

RESEARCH NOTE

“What, I Pray You, Shall I Do with the Ballance?”: Single Women’s Economy of Migration*

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SUMMARY: This article compares the experiences of independent women migrants in the textile cities of Preston, England; Paisley, Scotland; and Lowell, Massachusetts in the period 1850–1881. There are essentially two models describing single women’s migration in the current historical literature. Both describe young women primarily in terms of personal economy and what kind of relationship they maintained with their parents before and after migration. The first emphasizes that though the European migrants were physically removed from their parents, they remained economically tied to their families; the second refers specifically to American women, defining them as emphatically independent, economically and socially, and cut off from their families. Direct comparison reveals remarkable similarity of experience for these young women. Though migrants in each city chose different occupations, each chose occupations that provided accommodation. Most became financially independent, rather than primarily contributors to a family economy, but maintained important supportive ties with family.

In November 1853 a domestic servant named Jane Dunbar was being treated in the Glasgow Lock Hospital. Jane had migrated from Liff (near Dundee), Scotland, about 100 miles across the country from Cathcart, near Glasgow. While she was in the hospital another young woman with a forged note duped her employer into giving up Dunbar’s chest and basket, containing everything she owned in the world. Dunbar reported that she lost:

Seven gowns, eight pairs of stockings, two Plaids, a Shawl, five petticoats, Twelve Cotton Caps, two Lace Caps, Thirteen shifts, Two parasols, four pairs of boots, Two pairs of slippers, five Handkerchiefs, A cravat, A net, Three towels, A

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bonnet, A pair of stays, A boa, An apron, four chemisettes, A Purse, A bank note for one pound sterling, A comb, and a box with some ribbons, night caps, and other small articles.

After her discharge from the hospital, Dunbar returned to her mother's home in Liff. The alleged thief, who claimed to be a friend of Dunbar's, was apprehended in December, and it is possible that the stolen goods were returned.¹

A second young migrant in Scotland met with a less benign ending to her story. Isabella McNeil was born in Oban, a coastal city in the Scottish Highlands. In 1871, when she was sixteen years old, she left her parents' home to work in Paisley, likely as a domestic servant. In the next three years she met a weaver named James Waddell, quit service to become a millworker, and moved in with Waddell. Less than a year later he married another woman and moved away, leaving Isabella pregnant and destitute. In May 1874, eight months pregnant and with an injured leg, she applied for poor relief. Her daughter was born at the Glasgow Lying-in Hospital, and McNeil managed to scrape by in Paisley for another year. Finally, in October 1875, her mother came to Paisley intent on bringing her home. However, Mrs McNeil could not pay their way back to Oban. Paisley's Poor Law Inspector provided 4 shillings for train fare, and Isabella's adventure in the city ended with a retreat to her parents' home, a baby in her arms, and no husband in sight.²

McNeil's and Dunbar's stories are interesting in their own right, simply as narratives of young women struggling to survive on their own in the city. But they also highlight a larger historiographical problem. Hundreds of young migrant women left stories similar to Jane's and Isabella's in British records from the second half of the nineteenth century.³ Taken together, these stories urge a reconsideration of single women's migration in the nineteenth century, especially the economic aspects of that migration.

There are essentially two models describing single women's migration in the current historical literature. Both of those models describe the young

1. Dunbar's story was reconstructed from the "criminal libels" published by the Procurator-Fiscal (public prosecutor) in Paisley in conjunction with a criminal trial. They include the charges against the accused, the evidence to be presented, and a list of the witnesses. The defense, however, had no voice in these records, nor were verdicts recorded, so they should not be considered indicative of guilt; Paisley Sheriff's Court, 9 February 1854, SC58/50/12, Scottish Record Office.

2. Paisley Poor Law: Statements of Cases, vols 11–17, 21 May 1874, case no. 16890, Paisley Public Library.

3. The primary sources consulted for this study included: (from Paisley) Poor Law records, parliamentary reports on children's labor and bleach and dye works, newspapers; (from Preston) newspapers, bank records; (from Lowell) corporate and personal correspondence, observers' reports. In all three cities a 7.5 to 10 per cent sample was taken from the censuses of 1850/1851 through 1880/1881 which grounds the qualitative material in statistical data.

women primarily in terms of how they spent their money and what kind of relationship they maintained with their parents before and after migration. Although more recent historians have given the models greater nuance, they are still founded in work from the late 1970s.⁴ The first comes from Louise Tilly and Joan Scott's classic 1978 study, *Women, Work, and Family*. Tilly and Scott recount how young farmers' daughters from twelve or thirteen years old were sent by their parents to the cities, where they worked as domestic servants or occasionally in factories. Simply in migrating the daughters took economic pressure off their parents. Many also became economic contributors to their families, because their wages were sent home to help pay the rent or buy necessities. The family-economy model emphasizes that, even though the migrants were *physically* removed from their parents, they were still very much a part of a family economy, very closely connected to their parents in terms of the decision to leave home and what they did with their money afterwards. Further, Tilly and Scott suggest that when the economic ties between migrant daughters and parents were severed, the affective ties were likely to fade as well: "[a]ccumulating enough money to send home must have been impossible for many girls. Their consequent inability to help their families undoubtedly diminished contacts and ties with their former homes."⁵ The desire to save money for a dowry was acknowledged, but it was presented as a secondary goal or a failure of the family economy to provide the women with their traditional gift on marriage.⁶

