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Who was Ever ‘a Fisherman’? Revisiting Paul Thompson’s *Living the Fishing*

Abstract

This article revisits Paul Thompson’s major oral history project of Britain’s early twentieth-century fishing industry, situating it within the emergence of oral history as a practice in the 1960s and 1970s, and interrogating assumptions over the fixed category of ‘fisherman’ which informed the original research. Through a detailed look at interviews collected with those involved in the herring fishing of East Anglia and north-east Scotland, it finds that Thompson and his colleagues were still as informed by social science interviewing practices as they were oral history as an evolving methodology, and framed their approach at a time when fixed worker identities were taken as given. Revisiting the transcripts with a different set of research questions revealed how ‘fishermen’ moved in and out of fishing, with ‘farmworkers’ equally being found as regularly employed on boats. Thus the article argues that instead of fixed and life-long fisher identities, precarity, migration and seasonality were key features of many fishers’ involvement in the herring industry. Through focussing on mobility – across place and types of employment – this piece also reveals the central role of personal preference and intimate decision-making in mediating individuals’ choices to ‘follow the herring’.

Now you’re up on deck, you’re a fisherman
You can swear and show a manly bearing
Take your turn on watch with the other fellows
While you’re searching for the shoals of herring
... O I earned my keep and I paid my way
And I earned the gear that I was wearing
Sailed a million miles, caught ten million fishes
We were sailing after shoals of herring
Shoals of Herring, Ewan MacColl (1960)

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When, in the spring of 1960, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger spoke to Sam Lerner, an octogenarian ex-herring fisher, whose words formed the basis of MacColl's song of the East Anglian herring industry—'Shoals of Herring'—they were charting new territory. They shaped their thirty-three hours of recordings into *Singing the Fishing*, one programme that formed part of MacColl and Seeger's seminal eight 'radio ballads' that sought to foreground the words, experiences and world views of Britain's marginalized and working populations. Theirs was a profoundly political project, one borne both of their committed Leftist politics and their central place in the folk revival. But the radio ballads also embodied and captured something of the broader spirit and developments of the time, both in their attention to 'voices from below', and in their use of mobile recording technology.¹ We can situate MacColl and Seeger's interest in Britain's fishers as part of an extraordinary explosion of interest in what was becoming called 'oral history', as growing numbers of people from the radical, 'folk life' and workers' history movements went out into Britain's homes, workplaces and fields to capture the memories and voices of people habitually side-lined from history.² By 1976, there were at least seventy oral history projects working out of British universities exploring different aspects of British social history.³ This was testament to the expansion of the higher education sector over the previous twenty years, the intellectual vibrancy of history as a discipline, and the place of radical, labour, and social historians within it.⁴

Paul Thompson was central to this movement. Thompson had helped establish the Oral History Society in 1973, and his place as one of Britain's leading oral historians came in no small part due to his study, later published as *The Edwardians*. This had aimed to capture the profound changes experienced in British life around the turn of the twentieth century through interviewing and analysing the memories of five hundred informants born between 1872 and 1906.⁵ Emboldened by its positive reception, Thompson continued to develop his work as an oral historian, through expanding the number of students exposed to oral history, developing international networks of oral history practitioners and through

¹ Ewan MacColl, *Journeyman. An Autobiography* (London, 1990), 318–23. The radio ballads were transmitted between 1958 and 1964.

² George Ewart Evans, *Ask the Fellows who Cut the Hay* (London, 1956); John Saville, 'Oral History and the Labour Historians', *Oral History* 1 (1972), 60–2; Eric Cregeen, 'Oral Sources for the Social History of the Scottish Highlands and Islands', *Oral History* 2 (1974), 23–36.

³ Harold Perkin, 'Social History in Britain', *Journal of Social History*, 10 (1976), 129–43, 132.

⁴ Some of this vibrancy is captured in Thompson's Pioneer interview. See UK Data Archive (hereafter UKDA): SN:6226, Interview with Paul Thompson, in 'Pioneers of Social Research, 1996–2018', <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6226-6>, <https://discover.ukdata.service.ac.uk//QualiBank/Document/?cid=q-e7255286-fbf7-4ae7-bf87-7fe85a0c9908>.

