

Contrasting female identities: Women in coal mining communities in Northumberland, England, 1900-1939.

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### Abstract

This article evaluates the stereotypical image of mining society—of rigidly segregated sex roles and patriarchy—in an examination of women in mining communities in central Northumberland, England from 1900 to 1939. The author identifies two contrasting female identities: "domestic women" who fit the picture of subordination to males and of domesticity and who bore a maternal and domestic burden more onerous than that of other working-class women; and "political women" who rejected the lifestyle of their peers, chose a public life of political action, and fought for socialist and feminist causes. These findings suggest that, even in traditional communities known for homogeneity and conformity, female identity was variable

## CONTRASTING FEMALE IDENTITIES:

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Coal miners have long fascinated scholars from a variety of disciplines, as they have the public at large, because they engender dramatic and extreme images of danger and unremitting hard labor, unparalleled industrial solidarity and militancy, hard drinking and intense social lives. Gender relations also fit into this extreme pattern. The classic view of mining society is of more rigidly segregated sex roles and workspaces and of more entrenched patriarchy than in any other industrial community.<sup>1</sup> Many histories of miners’ trade union and political activity reinforce this picture, which leaves an impression of a hypermasculine culture centered around the trade union, working men’s club, allotment, and football field.<sup>2</sup>

This article considers these views of segregation and patriarchy in an examination of women’s experiences in mining communities in Northumberland, a county fiercely proud of its mining tradition. I focus upon three collieries—Ashington, Bedlington, and Newbiggin by the Sea—from 1900 to 1939, an era marked first by both great prosperity for the coal industry and then by its speedy decline. Of the three collieries, Ashington was the most significant as one of the largest and most advanced in the nation by 1914 and the source of several national trade union and political leaders in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>3</sup> Established around 1870, the mining town had a population of 24,583 by 1911 and 29,418 by 1931. With 79 percent of its men employed in the mining industry in 1911 and 76 percent in 1921, it was the most concentrated mining community of the three. Bedlington,

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