In the decades since *Women, Work and Family* was first published, descriptions of single women's nineteenth-century migration in Europe, including Britain, have followed much the same vein, describing the women primarily as elements of a family unit, or migrating in desperation when the family disintegrated. George Alter, in *Family and the Female Life Course*, brought the focus to the individual woman and her relationship with family, whether her parents or her family by marriage. In this examination, the minority of women who migrated independently – generally due to family failure through death or poverty – were something of an aberration in their separation from the family network.⁷ Recent work on single British women's migration to Australia in the nineteenth century has focused on the experiences of the woman alone, but

4. The "family-economy" model has been given much greater complexity, allowing the migration of a few women for reasons of self-support, by George Alter, *Family and the Female Life Course: The Women of Verviers, Belgium, 1849–1880* (Madison, WI, 1988). Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago, IL [etc.], 1988) adds an important "subculture" factor to the independence of single female migrants in the United States.

5. Louise Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (New York, 1978), p. 118.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 106–111.

7. Alter, *Family and the Female Life Course*.

the experiences of transported convicts cannot really be examined for the convicts' agency in the migration. Surviving sources regarding women's voluntary emigration to Australia in the later nineteenth century force a focus on the bureaucratic issues of recruitment and transport rather than the migrants themselves.⁸

The second model for single women's industrial migration refers specifically to American women, in Thomas Dublin's *Women at Work*, published in 1979, and supported by his collection of migrant women's letters, *Farm to Factory* (1981) and *Transforming Women's Work* (1994). Dublin's work is a study of Yankee female workers in Lowell, Massachusetts, before the Civil War, but since it is one of the few works to deal with young women's migration at length, its conclusions about the Lowell millgirls became a model for single American women's migration as a whole. Unlike the European migrant girls Tilly and Scott described, the migrants to Lowell were emphatically independent, both economically and socially. The girls left their parents' New England farms in their teens and traveled to Lowell in search of independent income and a bit of adventure. Their wages were their own, spent on clothes, tintypes, and saved for their own use. While in Lowell, the migrants became socially separate from their families, incorporated instead into a community of female workers. In Dublin's words, "the mill experience signaled the beginning of a new life. The world of their parents was the world of their past; they had moved beyond."⁹ In this model the migrants cut themselves off from their families. Not only did they not take part in a family economy, they relied on other migrants instead of their families for emotional support and security in the city. Later in the nineteenth century, the flood of migration from rural New England to Lowell slowed, but those young American women who migrated to textile cities after the Civil War continued to display and value their social and economic independence.¹⁰

The great majority of Yankee migration to Lowell ended before the American Civil War, but the model of independent female migration in the United States has been picked up by others. Joanne Meyerowitz's *Women Adrift* describes the networks migrant single women developed in Chicago near the end of the nineteenth century, networks that permitted them to survive, in spite of low wages and separation from their families.¹¹ In the

8. Deborah Oxley, *Convict Maids: The Forced Migration of Women to Australia* (Cambridge, 1996); Jan Gothard, *Blue China: Single Female Migration to Colonial Australia* (Melbourne, 2001).

9. Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860*, 2nd edn (New York, 1979), p. 57.

10. See Wendy M. Gordon, *Mill Girls and Strangers: Single Women's Independent Migration in England, Scotland and the United States, 1850–1881* (Albany, NY, 2002), especially ch. 3.

11. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift*.

twentieth century, thousands of young African-American women from the South joined the great migration to northern cities. Like the Yankee girls going to Lowell, they left behind looming drudgery of farm and domestic work for the excitement of the city, and historians give them a place as American migrants, acting independently, as far as possible, economically and socially.¹²

There is a remarkable lack of questions in the literature regarding the contradictions between the European family economy and the American independence model for single female migrants. Historians generally seem to have begun with the supposition that European women were forced to migration through economic necessity, while women in the United States often migrated voluntarily in search of some personal freedom. Yet it seems odd that young women's migration should be a preferred family strategy in one area and the source (or product) of familial tension in another. After all, these were all women in their teens or twenties, all working in rapidly industrializing nations. Comparative scholarship cries against exceptionalism, particularly American exceptionalism; if there were major differences between American and British cases it should be possible to explain them with more than geographic justifications.¹³

Trying to resolve the contradictory models, I compared the experience of Yankee migrants in Lowell from 1850 to 1880 with internal migrants to Preston, England and Paisley, Scotland, in the same period. I used a sample from the census manuscripts of each city to get four "snapshots" of migrants in each city, and filled in personal information with qualitative sources including personal letters, Poor Law records, bank records and parliamentary reports. Although record-matching was in most cases impossible, the combination of quantitative and qualitative data combined to give a remarkably complete description of the female migrant population. Although migrants in the cities varied dramatically in volume, their behavior in each case was similar. In each city they clustered in characteristic occupations which provided supervised housing. The occupations differed between Britain and the United States, but they show similarity between the migrant groups. Those in Britain, as in the United States, were seeking economic independence from their families rather than making vital contributions to a family economy. On the other

12. Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, 1984), pp. 141–142; Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916–30* (Urbana, IL, [etc.], 1997), pp. 46–49.

