are actively engaged in at least one association and the majority have a number of such involvements. Along the Southern Shore, the main ones are the Catholic Women's League, Royal Canadian Legion Ladies' Auxiliary, Women's Institute, Kinettes and the Darts League. There are also support activities for Girl Guides, Brownies, Pathfinders and 4-H, more transitory groups like Weight Watchers, softball and badminton and a continual succession of weddings, showers, banquets, prize-givings, graduation celebrations, "garden parties" (summer community socials on church grounds), dances and fund-raising events, all of which are organized and provided with food by groups of women.

Some activities are directed towards traditional good works like Christmas baskets for the elderly, and some, especially in the Women's Institute, focus on preserving traditional handicrafts, such as the hooked mats and country crafts. Associations or ad hoc groups also channel money into communal projects by applying for grants or supervising Government schemes. For instance, the Calvert Women's Institute repaired their centre and built a park and playground on two Canada Works summer programmes. All the work was organized and carried out by women, including all the building work. Women were also responsible for the project that extended the Legion hall, although in this case they overreached their technical skills and the new roof leaked, giving rise to much male banter.²

The resulting hectic round of activity involves all women in at least some aspects of the associations. Many are engaged in community activity of some sort every day. It is easy to see the significance of this activity in involving women socially and in terms of the impressively efficient communications network. But to what extent could any of it be described as cultural, or, even more problematically, political? Certainly much of the craft-works and the perpetuation of traditional entertainments and gatherings (e.g., mumming, garden parties) could be seen as "cultural" in the sense of "folk culture." More importantly, the level of involvement and the enthusiastic sociability create a social space to which all women are attracted. Furthermore, to associate *as women* was seen as the positive attraction, and women-only social events were, if anything, more popular than mixed ones.

Guided by a preconception of the Women's Institute and similar associations as inherently conservative and dedicated to traditional sex roles and the importance of the family, it is easy to dismiss much of what they did as simply "servicing" the community in a way that was analogous to individual women servicing their families in the home. Were they not simply valiantly underpinning the deficiencies of state provision and supporting male initiatives?

Dona Davis, who worked on the south coast of Newfoundland, has argued

that women's voluntary associations are essentially to do with play, rather than with work—which happens at home. Moreover she sees the family as the only “politicised centrally organised multi-purpose group” in a society characterized by its egalitarian nature (“Social Structure” 19). Before I comment on these ideas in terms of the content and style of women's culture expressed in the voluntary associations on the Southern Shore I need to consider an important factor that affected the women of the Southern Shore more than women in some other areas, such as the south coast.

LOCAL BUT NOT ISOLATED: THE ROAD TO INTEGRATION

SETTLEMENTS ALONG THE Southern Shore are scattered at about five- to ten-mile intervals. They vary in size and importance from hamlets of less than two hundred people, mostly related, to administrative centres like Ferryland with a population of 795 (1982).

While the Southern Shore is a clear cultural and geographic entity, subdivisions are more complicated. All the formal agencies have different ways of segmenting the Shore. In Ferryland, the RCMP, the doctor, the Department of Social Services, the Roman Catholic and Anglican parishes, the Rural Development Officer and the Unemployment Insurance Commission office all have different boundaries along the Shore. Electoral and census boundaries confuse matters still further. The voluntary associations follow suit. Some have branches in each community; some only have branches in the larger communities; thus people from Aquaforte have to go to Ferryland for most of their activities, while Calvert has its own Women's Institute branch but goes to Ferryland for Legion events. The Women's Institute local area runs from Calvert (north of Ferryland) south to Trepassey. The Southern Shore Development Association, contrariwise, runs *north* along the coast from just south of Ferryland.

The result of these arrangements is an extraordinarily profuse and complex set of connections between all the communities of the Shore. Thus, although most communities are small enough to allow face-to-face contact between all the members, the totality of the Shore is sufficiently geographically extended (some hundred miles long) and densely populous to produce a more formal *Gesellschaft* context. The whole area also integrates vertically with Provincial and Federal structures, thus linking Aquaforte, for example, ultimately with Ottawa. But it is the women far more than the men who operate on this wider level, and they are more involved than the women discussed by Dona Davis. One reason is exogamy. A man would marry a girl from a neighbouring outport. He then built a house close to his parents' and, by extension, to his brothers'. Fishing crews were still composed predominantly of close male relations. Men, therefore, lived among their kin, kept their boats at the community anchorage, fished with their brothers and other close male relatives, and sold the fish to the local fish plant. The women, separated from their own

families of birth, kept in close contact with their mothers and sisters by means of both the phone and frequent visits. With roots in two communities and with sisters in others, women start with an inherently "wider world" than the men.