⁵ UKDA: SN2000, Paul Thompson, 'Family Life and Work Experience Before 1918, 1870–1973'. For a discussion of the sampling method see Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians. The Remaking of British Society* (London, 1975), 7.

continuing with his own fieldwork.⁶ And so, nearly fifteen years after MacColl and Seeger, Thompson—with his colleagues Trevor Lummis and Tony Wailey—was to follow their footsteps. Not to speak to Sam Larner, who had died, but to record the memories of Larner's contemporaries who had worked in the herring industry its peak, in the years before and just after the First World War. Like MacColl's song 'Shoals of Herring', their interviews traced the arc of working life at sea, from initiation as cook to the crew, to deckhand, and in some cases to skipper or boat owner. Carried out for the main part during 1974–5 and conducting over 150 interviews, they built on *The Edwardians'* insights and methodology, selecting a similar cohort of informants and reusing its interview schedule while adding supplementary fisher-specific questions.⁷

Based on this material the project team attempted to construct a picture of fishing as a way of life in the late nineteenth and in the first half of the twentieth century. To do this, they focused their efforts in specific coastal areas—Lancashire; Aberdeen and the Moray Firth; the Western Isles and Shetland; and East Anglia—which between them encompassed the diversity of British fishing practices, from deep-sea trawling and drifting to different forms of inshore fishing. The project was underpinned by the intellectual premise that although it was the men who went to sea, it was an activity which drew in a whole community, with men and women, and sometimes children, working within dense place-based networks to create and sustain an entire industry. Throughout their research the team consistently paid attention to the role of migration—of humans and of fish populations—as well as the role of capital and particular forms of labour organization in driving change since the mid-nineteenth century, setting out their main findings in their subsequent publication, *Living the Fishing*.⁸

Unsurprisingly then, at heart the book sought to debunk any idea of fishing as a timeless industry. Explicitly distancing their work from narratives of the fishing industry and fishermen as fixed in time and place, the authors instead were centrally interested in change, intent on revealing fishing communities as profoundly dynamic. Their work revealed the extent to which the industry had been shaped by, and was continually responding to, migrations in fishing grounds, new technologies and wider industrial developments such as the construction of the railways and freezing, as well as the fluctuations in individual fish populations. They were also keen to reveal the movement within and between

⁶ See UKDA: SN6226 - Pioneers of Social Research, Interview with Paul Thompson, 6226int060, for a discussion of these three interrelated parts of his work.

⁷ The interview schedules can be found in the British Library, London (hereafter BL): QD8/FISH/4.

⁸ Paul Thompson with Tony Wailey and Trevor Lummis, *Living the Fishing* (London, 1983).

different fishing communities, pointing to the role of historically contingent factors in their formation, and varied forms of labour organization across the fishing sectors.

What does it mean to return to these interviews now? There has been something of a recent trend for historians revisiting survey material collected, particularly by social scientists, in the post-war decades. While on one level this has been driven by a pragmatic desire to make the most of extant raw data and to add depth and nuance to other existing historical sources, the process has sometimes led historians to interrogate the working assumptions of the materials' originators.⁹ Taken together their work suggests that re-examining previously collected sociological and historical data can both offer insights into the working presumptions—and sometimes biases—underpinning the original fieldwork as well as providing historians with rich datasets of which they might ask their own questions.

The richness of the fishing interviews and the fact that Thompson was a pioneer not only in oral history, but in ensuring that the growing body of raw material collected by academics was archived and available for future researchers, make it surprising that this substantive body of raw material has been neglected. This might in part have been due to the comprehensive nature of *Living the Fishing*—what else could anyone add to their account of Britain's fishing communities? But it was certainly because history as a discipline was evolving between the mid-1970s, when the material was collected, and 1983 when the book was published. Labour and community histories, which had been the subjects of such attention and intellectual excitement in the 1970s, by the 1980s were being passed by, as social historians found other foci—notably gender, sexuality—as well as new ways of thinking about oral history and memory coming to the fore.

And so, given Christopher Hill's dictum that history is rewritten by each new generation of historians, as they find new areas of sympathy with people gone before them, what can we now ask of these sources?¹⁰ Revisiting these transcripts means confronting the sheer volume of the material the team collected and the richness of their data set. The 157 interviews, some of them running to over sixty pages of transcript represent hundreds of hours of speech, song and memories. And adding to the transcripts are some detailed fieldnotes from Paul Thompson's later trips to north-east Scotland, while the UK Data Archive also holds the end-of-

⁹ Mike Savage, 'Working-class Identities in the 1960s: Revisiting the Affluent Worker Study', *Sociology* 39 (2005), 929–46; Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 'New Perspectives From Unstructured Interviews: Young Women, Gender, and Sexuality on the Isle of Sheppey in 1980', *SAGE Open* 6 (2016), 2158244016679474; Jon Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me? The Search for Community in Post-War England* (Oxford, 2019).