13. See for example George M. Fredrickson, "From Exceptionalism to Variability: Recent Developments in Cross-National Comparative History", *Journal of American History*, 82 (1995), pp. 587–604; James E. Cronin, "Neither Exceptional nor Peculiar: Towards the Comparative Study of Labor in Advanced Society", *International Review of Social History*, 38 (1993), pp. 59–75; James O. Gump, *The Dust Rose Like Smoke: The Subjugation of the Zulu and the Sioux* (Lincoln, NA, 1994).

hand, the migrants were not entirely separated from their families, leaving them behind for a new world of opportunity. In spite of economic separation, migrants on both continents maintained connections with their families, which in turn gave the young women crucial support in times of need.

In Preston, most of the single female migrants came from nearby rural areas both within and outside Lancashire, with approximately one-quarter from other cities. Independent migrants from outside Lancashire made up just 3.5 to 5 per cent of the single female population of Preston between 1851 and 1881, but many more young women migrated from within the county.¹⁴ On average across the period, slightly more than half of the transcounty migrants worked as domestic servants, though they accounted for only a minority of the domestics in the city. Many more servants were migrants from within Lancashire.¹⁵ The number of single female migrants in the city continued to rise after 1870, when the overall demand for servants began to decline.¹⁶ The lack of service positions neither prevented them from migrating nor caused them to return home. Thus, domestic service was important but not crucial to single women's migration into Preston; migrant women could and did choose other occupations.

Painfully few qualitative sources survive in Preston, but what there are suggest that the migrants did not fit easily into a family-economy model, particularly in terms of returning funds to impoverished parents. The Preston Savings Bank recorded more than 850 domestic servants (many of whom were migrants) with savings accounts in the late 1840s, while fewer than 200 millworkers (most of whom lived with their families) had accounts.¹⁷ Some servants kept their accounts open for many years, adding £4 to £5 every six months, which could account for the greater part of a

14. Some of these intracounty migrants fit the behavioral profile of the transcounty migrants. Others were more likely to join extended family members in the textile mills and tenement housing. See Michael Anderson's extended study of Preston in 1851, *Family Structure in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1971).

15. The present census sample, which records only county of birth, does not permit an estimate of what proportion of servants were migrants from within Lancashire. Michael Anderson estimated that 30 per cent of the young single female residents of Preston for the 1851 census were independent migrants (from in or out of Lancashire), and notes that most of these girls were in service, but he does not examine the servants as a distinct group; Anderson, *Family Structure*, pp. 40, 46. Tilly and Scott reported that "two-thirds of all domestic servants in England in 1851 were the daughters of rural laborers"; *Women, Work, and Family*, p. 108.

16. Gordon, *Mill Girls and Strangers*.

17. A great deal of this difference is attributable to the patterns in which wages were paid – servants received several pounds once or twice a year, millworkers a few shillings every week or so – and limitations placed by the bank, which would not accept deposits of less than two shillings to a regular savings account. That does not reduce the significance of the deposits made by domestic servants, however, the majority of whom were migrants.

Table 1. *Percentage of single female transcounty migrants in various occupations, Preston, 1851–1881*

Year (approx. total no. of migrants)	1851 (430)	1861 (507)	1871 (429)	1881 (650)
Needle trades ^a	11.6	15.5	9.0	4.0
Textile mills ^b	16.3	18.0	12.1	14.0
Service ^c	62.7	54.0	51.6	58.0
Other/none	9.4	12.5	27.3	24.0

Note: Derived from a 10 per cent (1851) and 7.5 per cent (1861 – 81) sample of the census of the City of Preston.

^a Includes dressmakers, milliners, tailoresses, drapers, and other garment makers.

^b Includes all industrial textile workers

^c Includes general servants, other household servants, waitresses and governesses.

year's wages.¹⁸ Thus some women were saving large portions of their wages, *not* contributing to a family economy.

