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Paper-making in Scotland in the twentieth century

Texts introduced by Siân REYNOLDS

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Testimony

Paper-making in Scotland in the twentieth century

Texts introduced by Siân REYNOLDS

The following extracts are taken from a series of interviews carried out by the historian Ian MacDougall in 1996, and published in 2009 under the title *Through the Mill*, by the Scottish Working People's History Trust, an independent association which recovers the traces in written, oral or material form of working people's lives.¹ MacDougall interviewed 33 retired workers, men and women, who had been employed at three paper mills: Dalmore, Esk and Valleyfield, operating for many years on the banks of the river North Esk, near the town of Penicuik, a few miles from the Scottish capital, Edinburgh. Papermaking had been going on there since the eighteenth century, using water from the river. All three mills have now closed, the last in 2004, and almost all the witnesses whose accounts were recorded have now died. We have reproduced here some of the testimony of one man, born in 1913, who worked at the mill most of his life, and of three women, born between 1916 and 1919, who worked there for spells, but mostly during the 1930s.

The three mills had been employing workers of both sexes since the nineteenth century: in 1883, Dalmore employed 83 men and boys

¹ *Through the Mill: Personal recollections by veteran men and women Penicuik paper mill workers*, collected and edited by Ian MacDougall, © Scottish Working People's History Trust, Falkirk & Edinburgh 2009.

and 86 women and girls. A hundred years later, with increased automation, there were 133 men and boys but only 47 women and girls. Papermaking was (and is) a complex process, requiring huge machines to treat the raw material, followed by various finishing processes, depending on the order book. In these mills, the liquid pulp passed through a series of workshops: “potching” [crushing], adding chemicals, beating, drying, calendering etc. Reels of paper were wound on to giant cylinders, and moved to the cutting machines, to be cut into sheets which had to be inspected, counted and packed. There was a very rigid sexual division of labour: the men minded the large machines, beaters, calenders, etc. The women mostly did finishing: receiving cut sheets and especially checking the finished paper for faults – a process known as “overhauling”.

The materials used to make paper have changed over time: rags in the early days, followed by esparto grass, and finally, in the twentieth century, almost always wood pulp. One of the older workers remembered seeing rags, which went on being used to make bank notes:

There was about a dozen women, I think, in the rag house when I started at the mill [in 1927], weedin’ through the rags and sortin’ them out. They were makin’ sure there was nae buttons on it and eyes and hooks, and that kind of thing, bones. The rags were already disinfected when they came to the mill, they weren’t filthy [...] the women in the rag house cut them up into smaller bits, maybe six inches square. [p. 5]

A woman worker noted, as a picturesque detail, that during the Second World War, “Everybody in Penicuik in those days would have a box of buttons off the rags.”

Through their accounts, we can see that the sexes had very different trajectories: most of the men spent almost all their working lives (30 or 40 years) in papermaking, either in the Penicuik area or in other Scottish mills. Most of the women, by contrast, had much shorter working careers (nine years on average) since they were virtually obliged to leave work when they married. There was no formal rule, but it was a near-universal practice until the 1950s, with the exception of the war years [see Helen W.’s account below]

Ye never worked after ye got married. I was never back in Dalmore after I got married. [Agnes T., p. 4]

When I got married, I gave up working at the mill ... All the women had to stop work when they got married, unless like there was anybody that had lost their husband or that... I think they [the bosses] could aye get plenty others tae fill in just and that. That's how it was then, that was the way of it. [Peg M., p. 109]

Women were expected to stop working when they married and this was still the practice later on when I got married. (Jean H, born 1931, p. 504)

Women were less likely to be in the trade union. Men more readily mentioned the union:

Most of the workers were members of the union, there was no question of that. It wasn't a closed shop, it didn't act as a closed shop as far as I know. But most of them were members. [Henry H., p. 480]

The women weren't involved in the union quite so much in these days. It was mostly the men... I would say three-quarters of the men were in the union before the war and maybe half of the women. [George M., p. 315]

But that said, the family-based nature of the employment in the mills where brothers and sisters could be hired to work in the same factory created a network of solidarity:

You were out at friends in the evening, you weren't so frightened to go home, because you'd say: "Oh it's all right. There'll be somebody on the street, I'll get along with the men coming off the back shift or the men going on the night shift." There was always a kent [=well-known] face on the road, always people coming from or going to work, and you weren't so frightened. [Mary B., p. 2]

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As with all oral history, these first-person accounts are subject to the normal reservations: memories fade, are embellished or become confused over time. But the descriptions of the work process from all the witnesses tend to confirm and support each other in the full collection of testimonies, which runs to 600 pages. Taken together (with details about everyday life and working-class culture) these accounts offer the traces of a vanished community, where "everyone knew each other" and where Penicuik, "the paper town" was dominated by the presence, the noise, and the smell of its three mills.

The twentieth century witnessed the disappearance of many such, all over Europe. Life was hard, and working conditions almost unimaginable by present standards, but it was not so long ago, and some of the witnesses are still alive today.