¹⁰ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down. Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London, 1991 [1972]).

grant report for the East Anglian tranche of the research and Thompson's interviews as part of the 'Pioneers' study.¹¹

Unlike the broader context which shaped Thompson's world in the mid-1970s where historians were working at the tail end of three decades of full employment, and at a time when the strength of (male) worker identities were taken as given, the first decades of the twenty-first century offers a very different picture. Rather than taking worker, and community, identities, as fixed, we have become more accustomed to thinking of work as precarious and mutable, subject to the vicissitudes of market forces, but also shaped by the agency and choices of individuals. And so my aim in this article is to do two things. Firstly, to reflect on what the archived transcripts from the *Living the Fishing* project might reveal of oral history practice in its early days as an academic discipline. Secondly, rather than accepting 'the fisherman' as a given identity, through interrogating a selection of the collected life histories, to explore what else the transcripts might reveal of the lives of the rural and littoral poor in the first decades of the twentieth century.

My focus is on East Anglia and north-east Scotland: interviews from herring fishermen, gutters and those involved in ancillary trades in both locations between them comprised just over half of all the project's recorded interviews. These places which although far apart had, for much of the past 150 years been connected by their mutual involvement in the seasonal herring fishing industry. Not only did boats from both locations move up and down the coast following the annual herring migration, but this sea-based movement was mirrored by one on land, as the so-called 'herring girls' moved along the ports with the boats, gutting and packing the fish into barrels as soon as the catch was landed.¹² The numbers involved in this migration were significant. At the peak of the herring industry, just before the first world war, 1,163 Scottish drifters and five thousand Scottish herring gutters came to Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth for the autumn herring fishing.¹³

I

What do we find when we revisit the original transcripts collected by Thompson and his team? Firstly, an insight into the working practices of some of the early serious practitioners of oral history. These range from Alun Howkins' liberal tendency to break into song mid-interview, joining

¹¹ Paul Thompson, *Fishing Community and Industry: East Anglia and North East Scotland, 1870-1950* (Colchester, Essex: UK Data Service), SN-853323.

¹² Paul Thompson, 'Women in the Fishing: The Roots of Power between the Sexes', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 27 (1985), 3-32; Jane Nadel-Klein, 'Granny Baited the Lines: Perpetual Crisis and the Changing Role of Women in Scottish Fishing Communities', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 23 (2000), 363-72.

¹³ Thompson, *Living the Fishing*, 34.

in with an informant's tune, or matching theirs with one of his own; to staccato, disjointed pieces of interview, where the interviewer, determined to follow their schedule of questions, cut off an evocation of Scots herring girls thronging the quay in Lowestoft to ask whether prayers were said during the informant's dinner time as a child.¹⁴ We also have records of some of Thompson's fieldnotes from one of Scottish trips, detailing informal conversations with informants and evoking the atmosphere of Buckie fish market, the changes to Peterhead's docks, and the experience of joining the crew of the Lunar Bow as they fished off north-west Scotland: 'I shall not forget those autumn nights... beyond Cape Wrath... just as the grey clouds turned bloodshot with dawn and sunlight picked a silver glitter from the stark cliffs... we knew that a giant shoal was in the water below us—shot for them and found them...'.¹⁵ This was oral history merged with—or emerging from—social science interviewing methods and an ethnographic practice which sought to understand the embodied experience of fishing as well as the cultural expressions of the fishing community.

In short then, what we find in the transcripts now held by the British Library in micro-fiche form, is a record of evolving oral history practice, a snap shot of the work of a team who were simultaneously working out the history of Britain's fishing communities and how exactly to capture this history. While they were guided by the format developed during *The Edwardians* project, they also injected their individual selves, their knowledge and passion and local context into the interviews. Thompson, Lummis and Wailey all in their different ways had worked at sea, which eased both their access to informants and the flow of the interviews once underway.¹⁶ At the same time we also see traces of the team's stumbles as they went about their work: their sometimes dogged adherence to the interview schedule in the face of informant indifference, or where it cut across the flow of the conversation, which spoke of a reluctance to dispense entirely with interview methods developed by social scientists.

It is useful here to think of the historical moments in which both the collecting and the writing in this project took place. The period between the collecting of the oral histories (1974-5), and their analysis and publication in *Living the Fishing* (1983) spanned a crucial transition in oral history practice. This was the shift from what we might think of as oral history in its 'reconstructive' mode—as historians sought to recapture the past through direct witness testimony—towards its 'interpretative' mode, as it

¹⁴ See for example BL: QD8/Fish/4.

¹⁵ See BL: QD8/Fish/144 and QD8/Fish/154, 5-9; and Thompson, *Living the Fishing*, xiii.