Nor did the “leaders of the city” expect young women to give all of their money to their parents. Mr Moore, whose first name is not recorded, was an officer of Preston's new Penny Bank in 1859. At the opening ceremony he explained his desire to see young women putting their wages “to good purpose” (i.e. not spend them on clothes). “As to matrimony”, he said,

[...] if a girl had £30 or £40 in the bank she could look any young man in the face when he proposed, and say “yes” or “no” as suited her inclinations. But how many girls said “yes” when they felt they would like a home of their own, though they did not like the person who “popped the question”? Let her have £30 or £40 in the bank and she could say “no” because she would feel independent.¹⁹

Mr Moore's emphasis on young women is significant. He saw Preston's single women as independent economic units who had control over the wages they earned. He recognized that personal funds gave a woman a degree of power in her relationships with men and contributed to her independence from her parents.

The information we have about single female migrants in Preston is scanty, but what we do have – of women showing flexibility in their choice of occupations, and women “feeling independent” because they had money in the bank – does not fit comfortably with an image of daughters passively handing their wages over to support the family economy. The

18. An estimate drawn from the *Preston Guardian* classified advertisements, 1850–1880. According to these advertisements an average wage for a domestic servant (lumping together general servants and more specialized workers like cooks and housekeepers) rose from about £11 per year in the 1850s to nearly £18 by the 1880s; Gordon, *Mill Girls and Strangers*, p. 81.

19. Preston Penny Bank Minute Book, 4 March 1859, Harris Library, Preston.

first priority for young people living on their own had to be their own survival, their own futures.

In Lowell, Massachusetts, historians' focus, virtually from the start, has been on the young migrants as independent workers rather than contributors to their families. From the mid-1820s until the 1880s young women moved into Lowell's mills from neighboring states, most from small farming communities. From 1860 to 1880 the census recorded that between 65 and 90 per cent of the migrants worked in the mills. As conditions in the mills declined and alternative occupations became available after the American Civil War, fewer migrants chose textile work. Those who did continue in the mills – and some of those who did not – generally lived in company- or privately-owned boarding houses.²⁰ In those boarding houses the migrants developed a network of friends which took the place of direct support from parental families.

The migrants in Lowell were undoubtedly economically independent, using their wages for personal luxuries rather than sending them home. In 1845, the Reverend Henry Miles's tome in support of the Lowell system included a brief catalog of illnesses that might befall millgirls in the city. Three of the four illnesses were a result of the workers' economic choices, rather than the fault of the mills themselves. Girls might, through "that devotion to fashion which is characteristic of the sex [...] contract a serious, perhaps fatal cold, through a neglect to provide themselves with a warm shawl". Similarly, they might give themselves stomachaches through "a foolish and expensive patronage of the confectioner". Only after mentioning these problems brought on by spending money on themselves does Miles declare that a millgirl might sink beneath the "self-imposed burden" of supporting an "embarrassed parent or [...] helping a struggling brother through college". Even when she contributed to her family, the Lowell migrants were seen as independent economic entities who *chose* to contribute.²¹

Miles's assessment of the girls' spending tendencies are backed up by the sources left by the girls themselves. Unlike Preston, there is a wealth of personal materials left by workers in the Lowell mills from which their personal motivations can be deduced. For example, an anonymous millhand wrote to a friend in 1849,

I wish you would buy me a pen and send it by the next mail, for this, I am really distressed with. I had an excellent opportunity yesterday, to buy a gold one, but,

20. The admission of boarding houses as acceptable housing for young women is a dramatic difference between the United States and Britain, and is generally traceable to the early efforts of the Boston Associates to make the Lowell boarding houses protective havens of respectability for their earliest recruits.

21. Henry A. Miles, *Lowell, As It Was and As It Is*, 2nd edn [1846] (New York, 1972), p. 125. The fourth common illness listed was infection brought on by too frequent attendance at church or lectures.

Table 2. *Percentage of single female interstate migrants in various occupations, Lowell, MA, 1860–1880*

Year (approx. total no. of migrants)	1860 (2522)	1865 (533)	1870 (1170)	1880 (1362)
Needle trades ^a	5.6	7.3	7.7	4.9
Textile mills ^b	87.1	82.9	76.6	64.7
Service ^c	1.0	2.4	10.0	15.7
Other/none	6.3	7.4	5.7	14.7

Note: Derived from a 7.5 per cent sample of the US and Massachusetts state census of the city of Lowell. The 1850 US census did not record female occupations.

^a Includes dressmakers, milliners, tailoresses, and other garment makers.

^b Includes all industrial textile workers.

^c Includes general servants, other household servants, and waitresses.

I finely concluded to wait 'till after pay-day, [...] and then after purchasing that pen, what, I pray you, shall I do with the ballance? I *really* hope, there will be a way opened for me to spend so *much money* profitably.

Not only was this operative impressed with the amount of money she was earning, she clearly had no particular plans for it. Indeed, she felt obliged to ask for advice from her correspondent's husband on "this difficult matter".²² Her letter illustrates the millgirl's ability to dispose of her wages as she pleased, a tendency to purchase less-than-essential items, and also the migrants' unfamiliarity, even uneasiness, with such responsibility.