A second reason is the importance of voluntary associations in women's lives. The sheer number of women involved and the social mesh produced by their cross-cutting memberships together with the fact that nearly all the local voluntary associations are linked with levels of activity beyond that of the individual outport or small cluster of outports mean that women frequently meet women from neighbouring settlements on a regular and structured basis, and, less frequently, women from further afield. It is no accident that in Aquaforte alone the two people active politically at the Provincial level were both women.³

Accounts of life in the traditional outport of the past emphasized their isolation. Transport was not easy, and was in the hands of men. Most communities had contact with others along a coast or bay by boat during the summer and by sledge during the winter. This is still the case in Labrador and along the South Coast, areas which have few connecting roads. But elsewhere, the coming of all-weather roads and widespread car ownership have transformed *women's* mobility. The men still dominate the all-terrain vehicle and skidoo trips to the woods; but the women have taken to the roads. No place on the Shore is now more than one or two hours' travel from anywhere else, and while winter conditions are not easy, the cars and trucks are robust enough to keep moving. Combined with the telephone, easy access to road transport has given women freedom of association, and they have taken it up with gusto. Quite apart from shopping, many women travel for meetings, banquets, tournaments, weddings and showers, conventions, concerts and prize-givings and on any other pretext.

Women's public activity, then, is not only greater but less restricted to the immediate locality of the settlement. It also gives them a virtual monopoly of the informal communication network, a point I shall return to later.

MEN'S "POLITICS"

THE MEN, on the other hand, tend to stay at home. They do not involve themselves in voluntary associations as frequently as their wives. However, Lions, Kinsmen and the Canadian Legion flourish and most men attend the events that have been organized by their wives and the big social events of the year. Male associations have a structural dominance. Province-wide, the male "service" associations decide on the annual "cause," which both the male and female associations' fund-raising supports. Membership of some female associations, e.g., the Kinettes, depends on having a husband who is a member of the male equivalent association.

A small group of men, drawn from the actual or aspiring local bourgeoisie and the local professionals, "do a lot." They hold the key positions in the

local associations, run the Fire Brigade, drum up support for good causes, chair meetings of the Development Association and similar local groups that deal with snow and refuse clearance and generally act as "local leaders"—visible and articulate. It is noticeable that there is no such visibility of the much greater number of women who "do a lot"; nor do the active women come so often from families of higher status. Otherwise, the young single men (like the young single women) roam the bars in packs, go down to St. John's and generally "party around." During the winter, when fishermen have leisure, most of the men prefer to "go to the woods" in small groups—to hunt, cut timber and drink.

Yet despite a relatively low level of public activity, it is the men and male groups that dominate those public expressions of what we, conventionally, call politics.

The Fishermen's Committee in each community is a small elected group, usually about four people, always men. They wield the only overt local power, and they have considerable authority. They supervise the draw for trap berths and salmon-net berths at the beginning of the season. This involves determining who is, and who is not, eligible as a "fisherman." Each crew has one or two berths, but the berths vary enormously in their ease of access, in their danger to the trap, and, most important, in their productivity. The trap fishery is an entirely passive one, and the location of the berths is a major factor in the success or otherwise of a crew. Fishermen's fortunes, then, are largely dependent on the draw. The committee is also responsible for settling minor disputes, for representing the interests of a community in cases of "poaching" by residents from neighbouring communities, and for enforcing the myriad complex regulations imposed by the provincial and federal government fisheries departments.⁴ Disputes or issues that the committee cannot handle go either to the Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers Union or to the relevant official. Members of the committee have a great deal of knowledge as well as authority.

There is much discussion of fishing issues by both men and women, but only men, i.e. fishermen, go to the meetings to discuss them formally. Attendance at such meetings is high, although few men apart from the "local leaders" actually speak.