¹⁶ Thompson had served in the Navy during the war, Lummis had been a merchant seaman and Wailey had 'gone to sea from Marshside', a Lancashire shellfish port.

began grappling with the subjectivity of memory.¹⁷ Here the work of Luisa Passerini in her seminal 1979 *History Workshop Journal* article on silence was central.¹⁸ As Thompson reflected of *Voice of the Past* (1978), when he wrote *Living the Fishing* Passerini 'hadn't developed her ideas about the subjective. So the first edition... is very much a positivistic work... the main argument is the positive value of these memories, and whether or not they're reliable, and how you decide whether or not they're reliable. That was the research tradition I was coming from, essentially a social scientific one'.¹⁹ And even though *Living the Fishing* was written afterwards, the interviews on which it was based, and the thinking that had shaped their questions, pre-dated this move towards subjectivity and memory, and instead focused on the relationship between the material conditions faced by fishers and the culture and communities they created. And we see the uncertainty of oral history's place in academia in the project's final report. Although this aimed to present oral history as a robust research technique in its own right, it sought to do so by tabulating and quantifying the project's findings. While this had its uses, this need to justify the value of oral history through what it might reveal statistically seems a world away from course it would take over subsequent decades, where its focus on memory and its value for providing rich 'thick' accounts of the past was to become increasingly recognized.

We similarly find the transcribed interviews existing not as an expression of a definitive form but rather reflective of emerging practice and practical constraints. In contrast with more recent conventions in transcription, which have been shaped by the aim to capture nuances of speech and expression—leading to the growing use of video recording—for the fishing interviews we find patchiness of practice.²⁰ Benefiting from research council funding, Lummis' interviews from East Anglia were fully transcribed, with dashes standing in for pauses in the interviewee's speech, and each verbal repetition or false start faithfully reproduced. By contrast, as the Scottish research was only partly funded, 'only a minority' of tapes were ever transcribed, so many of the British Library

¹⁷ Michael Roper, 'Oral History', in Brian Brivati, Julia Buxton and Anthony Seldon, eds, *The Contemporary History Handbook* (Manchester, 1996), 345–52.

¹⁸ Luisa Passerini, 'Work, Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism', *History Workshop Journal*, 8 (1979), 82–108.

¹⁹ UKDA: SN:6226, interview with Paul Thompson, 'Pioneers of Social Research, 1996–2018', para. 121. <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6226-6>, <https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk//QualiBank/Document/?cid=q-e7255286-fbf7-4ae7-bf87-7fe85a0c9908>.

²⁰ For a discussion of video recording and oral history, see for example Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 2015), 137–60; Kathleen M. Ryan, 'Beyond Thick Dialogue: Oral History and the "Thickening" of Multimedia Storytelling', *Visual Communication Quarterly* 22 (2015), 85–93.

transcripts only exist in summary form, more as an *aide memoire* to the interviewer than as a resource for future researchers.²¹ The gap between what these summaries offer and a full transcript was made clear from the few interviews which exist in both summary and full form.²² Compare the summary from Helen and Jim Slater's joint interview, where they discussed Helen's work as a herring girl in Lerwick – 'they worked three as a crew, divided up the pay between them and got a weekly wage. They knew one another. In Lerwick they shared huts, six to a hut; the boys came up to Lerwick on Sundays—'good times, sing tunes'—with the Slaters' actual words:

Helen: And we got a hut to stay in Lerwick, and there were six of us in the hut, and we'd two beds, three slept to a bed. Just made up in this hut. And a wee bogie stove to make our meal on. . . we bought a little bone to make soup. We made soup for two days you know and maybe a little mince maybe the next day, but very little of course.

Jim: They used to economise on their own food so they had some to spend on the boys at the weekend. Wee bits of fancy cakes for the boys who came out for the weekend. Their brothers and fathers and sweethearts. . . Oh, we had some good times in the huts. Oh yes, oh yes, we used to have some great times in the huts. We used to sing songs, we used to get out the hymn books and sing. . . on a Saturday night and Sunday. . . oh aye.²³

Here the Slaters' evocation of summer in Lerwick, the sharing of huts, food and sociability—the 'wee bits of fancy cakes' and hymn singing, emphasized with the cadence of their speech, the repeated 'oh yes, oh yes'—offers a depth of insight into the life-worlds of fishers in a way that the summary information can only ever hint at. Oral history interviews were never simply about gleaning raw facts from informants. Here, even with only the transcripts to hand—and not only when they noted Alun Howkins' singing—do we get an insight into the importance of interviews as performance in its widest sense, something which was in subsequent decades to become understood as being such crucial part of oral history practice.²⁴

²¹ UKDA: interview with Paul Thompson, para. 135. <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6226-6>, <https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/QualiBank/Document/?cid=q-a85b1370-a891-4adb-b44f-c76267855771>. Although Thompson does note that the full interview tapes were deposited at the National Archives of Scotland.