In the face of such choices, many migrants simply saved. Like the domestic servants of Preston, many millworkers put aside their wages for their own future use, so an observer of the out-migration in the early years of the American Civil War recorded, "many carried with them a very respectable outfit and means of subsistence earned and saved, or left behind them large earnings deposited in the banks".²³

These were the migrants on whom models of American single female migration focus, and they present a striking contrast to the European model of dependent female migration.²⁴ But not all of the migrants were so separated from their family economies that they did not consider helping out. Henry Miles noted – and it was a common conceit in fiction by or about the millgirls – the need to help beleaguered parents or aspiring brothers. In 1873 Addie Holms, a millworker from New Hampshire who

22. Unknown mill operative, initials possibly LBS, to Mrs James Fuller, Heartland, ME, 25 August 1849; Accession 613, Lowell National Historic Park. Underscore in original.

23. [Horatio Wood], *Eighteenth Report of the Minister at Large in Lowell to the Missionary Society Connected with the South Parish* (Lowell, MA, 1863), p. 4.

24. As Dublin noted in his collection of migrant women's letters, the American migrants maintained control of their wages even in the face of poverty at home; Thomas Dublin, *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860*, 2nd edn (New York, 1993), p. 24.

had been assiduously saving her wages, articulated the conflict between her own desires and the needs of her family:

I am not to come to New Hampton this spring, if ever. Almost everyone I have ever talked with about it favor my going to school. I wish to go so much but Mother does not wish me to. She and my brothers and sister need me. [...] If I put what money I have saved to go to school with into the farm (and I have already put in over a hundred dollars) and then go home and devote myself to that, Mother would be relieved of care and worry and would probably have a home after a time.

On the other hand – if I take my money and go to school and then live to see my mother taken from me, killed by work, care and anxiety just as I “was going to” be able to help her; and my brothers confirmed in a course of careless unconcern if not in actual “badness”; shall I not then bitterly regret that I had not given up the long-cherished and much loved plan of going to school?²⁵

Addie had a more serious decision to make than whether to buy a gold pen. She believed her widowed mother needed the help that only she was able to give, somehow tying even her brothers’ future moral state to her economic contributions. She had dreams of using her wages for herself, but those plans conflicted with her sense of obligation to her family. Used to a subordinate position in society and in their families, independent migrants struggled conscientiously with their power to choose.

The second important aspect of the American female-migration model is the idea that they were not only economically but *socially* independent from their families, relying more on the network of friends in the boarding houses. This peer support encouraged the millworkers, especially in the 1840s, to fight for their rights against abuses by the mill managers.²⁶ Even after the Civil War, when the major protest movements were over, peer groups remained important to Yankee migrants in the mills.²⁷ Young women lived in boarding houses with friends from home and far afield, corresponding faithfully when they were separated. A surviving collection of letters from the 1860s suggests that connections with other migrants were one of the primary reasons women continued to work in Lowell, in spite of opportunities closer to their parents’ homes.²⁸

25. Addie Holms, Lowell, to Lillian Abbot, 14 April 1873; Letters Collection, Center for Lowell History, Lowell.

26. Dublin, *Women at Work*, chs 6 and 7.

27. It is a common misperception that Yankee migration to Lowell ended at the time of the Civil War. In fact the census records show that young women from New England were about 20 per cent of all single people not born in Massachusetts living in Lowell in the two censuses following the Civil War, as well as just over 20 per cent of the whole single female population. Their overall numbers actually increased between 1870 and 1880; Gordon, *Mill Girls and Strangers*, pp. 65–67.

28. Lawrence Sturtevant (ed.), “Grandmother’s Friends: Letters of Maine Girls in the Lowell Mills 1864–1876”, unpublished manuscript, Special Collections, Colby College Library, Waterville, ME. This is a collection of letters written to Emma Page by family and friends between 1864 and 1874, most of which years she was working in Lowell.

Nevertheless, the connection with their parents remained important to migrants to Lowell. They had left their parents' homes, but they did not stay away. Most went home periodically, whether for holidays, to nurse an illness, or simply to visit. Ella Bailey, a native of North Troy, Vermont, was at home for a year in 1867 and 1868, gradually recovering a health weakened in the Lowell mills. Her dear friend, Emma Page (who was one of the minority of migrants working as a tailoress, while living in a boarding house with millworkers), went home to Readfield, Maine, for several months in the winter of 1869–1870. Of the letters Emma collected during her decade-long stint at Lowell, more than half were from friends made in the mills while they or Emma were visiting or had permanently returned home.²⁹

In short, while it is clear that the migrants to Lowell were in control of their own economies, they remained closely tied to – even dependent on – their families. It was expected that when the mills shut down that the workers would return to their rural homes. After the Panic of 1857, when most of the mills closed, the city's Minister at Large reported, “not a few persons left the City to go to friends in the country [...]. Many were urged by the Corporations to return to distant homes, with the promise that they should be individually sent for when business revived.”³⁰ A few years later, the Civil War closed the mills again and the minister noted, “Many single women have had comfortable homes in the country to fall back upon.”³¹ When illness struck, or they simply wearied of urban life, they headed home to recover. Economic separation, in Massachusetts or Britain, does not imply emotional separation. A network of friends in the destination city was crucial to migrants, but in times of true need there was no substitute for parental support.