All fishermen are also members of the NFFAW and local meetings are held in which officials discuss the negotiated fish prices and other issues. In addition, some leading fishermen attend meetings in Trepassy and St. John's to discuss issues such as licensing and quotas. These are usually organized by government, local professionals such as doctors, or the Union. Ad hoc committees and meetings to respond to such issues as the Mobil Oil Impact Study tend to be convened by local professionals and dominated by the local leaders.

The Southern Shore Development Association is a wider organization covering the whole Shore. Its meetings provide some of the few occasions when men meet men from other outports in a structured way. Inevitably fishing issues

come up, but the meetings focus mainly on general community problems, e.g. response to oil-related development, refuse disposal, community grant applications, demands for road surfacing, etc. Yet few women, except one or two especially "public-minded" women, attend these meetings.

What I appear to have described here, then, is both men and women being involved in formal public associations, but with a difference. While the women are engaged in cultural or "play" activities, or else in supportive functions such as catering, the men continue to control the more serious and "political" activities, what Peggy Sanday calls "the public", i.e., "political or economic activity which relates to the control of persons or things" (190).

Rural Newfoundland society then presents us with a public life divided according to gender in a particularly clear way, and it also exposes that circularity of definitions of *culture* and *politics* that makes them correspond so neatly with men's and women's activities.

men	=	fish, roads, oil	=	politics
		bake sales		
women	=	community projects	=	culture
		money-raising		

This is the point at which I want to look again at the voluntary associations, particularly in terms of their content and their style. It is an examination that takes us back to the Women's Institute meeting in Trepassey.

CULTURAL POLITICS AND POLITICAL CULTURE

WE SHOULD NOTICE, first, that the meeting was set up, organized and run by local women themselves, not by local professionals or government officials, nor even by provincial officials of the Women's Institute. Only the outgoing President, Dot Mackay, remotely resembled the pattern of the male "local leaders." Her husband had a government job, although as he worked elsewhere on the Island he was invisible locally. Neither Dot nor her husband had been born in the area, and this "stranger" status might have given them links with the local professionals, but, in fact, they did not associate with them. They lived in a trailer home. Dot's job as a part-time mail carrier was hardly prestigious and, generally, she had more in common with the other women who made up both the outgoing and the incoming committees. By and large, the women came from "good" families, which were merely a reflection of the "respectable" membership of the Women's Institute as a whole. The Darts Club, for instance, had a much more socially mixed leadership. Apart from the principal of the school in which we met, who was there as a private member of the Women's Institute, there were no local professionals. Nor, as one might expect (and a number of writers, including Dona Davis, support

this), were there any *wives* of professionals.

Secondly, the area represented at the meeting, half the total Shore, involving seven communities, was too large to be merely local. This level of association was only open to men who attended the Southern Shore Development Association and ad hoc fishery meetings, neither of which involved structured links between the men of different outports in the same way as that available to the Women's Institute members. While the meeting had its own autonomy, it was also aware of its position within the framework of the provincial Women's Institute—to meetings of which the new president and vice-president would go—and beyond that, the federal Women's Institute, and indeed, beyond that, the world.

The main business of the evening was "the voting," and to understand this it is necessary to recognize the strength of the ethic of egalitarianism among Newfoundlanders. This has been well documented by sociologists and anthropologists, (Chiaramonte, Faris, Firestone, Nemec, Szwed), who have pointed out that the refusal to either accept or grant leadership positions can both foreclose local initiative and prevent effective resistance to outside encroachment.⁵ In other words, what may have been an essential mechanism for social survival in the days of harsh merchants and grinding poverty may be less appropriate in changed conditions.

The egalitarian ethic clearly throws some light on what went on. In so far as these positions *were* leadership positions, or were perceived as that, it would be compulsory to refuse them. In the male associations (and in the one described in Davis, "Social Structure"), the vacuum was filled by local professionals or by aspiring "local leaders." Thus, by degrees, male outport society was becoming more stratified. On the other hand, the fishermen's committees, which did have a wider spread of members, often had their authority challenged. This was usually expressed in terms of it being morally wrong to accept a leadership position. Much of the discontent stirred up by a refusal to allow one crew in Aquaforte to continue to use its berth after its skipper had gone to work on the oil rigs centred on the credentials and imputed partiality of the current committee, rather than on the merits of the decision itself. Similarly, in Calvert, one elderly man was still not speaking to his nephew because, during his nephew's term on the committee, the man had been refused the right to draw. The uncle's enduring rage centred upon what he saw as his nephew's *prior* obligation to him, based upon kinship.