[A note on the transcription: the witnesses mostly spoke in Scottish vernacular English, which was preserved in the published book: some of the spelling has been standardized to make it easier for readers from outside Scotland, but NB: ye = you, nae = no, tae = to, didnae = didn't, ken = know, etc.]

1. Robert W., born 1913

Well, I was employed first on what ye call runnin' the cutter – fillin' the cutter. They had the cutter where two women sat catchin' and the man drove the machine. They put the paper in maybe five reel at a time and cut them. I would go away round, and I would [heft = lift] a web – a roll of paper... There was a shell in the middle o' the web where a spindle went through. It was fitted on and away it went. I was in what ye called the coatin' department in the mill my whole life – that was paper, art paper, for glossy magazines and things like that in the printing and publishing industry... [Later] I worked [on a different machine] loadin' three cutters. That was quite heavy work for a boy o' fourteen. My feet, I could hardly wear shoes, they were that sore wi' the cement floors. [...] then when I was sixteen, they said tae me: "We're goin' tae shift ye on tae the calenders" That was the rolls. It's a cotton roll, steel roll, cotton roll, steel roll, cotton roll, steel roll. They put a coatin' on it – brushes that went backward and forward all the time [...]. they brushed the coat on. And it went away and hung in folds [...]. It was taken round slowly, right round. It's a slow job, till it came when it was dried out. [...] And then it came from there tae the calenders, and you led it over these calenders and down, watching ye didnae mark the roll, because the least wee mark on the rolls showed up on the sheet. Ye put your weight on the rolls and started it up and ye took a strip out tae have a look. And ye had a sample, ye ken, for finish, eye finish. If ye saw it was all right, ye let your boss see and and: "Carry on". That was quite a skilled job, because ye needed judgement on the quality o' the paper.

[Robert W. was called up during the Second World War, served in the Far East in traumatic conditions, and eventually returned to work in Valleyfield. He ended his career, working in "the offices", i.e. in a white-collar job.]

All this new papers and all that happened after the war. When I was on the staff, I was getting' samples sent frae Germany on the quiet, with different magazines, all these big books that all these superstores send ye out. Well, we'd do it at Valleyfield in the old-fashioned way, where the Germans had new ways o' doing it. It was a German paper – beautiful and I don't know how many times cheaper than we could turn out. They commandeered the whole market. And then with bad management and bad foresight, that's why Scotland went down – not just in paper, in everything, I think [...] I went down tae see a mill at Aylesbury near London. They had six or seven paper-makin' machines. We had only two or three at Valleyfield and they were all over the mill, where they should have been together like the six o' them in that mill in England. And the six there were goin' like bombs – and I couldnae see no men there at them! Ye couldnae see a soul – it was all done electronically. Well at Valleyfield ye seen laddies [= boys] pulling barrows and men all over the place.

2. Helen W., born 1916

When I started in the mill in 1930-31, it was fortnightly wages and it was £1 for the fortnight and your insurance and that off it. That was your wage. So ye were makin' about ten shillings a week, with your insurance off that. I handed all my wages to my mother and she gave me pocket money. I think it was about half a crown (2/6) pocket money. [...] In the mill we started early enough, because we started at six in the mornin'. And then we got stopped for breakfast. I went home for my breakfast because I was [close to the mill]. And then you went out for the forenoon [= morning] and then back home for your dinner and then out again till teatime. [...] You finished at five o'clock. It was a long day, from six in the morning tae five at night for a girl of 14. But that's what it was... Ye finished at dinnertime [= midday] on Saturday. So ye were working about 60 hours a week.

[...] The work I liked most was the *salle*, the overhaulin' and making your own wage. When ye were overhaulin' ye were lookin' for marks on the sheet, any flaws on it, and ye put the tae the side. Sometimes there were a good lot of sheets with flaws on them. Ye had to pay attention and look out for them. Then there were an overseer used tae come in.

All the overhaulers were women, all women. Some jobs in the mill only women did them. It was the jobs I did, except the cutters, ye got some men there and some women. The men were runnin' the cutter and had an assistant. And the girls, we were either takin' the paper away or carting it round or keeping it, catching it at the bottom, where the sheets was gettin' cut through.

[...] Well I was 23 when I got married in 1940. I'd been working in Esk Mill nine year. Ye had tae give up the job when ye got married. Ye had no choice, that was the normal. As soon as a girl got married, she gave up her job. There were no jobs in the mill then for married women. Practically all the women in the mill were single, unless they were widows maybe. The manager didnae just come and say tae ye, "Ye'll have tae give up your job." Just that ye knew. And if ye asked for a job after ye were married, they would just say "Well, ye'll need tae wait and see."

[In fact during the war, Helen W. was taken back almost immediately, as were many women, originally to bleach rags. After having been requisitioned into metalworking for the war effort, she returned to Valleyfield at the end of the war, and stayed at work there until the birth of her first child in 1948. (p. 208-209)]

3. Frances P., born 1919

Ye just went down yourself tae the mill and ye just put your name in. My sister worked in the mill then, but I don't know if she spoke for me. But everybody knew one another then, and they all sort of spoke for one another. Ye went down to the pidge [pigeon-hole] – a check-out place at the mill where ye checked your name in and ye just asked there to have your name put down. So I started in Valleyfield more or less as soon as I left school in 1933.

