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 emigres 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

1.6.1. “...With A Stout Wife”: Doukhobor Women’s Challenge to the Canadian
Androsoffs, 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 pioneer 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 begin their 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 several, 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 for taking up her family’s tenancy. Public critics attacked women who were involved in farming to the point that between 1851 and 1901, over one in ten farms was headed by a woman. While historians have written widely about the position of women as farm workers, and farmers as family members in Britain, the last decade has seen a much increased focus on women managing farms in their own right. But were these women, continuing the tenancy of their late husbands; others single women managing alone. This paper will explore the strategies that women developed in order to overcome gendered and institutional barriers to farming in late Victorian England.

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 1880s. 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 outlines 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 was 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 as 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 evoked 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 farm hands. This paper will explore the strategies that women developed in order to overcome gendered and institutional barriers to farming in late Victorian England.