Clearly, the Women's Institute committee did not have, and certainly did not exert, that kind of direct authority over its members. But it had some, notably the right to expel members who behaved inappropriately or who failed to attend meetings. Looking at what happened during the voting shows how the women have tackled the problem of the conflict between egalitarianism and authority. I have already pointed out that what they ended up with was actually four "volunteers." One was very young, and none were from high-status families. Yet, because they had not transgressed the egalitarian ethic,

their subsequent leadership gained ready acceptance. Also, because nearly all the women had held position in some association, at some level, at some time, there was a much greater understanding and sympathy for the conflicts of office.

So I want to argue here that while the men remain trapped between an incompatible egalitarian ethic and a democratic mechanism, the women have found a way of using the mechanism without betraying the ethic. Their solution allows both authority and decision-making and also the retention of a strong sense of identity as a group. Comments at that meeting and heard from many other women show that they regard such leadership positions as jobs with some perks, not status positions. There is no question of anyone "hanging on" (symbolized by the abandonment of the high table by the outgoing committee). There is constant pressure to involve younger women, newcomers, outsiders, women considered "not as well-off" or even "unfortunates." Nor does the committee impose itself more than necessary. Members meet only as often as they have to and the general membership remains involved in the bulk of activity. Indeed, the sheer scale of that activity presupposes an entirely active membership.

The women have a structure of extraordinary efficiency and power that has no parallels among the male organizations. Combined with all the other women's organizations, it ensures a formidable command of communications. We have already noted that while the formal activities of the groups fell into the categories of recreational, cultural or supportive, the communications are not so restricted. The women do talk about fishing issues and resurfacing the road.

The point here is that their discussion is rarely set up formally and never as confrontation. It is interlaced with other concerns. In fact, it is clear that in the minds of the women they are not really separated. Why, then, don't they simply take over? They have both the means and the energy.

One answer could be that the men would resist them, as they undoubtedly would. Yet the few women who *do* take part are eminently successful and there is little *overt* sexist exclusion in the public sphere.⁶ As a hypothesis, this is difficult to test. In any case, a more immediately obvious answer is that they simply don't want to.

Another covert connotation of politics identifies it as "important," in contrast to culture, which is not. Looked at from the outside it is easy to assume that women *ought* to prefer to be involved in the "politics" of the inshore draggers, rather than the "culture" of bake sales. One anthropologist who has questioned this is S. C. Rogers. She argues that it is both sexist and Eurocentric to assert *a priori* that the public and formal sectors of society offer greater rewards than the private and informal sectors.

Yet it is not simply Marxists who argue that the economic has to be prior in some sense. It is worth noting in this context that the whole edifice of the women's materially comfortable lives which enables the voluntary associations

to be so active rests on the success of the fishery, and on the continuing operation of the local fish plant. A year later, after a disastrous season's fishery, the Aquaforte plant closed down. It reopened shortly after with government aid, but it alerted the people to their extreme economic vulnerability. In other parts of the Province such closures have led to local action, but so far these have been male-dominated, usually co-ordinated by the local development association or branch of the fishermen's Union.⁷ Where are the women at a time when the well-being and indeed the survival of the entire community are under threat?

The sexual division of political action is all the more striking in the light of Newfoundland women's significant economic contribution. There is a long tradition of women's active economic involvement in Newfoundland. Even now that women's contribution to the family economy in the production of sun-dried fish has ended, women work in the fish plants and manage the shops and post offices, frequently bringing home more than their fishermen husbands. In this case it does not make sense to equate political power with economic activity.

This point raises the question, again, of what the term "political" includes. During some research I carried out in a United Kingdom city (see Porter, *Home, Work and Class Consciousness*) I asked, "Do you think men know more about politics and things like that than women do?" Most of the men and some of the women thought that men did know more than women. But many more women either defined politics as what women *were* interested in, or else dismissed politics as "men's business" but then said what women were interested in was "Oh, health and education, and food prices and the old people, and things like that." Apart from being a tidy lot of exceptions to any definition of "political," these responses also reflected both a sense of priorities and a sense of powerlessness. For both men and women, "politics" boiled down to elections, industrial disputes and a few newsworthy issues, problems which were out of their control anyway. So, indeed, were prices and education at a national level; but women could, and did, confront these issues locally in their shops and schools, as individual consumers and parents. It seemed to me that the absence of a community equivalent to a trade union forced the women into frustrated individualism.