When I began first I was in what they called the SO department [Sorting Office] where the paper was cut into parcels. And we rolled the parcels up. Where the guillotine used tae cut it intae squares, we had tae parcel them up and send them off. Ye just had tae wrap up the papers, ye sealed them with sealing wax. Some ye got tied with string and some with brown sticky paper. [...] They had different kinds of paper, ye know. [...] It was quite an interesting job in the SO department. I worked there two years anyway. Then I went up to what we called the overhauling.

[And there] ye were on your own, making your own wage. You were on piece, whereas down below, ye were on hourly rates. [...] It was heavy lifting though. I mean, they brought in the big barrows, full o' paper and ye had to lift as much as ye could and sometimes it was really heavy, back-breakin'.

[...] I worked about four or five years in the overhaulin'. If you made £3-odd a week it was a big wage. Some o' them worked like anything and maybe made more. But it all depends how hard ye had worked or what your luck was wi' the bundle of paper you got up. I mean, they made them into reams o' 500 sheets. And then the girls came and counted them, you see. And then ye got so much maybe tuppence halfpenny [2½ pence] or something for a ream. It all depends what kind o' paper it was. [...]

It was quite an interestin' job when ye think of it now, and if ye went right through the mill it was interestin' to see it all. ...If you went messages or anything ye went through to where the paper was made... I mean ye just kept your eyes and ears open. But there was no training about the rest o' the mill. Ye were never taken round the mill and things explained to you. There was nothing like that. Unless ye went down yourself and had a look, ye would never have known how paper was produced or anything. They were quite content there. [p. 280-282]

But oh, we got a lot o' cuts on our fingers. That was common. When ye were bringing the paper, ye had a rubber on your finger and you brought the paper and it used tae cut the palms of your hands, ye were all cuts in there [...] they were wee, wee fine cuts, ye know. People don't realize that paper cuts you. We didnae have gloves or

protective clothing [...] ye got cut at the base of your thumb and the palm of your hand rather than the fingers. [p. 284]

4. Joanna G., born in 1918

Joanna G. came from a large family where resources were scarce. She would have liked to train as a pharmacist, but that was impossible. She started at Esk Mill at 14, but left in disgust at the working conditions in what were by then dilapidated premises. A few months later, she signed on at Valleyfield, and stayed there for nine years until her marriage. She was not someone who put up with poor working conditions, see below.

My first job at Valleyfield was on the cutters. I sat down at the cutters. There was three different kinds of cutters in the place. [...] They used to tae come and ask me tae go special tae this great big yin [=one], because it was heavy, heavy work on it. There was three o' us girls: Annie Groves, Isa Withnell, a great big tall girl, and myself. Isa was a rare worker. She was big and she could get the paper up. We threw the paper up high, ye see, tae get it piled up afore it went tae be counted. I loved the cutters, because I kent [knew] how they were worked. I was an awful person tae get intae the guts o' everything just tae see how they worked. The boss, Mr L., he cried [= called] me Johnny and he used tae say: "Johnny dae this, Johnny dae that." I says tae him: "I'd like tae ken how the cutters work." He says: "Ye're no needin' tae ken how they work, just as long as ye can work them." "Ah but," I says, "if ye ken about it, it makes all the difference." So of course, I got this bloke tae come and tell me how it all worked. And Mr L. used tae say tae me: "I never kent anybody like you that had tae get into the guts o' everythin'". "I just feel," I says, "that a little learnin' sometimes it's a bad thing." [...] Then I was shifted from place to place. If ye were any good at your job, ye wernae long or ye were shifted I went on tae the overhaulin' after the cutters. [...] It was a routine: as the lassies left one part and they needed somebody else, the other girls were moved up intae that job. Some o' the older women would retire, and the young girls got married. When girls got married, ye had tae leave the mill and re-apply for your job if ye

wanted it back. You could go back, but ye had to re-apply. [p. 244-245]

When I started work at Valleyfield, they asked me tae join the union. Ye werenae forced into it. They just said tae me “I think it’s a guid idea.” Well I worked in Valleyfield just for a very short time when they came tae me one day and asked me if I would go on the committee [...] There was not a drinkin’ water thing in the place! There was an old broken down tub thing, and they filled it every morning wi’ water. It stood there all day till it was almost boiling wi’ the heat in the place. And there was never a tap. But the old committee were feared tae ask for decent water, just a glass of water! I says “I’ll get you water, supposin’ it’s the last thing I do.” And when I went in, it was this guy an awfully nice man that came from Edinburgh that was there. I kent what I was talking about and so did he. I says tae him: “Now that is not right. There’s no water for anybody tae drink [...] There should be a tap in all the departments so everybody can go and get a drink”. Paper makin’ was a hot atmosphere, ye see. And he says: ”Well there isnae any [running] water in the place.” I says: “Well, ye’ll just have to get it put in, won’t you.” He says: “You’re right there”. So they got taps in all the departments. And they came and asked me what kind o’ tap I wanted. I says: “I want one that ye press down wi’ your thumb like that and it scoots up. That’s what I want.” And that’s what they got. [p. 247]