The third city in this study, Paisley, Scotland, illustrates the combination of economic separation and emotional connection. Young women migrated into Paisley from surrounding Lowland counties and the Western Highlands. Unlike Preston, where approximately half the migrants chose a single occupation and the remainder were spread throughout the spectrum of available employment, or Lowell, where most of the single female migrants worked in only one kind of job, in

29. “Grandmother's Friends”, Ella Bailey to Emma Page, 8 November 1867, 15 April, 30 June 1868; Georgia to Emma Page, 21 November 1869; Ted, Mary Taylor, Mattie Johnson, and Flora to Emma Page, 9 January 1870. Fifty-three out of the 100 letters in the collection are from non-related friends, most of whom make reference to past, future, or current work in the mills. Emma's sister Hattie (who wrote 22 of the remaining letters) was also a part of this network until her marriage in 1867; later letters carry greetings and love to friends left in Lowell.

30. [Horatio Wood], *Thirteenth Report of the Minister at Large in Lowell to the Missionary Society Connected with the South Parish* (Lowell, MA, 1858), p. 22.

31. [Horatio Wood], *Seventeenth Report of the Minister at Large in Lowell to the Missionary Society Connected with the South Parish* (Lowell, MA, 1862), p. 9.

3rd
"

To you have discovered what the
 "Burning Shami" is. (By the way some
 has just come in with a "Burning Shami"
 and is handling it over my head
 and I have to fight.) How soon
 that think of that "Burning Shami"
 it must be a precarious situation
 for anyone to carry a flaming
 torch-fight in their "latter end".
 I can imagine how gracefully
 Nell Bishop would carry such an
 article of merchandise in the
 latter end of a ^{hip} partition how soon
 I will tell how you what I do
 with your letters & that no one
 and then not even the envelope
 I must let them and after
 have read them all I must
 to I put them in my package
 of letters then in a box of
clock the box then put the box

Figure 1. "No one sees them, not even the envelope I won't let them". Ella Bailey's November 1867 letter to Em Page reveals how she valued, and jealously guarded, the communications from friends in Lowell as she was regaining her health in her mother's Vermont home.
 Source: Ella Bailey, North Troy, Vermont to Emma Page, Lowell, MA, 8 November 1867. Miller Library Special Collections, Colby College, Waterville, Maine.

Table 3. *Percentage of single female transcounty migrants in various occupations, Paisley, 1851–1881*

Year (approx. total no. of migrants)	1851 (750)	1861 (845)	1871 (871)	1881 (1157)
Needle trades ^a	8.3	3.1	3.0	4.4
Textile mills ^b	5.3	3.0	28.4	11.2
Bleaching ^c	17.3	13.8	13.4	13.5
Service ^d	60.0	69.1	47.8	53.9
Other/none	9.1	11.0	7.4	17.0

Note: Derived from a 10 per cent (1851) and 7.5 per cent (1861–1881) sample of the census of Paisley burgh, including Abbey parish.

^a Includes dressmakers, milliners, tailoresses, and other garment makers.

^b Includes all industrial textile workers except bleachers.

^c Includes only those who specified bleaching as occupation.

^d Includes general servants, other household servants, and waitresses.

Paisley migrants clustered in two occupations for most of the period. Domestic service employed a majority of all single female migrants; another group of migrants worked in the bleachworks outside Paisley. Occupational choice also varied by region from which migrants came; Highlanders, particularly from Argyll- and Inverness-shires, had a special connection with Paisley's bleachworks, and they dominated the profession until the migration trend from the Highlands turned away from Paisley.

Migrants in Paisley's bleachfields pre-dated the 1851 census by several decades. After 1800 traditional sun-bleaching was replaced by an industrial, chemical process but the traditional young female workforce adapted and remained. At least one of the bleachworks encouraged continued migration by preferentially hiring those recommended by other employees.³² The young migrant women employed at the bleachworks lived in corporate-run boarding houses. Although these "woman houses" had questionable reputations in the community and were known to attract young men, they provided their residents with important supports. Bleachworkers were far less likely to apply for poor relief than were domestic servants; although no letters by migrants to Paisley survive, the patterns in the bleachworks suggest that the migrants were forming the same kinds of peer-support networks that are so readily identifiable in Lowell.

32. Parliamentary Papers [hereafter, PP], "Appendix to the Second Report of the Commissioners for Enquiring into the Employment of Children [Trades and Manufactures]", part 2, 1843 [432] XV.I, pp. 26, 28. Poor Law, 1851 Lawrence Sturtevant 1880.