²² For example, only summaries exist for the Buckie interviews - QD8/Fish/64-72. See QD8/Fish/74 for an interview which was both fully transcribed and has a summary.

²³ BL: QD8/Fish/74, 1 and 8.

²⁴ On oral history and performance, see Ronald Grele and Studs Terkel. *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (New York, 1991); Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London & New York, 2016), 130–52. For an early example of working through the possibilities of oral history see Dennis Tedlock, 'Learning to Listen: Oral History as Poetry', *Boundary 2* (1975), 707–28.

And so the full transcripts stand as testimony to the researchers' commitment to produce a different kind of history, one which, in the terminology of the time, sought to reveal 'history from below'. While this phrase had originally sought to bring the experiences of working class people into the realm of academic enquiry, by the time the fishing study was conceived social historians had also taken to heart critiques from feminist and anti-racist scholars and activists, and had sought to expand their gaze accordingly. Thus despite criticisms from some reviewers, from its inception Thompson's fishing study had sought to reveal the role of women in the fishing industry: the team's initial aim, for the East Anglian part of the fieldwork at least, to achieve gender parity in their sample of informants was thwarted through a lack of female informants not through absence of interest.²⁵ Despite this challenge, across the sample of interviews we find accounts from those who had worked as 'herring girls' and from their landladies, from women who had worked the sea from the shore, baiting lines and mending nets. And, through their memories of their mothers and grandmothers, we also gain access to the role of women in smoking, processing and selling fish. This was part of a serious commitment to oral history as a political and feminist tool. One which did not simply aim to capture the contribution of women to fishing economies, but also to try and reveal connections between, for example, child rearing practices and the involvement of working men in housework. Paying attention to these parts of fishing life allowed the team to develop important insights into how whole family practices helped create the dynamic fishing communities of the Shetland Isles.

Despite their understanding of the dynamism of the fishing industry across time and locality, their work contained a curious lacunae. For as much as they stressed that in the place of the 'traditional' fisherman evoked, for example, in Frank Sutcliffe's famous photographs of Whitby fishermen, they were interested in understanding how the industry had changed, they still largely left uninterrogated the category of 'fisherman'.²⁶ By this I mean that although they attempted to capture the complexity of fishing communities they did not pay attention to the ways in which people might have moved in and out of fishing, both over a season and over the course of their lives. The authors raised, but did not pursue the existence of links between 'fishing communities' and their rural hinterlands, mentioning, for example, that while some Norfolk farmers took to fishing to earn enough money to buy their farm this had largely died out by the 1900s. For the Scottish fishing settlements of the north-east, the division between farm and sea was seen by Thompson as even more

²⁵ For a gendered criticism of the study, see Rosalind Mitchison, 'Sewing Furiously', *London Review of Books*, 7 (7 March 1985). For gendered findings of the study see Thompson, 'Women in the Fishing'.

²⁶ Thompson, *Living the Fishing*, 3.

stark. Citing the old adage from the Moray Firth that ‘the corn and cod dinna mix’, he suggested that ‘[a]part from fishwives tramping the farms selling fresh fish, there was little contact between the farm and sea communities’.²⁷ In this sense the study both flagged up the potential connections between those working at sea and on the land, beyond fishing’s immediate ancillary industries, and dismissed their importance.

In contrast, when I was faced with the transcripts what was immediately striking was the varied and non-linear life trajectories of the interviewees: lads who started out as farm labourers who moved into fishing before becoming farmers; young women shuttling between domestic service and working as herring gutters; or men who thought of themselves as fishermen taking up farm labour or road construction during lean years. All this spoke of a world which was something more messy, fluid and contingent than the labels of ‘fisherman’ evoked. Consequently, in this remainder of this article I argue that paying attention to these moves in and out of fishing might complicate our understanding not only of the lives of fishers, but also to connect their lives more clearly to wider working class experiences of the period. For the interviewees’ life stories laid bare the struggle by individuals and families living in rural and littoral communities to make a living in the years before the expansion of welfare state and the emergence of a state-subsidized fishing industry after the second world war. As Mike Savage has argued, ‘structural insecurity’ was perhaps the ‘distinctive feature of working class life’, one which forced workers to ‘find strategies for dealing with the chronic insecurity of everyday life’, a condition from which those living on Britain’s coasts were not exempt.²⁸ And so it becomes useful here, I argue, to connect the experiences of Thompson’s interviewees to wider literatures of (rural) poverty as well as to works highlighting how the poor constructed their livelihoods via, and within, an ‘economy of makeshifts’. This approach usefully emphasizes the labouring poor’s agency in seeking to maintain livelihoods in a risky world where charity and state support could never been taken for granted.²⁹ In this way, rather than seeing fishers as a rarefied profession, distinct and separate from others who earned their living by their labour, we can understand them as forming part of a much larger

²⁷ Thompson, *Living the Fishing*, 14–15.

