

## 1.6. Women on the land: Gender, patriarchy, ethnicity and nationhood in modern agrarian history

**Panel organiser: Verdon, Nicola, Sheffield Hallam University, UK**

This panel brings together scholars from Canada, Australia and Britain to present new and innovative research on women's involvement in modern western agriculture. In an era when female involvement in farming at all levels was increasingly being questioned, criticised and marginalised, these papers seek to analyse how women in both the old and new worlds sought to overcome cultural, technological, and institutional barriers to participation in the agricultural arena. They analyse the representation of women agriculturalists from a variety of sources at times of cultural and economic crisis: public critiques of women who broke established gendered norms by carrying out some of the most physically demanding work on the land; press discussion on the place of women as homesteaders and landowners; self-representation in the form of diary writing. All papers, whilst looking at different groups of women agriculturalists (Russian émigrés in Canada; Canadian homesteaders; an Australian family farm and British female farmers), include themes that overlap and intersect in various ways: gender, patriarchy, ethnicity and nationhood.

**Chair: Verdon, Nicola, Sheffield Hallam University, UK**

Monday 19.8.2013 // 1100 – 1300 // Session 1 – Room A 022

### 1.6.1. „...With A Stout Wife“: Doukhobor Women's Challenge to the Canadian

**Androsoff, Ashleigh, Douglas College, British Columbia, Canada**

Fleeing religious persecution in Russia, nearly 8000 Doukhobors came to Canada in 1899 to take up free homestead land in the Northwest. Repeated exile to the remote outreaches of the Russian empire had prepared them for the challenges implicit in breaking new ground despite limited resources and unfavourable conditions. Their reputation for hard work and agricultural acumen made them attractive as prospective prairie settlers in turn-of-the-century Canada. Their cultural peculiarity was, however, cause for concern. While male Doukhobors hired out to earn much needed start-up capital, female Doukhobors set out to construct their homes and break the land. Too poor to afford draught animals, the women harnessed themselves to their plows. This ensured that they could feed their families by harvest, and demonstrated that they could cultivate the land, even without men or animals. This incident proved that women could rise to the physical challenges of agricultural work, providing they were willing to depart from gender conventions, liberalist assumptions, and standard agricultural practices. In so doing, however, the women challenged Canadian nation-builders' expectations concerning gender roles, the agricultural ideal, the value of severalty, and white newcomers' potential for complete assimilation. Drawing from public critiques of this incident, this paper explains the conflict between the cultural and agricultural priorities of Canada's homesteading program.

### 1.6.2. „Disastrous for the Woman and for the Reputation of Canada“: Debating Women as Farmers in Western Canada 1900 - 1930

**Carter, Sarah, University of Alberta, British Columbia, Canada**

“It would be most disastrous, not only for the woman, but for the reputation of Canada, for any woman to start grain farming in Western Canada.” In April 1913, Saskatchewan wheat farmer and Englishwoman Georgina Binnie-Clark was scornfully derided at the Royal Colonial Institute in London, England following her presentation “Land and the Woman in Canada.” In this paper I explore the roots and uses of the entrenched and pervasive idea that in Western Canada women and farming were incompatible. In contrast to the U.S. there was no prolonged discussion about the place of women as homesteaders among legislators of land policy, but there was heated debate in the Western farm press that touched on issues of ethnicity, race including “whiteness,” gender, class and nation. A determination to fabricate Western Canada as a British imperial project, and an ideal of British femininity, that developed in response to the presence of alternative and “foreign” femininities, was at the core of objections to women farming and owning land.