Based on traditional migration models, Paisley, like Preston, would be described as part of the family economy pattern. The migrants were from generally poor agricultural families and most of them worked as domestic servants. Contemporary observers believed that migrants in both the bleachfields and service were working at least in part for the support of poverty-stricken parents. A clergyman who ministered to the Gaelic population of Glasgow reported in 1841, “There is nothing more common than for [Highland] servant maids to get their wages in advance to remit to their parents considerable sums, much to their honor.”³³ But in Paisley there is enough evidence extant from individual migrants to examine individual female migrants’ use of their wages and estimate their commitment to a family economy versus their own economic agenda.

Take, for example, Jane Dunbar, whose long list of possessions introduced this paper. Seven gowns, four pairs of boots, thirteen shifts... That trunk full of clothes represented all of her worldly wealth – and at least some of her wealth was going into the trunk, not being sent home to her parents. There is nothing to suggest Dunbar or her trunk were unusual. The parliamentary inspector who examined the Paisley bleachworkers in the early 1840s mentioned that “the purchase of articles of dress is the great ambition of the Highland females, and to this all the savings they can economize from their scanty earnings are usually applied, so that silk and other expensive dresses have been shown me in their storechest”.³⁴

The investigator also provided data regarding wages and expenses for the bleachfield workers. Querying not only the bleachworkers but their employers and interested townspeople, he offered generalizations about the young women’s lives and how they used their wages. The lowest-paid bleachers in 1841 earned 4s weekly; 6s seems to have been a more common wage (some earned more), paid every four or six weeks. Food could be purchased at the company stores before payday. The workers interviewed claimed to have from 8s to 22s every six weeks, with workers under fifteen years earning dramatically less than older workers. Some bleachers charged their employees for night school or medical care, some girls may have contributed to small friendly societies. In 1843 it was reported that the woman-houses were rent free; in 1857 witnesses to an enquiry on bleach and dye works throughout Britain reported that a token rent of 2d – 4d a fortnight was charged.³⁵ The fact that “more than a half of the girls [...] send home from 15s to £1 a year to their parents” was held up by the

33. PP, “Report from the Select Committee Appointed to Inquire into the Condition of the Population of the Islands and Highlands of Scotland, and into the Practice of Affording The Proper Relief by Means of Emigration”, 1841(182) VI.1, question 1213.

34. PP, “Second Report of the Commissioners for Enquiring into the Employment of Children [Trades and Manufactures]”, 1843 [430], XIII.307, p. 29.

35. PP, “First Report from the Select Committee on Bleaching and Dyeing Works; together with the Minutes of Evidence”, 1857 (151 Sess. 2), vol. XI, p. 169.

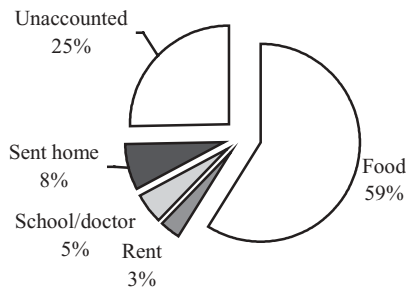


Figure 2. Bleachers' annual expenses (estimated), c. 1843.

manager of the Foxbar bleachworks as evidence of the migrants' good character.³⁶ Nevertheless, based on the wages paid at the same works, the migrants kept a far greater amount for themselves, which was notoriously spent on clothes and "items for a house".³⁷ Local merchants encouraged the purchases, tempting migrants with advertisements headed "A Word to Servant Maids", and offering good prices for "term boots".³⁸

Workers in Paisley not only spent money that they had in hand, they contracted debts with both the company stores and area merchants. In 1852 Alexander Wilson, a draper (fabric merchant) in Pollockshaws (between Paisley and Glasgow) sued six area bleachers for debts ranging from £o 10s 7½d to £5 2s 5d.³⁹ Observers interviewed for the parliamentary investigation accepted credit purchases as an inevitable by-product of the six-week pay schedule, although some believed the Highland migrants were less likely to borrow than their Irish counterparts.⁴⁰ Such debts (even when unpaid) are a clear indication of the workers' desires for their income.

The Highland migrants were from some of the poorest rural families in Britain in the nineteenth century. They lived frugally, on diets of oatmeal and herring, clearly capable of saving money for what they felt was more

36. Figure is derived from data provided in PP, "Appendix to Employment of Children". This estimate differs somewhat from that made from the same data in Gordon, *Mill Girls and Strangers*, p. 132, as I've been more generous in the allowance for food (3s per week) and based the school/doctor charges on the six-week pay cycle instead of a monthly charge. The survey that produced this data was conducted well before there was any hint of potato blight in the British Isles. Migrants' spending habits probably changed drastically during the famine, but there is no reason to think they did not revert to buying items for themselves when the emergency was over.

37. PP, "Appendix to Employment of Children", pp. 26, 25, 29, 27; PP, "Second Report of the Commissioners for Enquiring into the Employment of Children", p. 29.

38. *Glasgow Saturday Post, and Paisley & Renfrewshire Reformer*, 14 May 1864.