In Newfoundland, the situation is reversed in that it is the women who have the strong grass-roots organizations while the men remain trapped in inappropriate political structures and relative isolation. In contrast to women, the men seem to be operating out of their depth in structures that have been imposed on them. In many ways, men reproduce the structures of oppression. There is patently little that the weak and isolated inshore fishermen can *do* to control or challenge either the proliferating obscure regulations of the state bureaucracy or mainland firms that would like to eliminate them in favour of "more productive" units.

We have already noted that while women's voluntary activities fell into the categories of recreational, cultural or supportive, communication was not so restricted. In Aquaforte, everybody talked about fishing issues, but the men and women discussed them separately. Information necessary for discussions was traded in the family. The women needed details of the menfolk's catching problems, waterfront conversations and results of formal meetings to exchange with other women on the phone and face to face. The men relied on the women for all information about other crews in different parts of the community and in other settlements up and down the Shore.

Where more general issues were concerned the men and women did not rely on one another for information. Whereas the men would "talk politics"—about the Constitution, the impact of offshore oil development and the provincial claim to control that oil—the women remained silent about such matters in public, and even in private they usually confined themselves to moral commentary on such events as the assassination attempt on the Pope or the *Ocean Ranger* oil-rig disaster.

When I questioned them about these wider political issues the Aquaforte women, like the English women I talked to, said that "politics" was not interesting, or was simply depressing, and, most significantly, that nothing could be done about it. In the English research I had found that women often said that men's concerns were "more important" than their concerns. This meant that men could *talk* about what interested them—from motor bikes to civil wars. Meanwhile, women got on with the "really" important matters of personal relationships, caring concerns and the family. Like their English counterparts, the Newfoundland women disclaim their activities as "not important," and by this they mean that they do not consider them "political."

Women do talk, though less dogmatically than the men, about locally important issues. They also talk about all the other important aspects of the shared life of the Shore, and they act in powerful co-ordination to forward those things they approve of and to discourage those that they oppose. In their voluntary associations women have established a kind of freedom, autonomy and material confidence in which they can make their own politics. They have established control over certain aspects of the shared life of the community which they see as central. But by accepting that their interests are by *definition* not political, that is, important, by refusing to involve themselves in those that are and by hiding behind the camouflage of the "tangly bunch," what they have engineered is in effect a retreat from an apparently uncontrollable outside world to one which is more manageable.

CONCLUSION

IN THIS ESSAY I have had two objectives. One is to raise the question of the use of the concepts of "culture" and "politics." I have suggested that the use of covert assumptions leads to the misinterpretation of the evidence, which then

slips into preordained categories, rather than being accurately examined on its own merits. Once a speech or an action has been defined as "cultural," it is difficult to remain open to its "political" consequences and dimensions. The second is to present some of the activities of the women of the Southern Shore in the voluntary associations, and to ask certain questions about these. It is clear that the women possess certain tools of considerable political potential. Their command over channels of communication is in itself a considerable strength. So are their organizational sophistication and the accomplished ease with which they organize and co-ordinate various activities. Yet they do not use their potential power in open conflict with the state, or with capital. They have deliberately separated their resources from the men's albeit powerless efforts to affect economic and political decisions involving the whole community. In other words, they have turned their backs on politics as they understand it, and have built instead a "political culture" which remains powerful in controlling the culturally meaningful parts of the environment of its members, *providing* that the economic and wider political reality in which it is embedded is unthreatened. While there is a certain perspicacity in their sense of powerlessness it is, essentially, a negative position. The women have achieved a piece of subversion that should not go uncelebrated, but the latent power of the organized rural women of Newfoundland is, as yet, unrealized. As one frustrated Bristol woman put it, "Women together: that's the greatest power in all the world." The society that gave rise to the voluntary associations and to the institutions and priorities that these women value is under economic threat, and the potential power of "the tangly bunch" to act in its defence should not be underestimated, or forgotten.