### 1.6.3. „I cannot be idle“: Patriarchy, Gender and the Yeoman Farmer Ideal in Nineteenth-Century Victoria, Australia

**Nixon, Kerry, La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia**

The settlement of land in Victoria was a conscious attempt at social engineering by colonial legislators in the 1860s. They sought

to encourage a class of yeoman farmers at the expense of the existing squatters, tenant farmers and rural wage labourers. The implications of this were felt particularly by women and the children of farmers, at a time when those same family constraints were being loosened in urban centres. This paper utilises the Currie diary, a document which records the life of one family on the land in rural Victoria, Australia for some thirty-five years. It will examine the nexus between the yeoman farmer ideal and patriarchy as it played out in the lives of the Currie family. In particular, Kate Currie, the matriarch trod an interesting path as compliant wife, entrepreneurial farmer, and caring mother. All her children stayed in the family home and continued to farm the same land after their parents' demise. Whilst the rhetoric of yeomanry was one of frugality and independence, reality involved dependence on family labour, neighbourhood assistance and generous financial terms provided by the government. The challenge to transform the hostile environment into a profitable farm meant that many farmers did not succeed. How the Curries succeeded is as much due to their successful negotiation of patriarchal and gender boundaries as it is their farming prowess.

### 1.6.4. Willing and capable: Women as farmers in late Victorian British agriculture

**Sayer, Karen, Leeds Trinity University College, UK**

**Verdon, Nicola, Sheffield Hallam University, UK**

In many respects Victorian farming was a man's world. As an industry that was progressively directed by scientific research and technological innovation, agriculture in England came to be dominated by a language and imagery that was increasingly masculine. Contemporary observers increasingly subjected women who were involved in farming to adverse comment and criticism. But between 1851 and 1901 almost one in ten farms was headed by a woman. Although historians have written widely about the position of women as farm workers, and farmers family members in Britain the last decade, women who owned or managed farms in their own right are still under-researched. Most were widows, continuing the tenancy of their late husbands; others were single women managing alone. Farming involved women taking part in activities that defied gendered norms such as the buying and selling of stock in the open market, and the hiring and managing of labour. This paper will explore the strategies that women developed in order to overcome gendered and institutional barriers to farming in late Victorian England.



#### Participants

##### Androsoff, Ashleigh

Ashleigh Androsoff is a faculty member of the Department of History at Douglas College in Canada. Her doctorate is entitled 'Spirit Wrestling: Identity Conflict and the Canadian "Doukhobor Problem," 1899-1999' and awarded by the Department of History, University of Toronto in 2011. She has published on this subject in the Journal of the Canadian Historian Association.

##### Carter, Sarah

Sarah Carter is Professor and Henry Marshall Tory Chair in the Department of History and Classics, and the Faculty of Native Studies of the University of Alberta since 2006. Her research focuses on the history of Western Canada and on the critical era of the late nineteenth century when Aboriginal people and newcomers began sustained contact. Her recent publications include *The Importance of Being Monogamous: Marriage and Nation Building in Western Canada to 1915*.

##### Nixon, Kerry

Kerry Nixon is currently completing her graduate studies in History at La Trobe University, Bendigo. Her research focuses on the diary of a farm family from Victoria, mostly written by its matriarch Kate Currie, spanning some thirty-five years, covering the work performed by various family members, the produce grown and manufactured,

the price of inputs and outputs, and social activities. This reflects her wider interests in modern gender, social and economic history.

##### Sayer, Karen

Karen Sayer is Professor of Social and Cultural History at Leeds Trinity University. She has wide ranging interests in modern British, including rural and gender history, and is currently working on a longer-term large-scale environmental and cultural history project focused on farming, gender and food production in the Modern period, for example, the industrialisation of poultry keeping, its standardisation and consumption. She is also working on projects connected to the history of women in farming, including a joint project with Nicola Verdon on women as farmers in the 19th and 20th centuries.

##### Verdon, Nicola

Nicola Verdon is Reader in History at Sheffield Hallam University. She has broad interests in social and economic history of the British countryside since 1750, with special reference to gendered patterns of employment, family and domestic life, poverty and household economies. She is currently writing a history of the farmworker in England from 1850 to the present day, and researching the history of women farmers with Karen Sayer.