²⁸ Mike Savage, ‘Class and Labour History’, in Lex Heerma Van Voss and Marcel Van der Linden, eds, *Class and Other Identities: Gender, Religion, and Ethnicity in the Writing of European Labour History* (Oxford, 2002), 61.

²⁹ Olwen Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France: 1750-1789* (Oxford, 1974). More recently, see Stephen King and Alannah Tomkins, *The Poor in England 1700-1850: An Economy of Makeshifts* (Manchester, 2003); for migration as a livelihood strategy see Jason Long, ‘Rural-urban Migration and Socio-economic Mobility in Victorian Britain’, *The Journal of Economic History* 65 (2005), 1–35; and for Scotland, see Andrew Blaikie, ‘Household Mobility in Rural Scotland: The Impact of the Poor Law after 1845’, *International Review of Scottish Studies* 27 (2002), 23–41; and for Norfolk specifically see Alun Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men: Rural Radicalism in Norfolk 1870-1923*, History Workshop Series, 1985.

group of people for whom employment was often precarious, casual, seasonal and temporary.

Even so, we should be wary of attempts to flatten the interviewees' experiences into a particular mould: some of the fishers began as, and remained part of, the working poor across their lives; others worked their way up and made substantial fortunes. We also need to pay attention to differences across place and the different forces shaping local life and opportunities in East Anglia and north east Scotland, respectively. We equally, as Thompson and his collaborators made clear, need to understand how all this mapped onto an individual's own structural position within the fishing industry, as herring gutters, deckhands, skippers, boat owners all variously sought to make the best decisions for themselves and their families.

II

Sidney Watts was born in Happisburgh, a village on the Norfolk coast in 1889.³⁰ His father was a vermin killer, working across local farms catching moles, rats and rabbits; his mother, worked on a farm in a neighbouring village, '[t]ailing swedes and keeping sheep and all them sort of things'. This she continued even with her growing number of children—Sidney eventually had nine siblings—because her husband only brought in fourteen shillings a week. As a child Sidney helped out where he could, running errands, working each summer holiday from when he was old enough on the harvest, and after leaving school at the age of twelve he went first to work on a farm. But his father had other ambitions for him and apprenticed him to a bricklayer-cum-carpenter-cum-builder: 'and I was bound for three year, the first year I got a shilling a week. The second year I was going to get two. And the third year I was going to get three'. Two years into his apprenticeship he refused to go back to his master:

I can't go on like this, I said, about two bob a week, that ain't enough. . . Well my oldest brother – Willie, he was at sea then. He was a skipper. . . in herring. . . picking up a bit of money see and he came home this weekend. So I said to him. . . can you lend me five pounds brother? Oh, he said, what are you going to do with five pound? I said I want to go to London. . . I'm going to see if I can get a job on the liners.

The next day, aged only fourteen but armed with five gold sovereigns and his aunt's address in London, he took the train to London and walked into the Union Castle Company office to ask for work. Challenged by the drafting master that he wasn't old enough to go to sea, Sidney declared he was seventeen:

³⁰ BL: QD8/Fish/5.

Well, he said – I don't know... but the *Caledonian Castle* sail on Thursday afternoon, he said, on the four o' clock tide. He said, if you come down here on Wednesday afternoon... and we haven't got a full crew... I'll see what I can do for you. 'Course the Wednesday afternoon I went down and he told me I could go... off I go to Australia.

Let us pause Sidney's story for a moment, in approximately 1904/5—he wasn't sure—and some seventy years before he was interviewed in his Norfolk home by Trevor Lummis, who recorded his occupation as 'fisherman'. Perhaps most striking, for the early twenty-first century reader was the ease, casualness almost, with which a fourteen-year-old boy could find work and set sail for Australia in a matter of days. This spoke of a world when childhood for the working classes—always a blurry and provisional state and one which could from very early on, as in Sidney's case, be seasonally interrupted by the demands of harvest—definitively ended at twelve. It also spoke of a time where movement between places, as well as transition between life stages, was little impeded by bureaucracy, with none of the demands for birth certificates or passports which were to become normalized over the course of the century.³¹ His memories also recalled a world where the reach of empire created and sustained pathways which might join a Norfolk village to the other side of the world. And not just for Sidney: the liners he worked on were taking emigrants, often up to a thousand on each trip, to Australia.