39. Small Debt Court, Paisley Sheriff's Court Records, Scottish Record Office, 23 December 1852.

40. PP, "Employment of Children Appendix", pp. 25, 27, 29.



Figure 3. "Fording the River". The journey from the Scottish Highlands to the city could be arduous, and most young women were probably accompanied and assisted by friends or family members.

Source: James Logan, *McIan's Highlanders at Home, or, Gaelic Gatherings* (Glasgow, 1900), p. 173.

important than immediate gratification. If *they* were not sending large amounts of money home, it is unreasonable to *assume* that any other migrants had family contributions as their first priority (though examining individual cases may well show that some women did). Economically, single female migrants in all three of these cities were more similar to Dublin's description of the Lowell migrants than the family-economy model. The Lowell migrants' economic independence seems less a case of American exceptionalism than a common experience for single female migrants in the mid- to late nineteenth century. While Lowell was unique in other ways, including the employers' early concern with protecting and even improving their workers' sensibilities and the economic status of rural families, the basic impulse to spend their earnings on themselves was not unique to American migrants.

The other part of the American model, social independence from parental families, does not apply as easily to any of the cases. I have already mentioned the frequent travels of the milgirls in Lowell back and forth to their families. Remember as well Isabella MacNeil's story. Isabella was not helping out a family economy, regardless of her original intentions. At the time of her pregnancy she could not even support herself, far less would

she be able to send money home to her parents. The authorities' automatic response to Isabella's trouble was to send word to her home parish, which in turn contacted her parents. It took a while, but Mrs MacNeil did come to Paisley to help her daughter, even though she could not afford their homeward train fare.

Migrant workers and middle-class observers in both Paisley and Lowell expected the young women to retreat to parental homes in times of illness or slack work. An 1853 meeting of the Paisley Operative Bleachers' and Scourers' Short-Time Movement acknowledged that few of the organization's members died in Paisley, because "no sooner were they taken ill, than they were compelled to give up their employment, and return to their houses in Ireland or in the Highlands, where they might drag out a miserable existence for a few years longer".⁴¹ The parliamentary investigator expected that many of the workers he observed would return home because of an inability to adapt to the requirements of the position.⁴²

Nor were Isabella or other migrants entirely isolated in the city.⁴³ Those women who did not have an automatic supportive network in a boarding house worked to make contacts in the city. Within a few months of arriving in Paisley, MacNeil met the father of her child, who may have helped her find work in a thread mill, an unusual position for a migrant in Paisley. The Poor Law recorded many, many young domestic servants who found men willing to entertain and/or exploit them. Far from being passive victims, women may have taken up with men specifically to create a local support network in the absence of a peer group like that created in corporate boarding houses. Isabella was disappointed by the man she chose and had to turn, like mill- or bleachfield workers who became ill, to support from her parents.

To some extent, any attempt at a migration model is an exercise in futility, as migrants do not consciously move in response to large-scale social forces. Rather, individuals respond to their individual situations and any pattern is necessarily imposed by the historian. Overall, neither the family-economy nor the complete-independence model seems to fit single women's migration experiences. In part, what is required to reconcile the models is a shift in perspective. The family-economy model by its nature focuses on the needs of the family and the migrant as a piece of that whole. The American model assumes the separation of the migrant – psychologically as well as physically – from her family. Examining the two groups

41. *Glasgow Saturday Post, and Paisley and Renfrewshire Reformer*, 17 September 1853.

42. PP, "Employment of Children", p. 29.

43. In addition to Joanne Meyerowitz's work on the migrant "subculture" in turn-of-the-century Chicago, there has been some work done on the networks formed by migrants in European cities, showing they were not wholly isolated within their employers' households. See especially Rachel Fuchs and Leslie Page Moch, "Single, Pregnant and Far from Home", *American Historical Review*, 95 (1990), pp. 1007–1031.

of migrants from the same angle, as individuals with their own priorities, if limited agency, helps to ease them into the same paradigm. Direct comparison reveals a remarkable similarity of experience for these young women working toward adulthood. Aiding a rural family may or may not have been an important consideration for individual migrant women; but it was only one component of an overall economic picture that had to encompass a variety of needs and desires.

These migrants generally made their own choices about their wages, with the support of their community. Some, clearly, were as much anxious as excited about such responsibility. Secondly, most young women retained strong emotional ties to their parental families in spite of their economic independence, and were able to, even expected to, return home in times of need. Finally, all the migrants' choices were limited by their peculiar situation as young women living relatively unprotected in nineteenth-century cities. Although the migrants in each city tended toward different occupations, in every case they clustered in particular jobs in a pattern distinctly different from that of single nonmigrant women. In every case, the preferred occupations were those that provided housing – and thus supervision – as well as income. The independent single female migrants in Preston, Paisley, and Lowell ultimately had a great deal in common. They would have recognized themselves in one another, young women struggling to support and assert themselves in a sometimes hostile environment.