Notes

¹The material drawn on here was collected in Aquaforte, south of St. John's, between February and July 1981. The research was supported by the Institute of Social and Economic Research of Memorial University, and I gratefully acknowledge the help of R. Hill, Director of the Community Services Council project on "Work and Unemployment in Newfoundland," and J. Cag, both of whom gave me access to their data and helped make contacts in Aquaforte. The References include a number of works which have provided ideas and viewpoints for this essay.

²Summer works programmes were aimed at the unemployed. They provided the much coveted stamps that entitled the holder to claim unemployment insurance. One of their deficiencies was that they operated at the height of the fishing season when many men, unemployed during the winter, were busy. In this case the slack had been taken up by the women.

³Jean Payne in the Liberal Party and Joyce George in the Progressive Conservative Party.

⁴By and large the federal body, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, deals with the live fish, i.e., matters of quotas, licences; and the provincial Department of Fisheries deals with the dead fish, i.e., hygiene arrangements in fish plants. The NFFAW negotiates fish prices for all the province's fishermen, as well as representing the fish plant workers and the men working on the draggers.

⁵In "Social Structure" Davis also argues that leadership positions threaten the stability of the "trading" between individuals and families. In Grey Rock Harbour they therefore foisted such positions onto strangers.

⁶It is generally true that Canadian women take up more formal positions without any apparent discrimination; e.g., the Speaker of the House of Commons has been a woman.

⁷A notable exception to this has been the community-led resistance to the closures at Burin, where women have been actively involved.

References

- Antler, Ellen. "Women's Work in Newfoundland Fishing Families." *Atlantis* 2, 2, Pt. 2 (1977):106-13.
- Chiaramonte, Louis J. *Craftsman-Client Contracts*. St. John's: Memorial Univ. of Newfoundland, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1970.
- Davis, Dona Lee. "Social Structure, Sex Roles and Female Associations in a Newfoundland Fishing Village." CESCE Meetings, Banff, Alberta. Feb. 1979.
- . "Women's Experience of Menopause in a Newfoundland Fishing Village." Diss. Univ. of North Carolina, 1980.
- Faris, James C. *Cat Harbour: A Newfoundland Fishing Settlement*. St. John's: Memorial Univ. of Newfoundland, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1972.
- Firestone, Melvin M. *Brothers and Rivals: Patrilocality in Savage Cove*. St. John's: Memorial Univ. of Newfoundland, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1967.
- Freeman, Jo. "The Tyranny of Structurelessness." *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 17 (1972-73):151-64.
- Mitchell, Juliet, and Ann Oakley, eds. *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967.
- Murray, Hilda Chaulk. *More than Fifty Percent; Women's Life in a Newfoundland Outport 1900-1950*. [St. John's:] Breakwater Books, 1979.
- Nemec, Thomas F. "I Fish with my Brother." In *North Atlantic Fishermen*. Ed. Raoul R. Andersen and Cato Wadel. St. John's: Memorial Univ. of Newfoundland, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1972, 9-34.
- Pocius, Gerald L. *Textile Traditions of Eastern Newfoundland*. Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies Paper No. 29. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1979.
- Porter, Marilyn. *Home, Work and Class Consciousness*. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1983.
- . "'Women and Old Boats': The Sexual Division of Labour in a Newfoundland Outport." In *The Public and the Private*. Ed. Eva Gamarnikow and others. London: Heinemann, 1983, 91-105.
- Rendel, Margherita, ed. *Women, Power and Political Systems*. London: Croom Helm, 1981.
- Rogers, Susan Carol. "Woman's Place: A Critical Review of Anthropological Theory." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 20 (1978):123-62.
- Rosaldo, Michelle Zimbalist. "Woman, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview." In Rosaldo and Lamphere, 17-42.
- , and Louise Lamphere, eds. *Woman, Culture, and Society*. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1974.
- Rowbotham, Sheila, Lynne Segal, and Hilary Wainwright. *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism*. London: Merlin Press, 1979.
- Sanday, Peggy Reeves. *Female Power and Male Dominance*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981.
- . "Female Status in the Public Domain." In Rosaldo and Lamphere, 189-206.
- Szwed, John Francis. *Private Cultures and Public Imagery; Interpersonal Relations in a Newfoundland Peasant Society*. St. John's: Memorial Univ. of Newfoundland, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1966.