But where though was Sidney the fisherman? Frustratingly, the transcript tells us little. The two years he spent working on liners is passed over in a sentence. This, after all was not the focus of Lummis' interest, but leaves us wondering what a boy from rural Norfolk made of his first experience of tropical air, of docking in Australia, of his return to his home village and the distance he had travelled between. All we have is this:

We took a thousand emigrants to Australia. Well then I used to come home and go in the drifting you know, after the herring and – and then I'd go down Fleetwood a-trawling and Grimsby, all over the place I'd go... I think that 1906 I came to Yarmouth... Drifting... [on the] *Silver Spray*... Belonged to Walter out of Winterton.³²

We can only assume that Sidney's move into fishing—possibly further enabled by his wider seafaring experience, possibly facilitated by his brother Willie—was as casual as his entry onto the ocean liner. It was certainly driven by the differences in opportunity between the land and the sea. We first get a glimpse of the possibilities offered by working the

³¹ John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport. Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge, 2000).

³² BL: QD8/Fish/5, 3–4.

herring fleet in the five gold sovereigns handed him by his brother. Later in his interview he fleshed this out, explaining that the best-paid skilled farmworkers at the time might expect to command threepence an hour: 'you had to go [fishing] if you wanted to earn a few pounds'. Even working on what was called the 'home fishing' – fishing the herring grounds off the East Anglian coast in the autumn—for eight weeks might earn you 'forty pound, well that was good money then wasn't it. Considering twelve shillings a week on a farm...'.³³ Sidney's contemporary, Harold Cook, gave a very similar account of his entry into fishing, with the physical sight of gold sovereigns also strongly imprinted on his memory. Having resigned himself to a life of badly paid work in the inland village of Catfield, Harold turned fifteen in 1913, when herring prices were reaching their peak: 'the fishing chaps... come home at Christmas, with a little bag of gold and sovereigns. And the average farm labourer's wage at that time of the day was only about eighteen shillings a week'.³⁴ Emboldened by what he had seen, the following May Harold went to sea. Both he and Sidney were clear about the strategic decision-making which underpinned their choice to go to sea. For them, it was not an immutable identity, but something to move into as a way of making money:

young people, they'd go to work on a farm perhaps might be 'til they got to twenty... well they couldn't save enough money on a farm – to get married out of twelve shillings a week you see, so they'd go to sea... Well if they had a good voyage they'd pick up thirty or forty pound, well they could come and buy a home – the furniture with it... that was the idea.³⁵

For many it became an option because of personal contacts, not only family members, as in Sidney's case, but also friends and neighbours, and not just ports or coastal villages, but ones well inland which also sustained significant numbers of men working the fishing.³⁶ Harold Cook's village, Catfield, about five miles inland from Caister-on-Sea, had 'about twenty-nine' fishermen 'in our little village, of a population of only about two hundred and ninety'.³⁷ As Thomas Crisp, born in 1899 in Burgh St Peter, remembered of his father: 'there was many fishermen outside the town as what there was inside the town, and my father happened to be one of those that, we lived out, right out in the country, to Burgh St Peter, which meant a six mile walk... right across Carlton marshes' to reach

³³ BL: QD8/Fish/5, 38–9.

³⁴ BL: QD8/Fish/11, 3.

³⁵ BL: QD8/Fish/5, 57.

³⁶ William Hodgson, *The Herring and its Fishery* (London, 1957), 30.

³⁷ BL: QD8/Fish/11, 3.

Lowestoft's port. It was only three years after his father was made skipper that the family finally moved into Lowestoft.³⁸

We should be clear that this vast gulf in earnings between land and sea was not guaranteed, nor was it a historically stable fact. Sidney went to sea in the herring industry's peak years: from the introduction of steam drifters in the 1897–8 fishing season to the outbreak of the first world war, the herring industry boomed. The weight of fish landed in British ports nearly doubled between 1890 and 1910 as boat sizes and the number of vessels increased. In 1908 there had been 626 Scottish steam drifters, five years later there were 884, with a further 624 sailing out of English ports, of which four-fifths were registered to either Lowestoft or Great Yarmouth.³⁹ In 1906, when Sidney was first fishing, women working the summer and autumn as fish gutters could expect to earn £12 for the season; hired deckhands might expect £30; while a steam-drifter skipper-owner might bring £400 home by the end of the year.⁴⁰ These were the years when it was possible for deckhands to earn enough in a season to buy a farm, and for fortunes to be made for those who wanted to stick with the fishing.

