Mill Girls and Strangers: Single Women's Independent Migration in England, Scotland, and the United States, 1850-1881 (review)

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Victorian Studies, Volume 46, Number 3, Spring 2004, pp. 512-513 (Review)

Published by Indiana University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/vic.2004.0115*

(1875–76); Jane Loudon's botanical writing for women; Ellis Ethelmer's sexual primers like *Baby Buds* (1895)—texts like these, along with an attendant bibliography, might have vivified King's literary study of bloom. So too might further inclusion of novelists like George Meredith. *Rhoda Fleming* (1865), with its two heroines Rhoda and Dahlia, could have extended what King calls the "novelistic lexicon" (136) and led us toward a more feminist reading of bloom. Other kinds of critical readings along with more kinds of texts would certainly have enhanced King's *Bloom*. Within and without the range of the novel, the botanical vernacular—and even the idiom of bloom—was both wider and deeper than King's book reveals.

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Mill Girls and Strangers: Single Women's Independent Migration in England, Scotland, and the United States, 1850–1881, by Wendy M. Gordon; pp. x + 234. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002, $68.50, $22.95 paper.

Wendy Gordon's *Mill Girls and Strangers* is ambitious. Through an examination of three urban centres in which textile manufacturers featured prominently as employers of female labour, this book endeavours to make sense of the migration of single women in three different national contexts. Preston, Paisley, and Lowell, Massachusetts, serve as case studies for developing trends in England, Scotland, and the United States, respectively. This study was designed to work both at the "macro" level, plotting migration patterns and their relationships to quantifiable socioeconomic factors, and at the "micro" level, examining in detail the personal experiences of individual migrant women. The study seeks to answer questions such as: "Under what circumstances did employers' needs exercise more influence on single women's migration, and when were the women's own needs and desires a stronger factor? What experiences were common to all textile cities, and which were specific to the city or region in which they [were discovered]?" (14). The book's introduction claims that it will contribute to our understanding of "the dynamic of the textile cities themselves," including "how nineteenth-century urban populations coped with women who were on their own" (2). Likewise, Gordon argues that the combination of quantitative and qualitative study that underpins *Mill Girls and Strangers* allows this book to "illuminate individual women's experiences from different perspectives, including insight into their goals and feelings regarding migration" (5). According to Gordon, this book presents "a picture of single female migrants with multiple dimensions, revealing their hopes and failures as well as their economic roles" (5).

Mill Girls and Strangers is organised into three sections, each of which explores one of the three highlighted cities. Gordon begins her study with an examination of single women's migration to Preston, moves on to an exploration of Lowell, and concludes with Paisley. The logic behind the order in which the reader is introduced to these case studies is clear. At the heart of the study is the information that was gained from the cities' sampled census reports for the years 1850–51 through 1880–81. Gordon notes that in the case of Preston there are few "qualitative" documents through which to gain further access to female migrants' lives. (In fact, the only archival sources listed in

the bibliography for this city are a Penny Bank Minute Book and a set of Preston Savings Bank Records, which Gordon uses to question the extent of migrant women's continuing financial relations with their families back home.) Preston thus serves as the base upon which the more "qualitatively" rich case studies of Lowell and Paisley will build. The Lowell chapter contributes information derived from the particularly rich collection of migrant women's correspondence available for that location, while the Paisley chapter adds evidence gained from government institutions' records relating to migrant women whose efforts to gain or maintain independence went awry.

Gordon's book is a solid contribution to the literature on women, waged work, and migration during the Victorian period. It provides information that may be instructively applied to questions relating to the motivations behind single women's migration, and to questions concerning the effects of migration on the migrants themselves. Gordon's findings confirm that single women were considered vulnerable to sexual predation and corruption during the late nineteenth century, and that this had a significant impact upon their decisions regarding where they would seek paid employment. *Mill Girls and Strangers* emphasises that migrant women's movements were determined by a variety of factors (including the needs and desires of prospective employers, the availability of desirable waged labour close to home, established patterns and cultures of migration, and the more personal whims and ambitions of the migrants themselves), and that the weighting of these various factors differed from case to case. In these respects, Gordon's comparative framework adds substance to familiar arguments.

It is in the less thoroughly explored details of this study, however, that its true worth becomes evident. For example, this study reveals that there were significant differences between the British cities and Lowell in terms of migrant women's occupations. Most migrants to Preston and Paisley opted to take up domestic work, while most migrants to Lowell chose factory work. Gordon's coverage of this issue is highly suggestive, but it appears that much more could have been done with her material. Similarly, Gordon's discussion of the citizenship rights and identities of migrant women in the textile towns is disappointingly brief. In spite of the fact that Lowell was dependent upon these women's presence for its economic prosperity, they were automatically considered nonresidents during economic slumps. As Gordon notes, migrant women in need were "generally refused aid from institutions in the city" (80). They did not "belong" to the textile city, but rather were understood strictly as sojourners. Gordon raises the issue and points out the irony, but leaves it at that, a pattern repeated at several points in the book. Some of the more interesting questions she raises in the introduction and body of *Mill Girls and Strangers* might have been explored in much greater depth.

To argue passionately in favour of the use of both quantitative and qualitative sources is unnecessary at this point; in a study of this sort, most readers would expect such a combination. Gordon's lengthy justification of her comparative method likewise comes across as needlessly defensive. The questions behind the study—and the methodology used—are compelling. Where this book is wanting is in its emphasis. Ultimately, the greatest value of *Mill Girls and Strangers* will lie in its many underexplored, provocative details.

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