This though was not to last. The outbreak of war simultaneously ended access to the vitally important herring markets of north-eastern Europe and broke up Britain's fishing fleet, with vessels requisitioned and fishermen joining up. Sidney was one of thousands of fishermen who served in the navy for the duration of the war, in his case in the Adriatic and Dardanelles. And after the war the herring industry never again reached its pre-war heights. The difficult post-war years saw widespread European economic depression and political instability, with the Russian revolution in particular serving to comprehensively disrupt the Eastern European market for cured herring, factors which together caused a sustained slump in prices. This was a process which affected the Scottish ports most comprehensively: what had been 435,000 tons of fish being landed in 1910 had fallen to 278,000 tons by 1938. While in England the landed tonnage remained roughly stable between these two dates this hid a profound shift in the market away from herring—and the East Anglian ports—towards cheaper white fish being landed in Hull.⁴¹ This was the wider economic background to Sidney's decision not to return to sea:

No... I went to Yarmouth – I went foreman on a farm for George Chapman the butcher. Well I left him – in 1925 I left him, and I came and took over Happisburgh Victoria. Pub. And I was there eight year [1925-33]. And I used to cart stones off the beach then to mend the

³⁸ BL: QD8/Fish/12, 1.

³⁹ Thompson, *Living the Fishing*, 32, 36, Table 1; 41, Table 2.

⁴⁰ Thompson, *Living the Fishing*, 35

⁴¹ Thompson, *Living the Fishing*, 37, 41, Table 2.

roads with. . . [and then]I went to Happisburgh Hall – for farming. . . I finished there in 1956. And bought this bungalow and came here to live.⁴²

Fishing, then, for Sidney, took up approximately nine years of his working life, for all that Lummis described him in the research metadata as a 'fisherman'. His was a working life which stretched from rural Norfolk to Australia and the Dardanelles, saw him sailing the world's seas in ocean liners, navy vessels as well as fishing craft, and found him running a public house, hauling carts of stones, and finally, and for the longest stretch of years, farming. For the years of his life when he was out on the boats and earning his living from fishing he might well have identified himself as a fisherman—although he might equally have simply said that he was 'working the fishing' - but it is clear that this was only ever one part of his various worker identities.

What of his brother Willie, whose relatively rich earnings on the herring fishing had given Sidney the money he needed to go to London? We aren't told how Willie got into fishing, but it is clear that for him too, time on the boats only made up one part of his working life, with Sidney explaining that Willie frequently picked up work as a 'bricklayer or a stonemason. . . he used to leave off sometimes [from the fishing] and go to his trade. See. . .perhaps he'd go to sea two year and then he'd go—a year. . . building, all that sort of business. . . he was down at. . . Wiltshire [Salisbury?] Cathedral repairing it. . . getting about thirteen pence an hour'.⁴³ Once again, rather than a fixed occupation, fishing was something to move in to and out of, depending on where economic opportunities lay, and perhaps also, as I discuss below, personal preference.

If we look to Sidney and Willie's wider family, we begin to see how the choice to go to sea or not was just one a much wider range of working opportunities which were available to the poor of Norfolk's coastline at the turn of the twentieth century. For their siblings, once again, rather than fixity it was mobility—physical and occupational—which formed a key part of the working lives of anyone who set their face against farm labouring as a way of life. Here though it was the railway, rather than the sea, which provided the means. As Sidney explained, the eventual move to Lancashire of half his siblings was prompted by one of his sisters marrying a railway signalman, initially stationed in Salhouse, just outside Norwich:

Well they kept moving him along the line you see, different places, he went from York, then. . . Rishton in Lancashire. Well – my brother Walter was the first one, he went down there for a holiday, for a

⁴² BL: QD8/Fish/5, 20.

⁴³ BL: QD8/Fish/5, 23.

fortnight. . . he got a job down there, he didn't come back no more. Well then – my brother Herbert went, he stuck there. See? And then – Jack he went, he stopped, then George, he stopped. . . and then my sister Flora went. . . they – went in the factories⁴⁴

By the second half of the nineteenth century Britain's dense railway network both provided a means of transport and an important new livelihood opportunities for working class men, one which simultaneously offered its employees spatial and social mobility alongside relative job security.⁴⁵ Here we see Sidney's brother-in-law being progressively moved away from Norfolk, and as his household moved, his in-laws followed, with the railway making visiting a relatively simple prospect. The railway might have provided the means for moving, but the draw of longer-term migration to Lancashire was better wages—'the money was more tempting down there, in the factories'—but also possibly the greater freedoms and sociability which came with town life. This willingness within the Watts family to move was not new. Sidney had briefly stayed with his aunt in London before joining the liner, and he also spoke of 'two uncles and two aunts in Illinois in America. . . They were all in good jobs. . . they done very well indeed.'⁴⁶

Were the Watts normal? Might I have cherry-picked Sidney's life history precisely for its exceptionalism? If we look from the perspective of the mass European migration to North America, and in lesser numbers to Australia and New Zealand, in the second half of the nineteenth century, and from the continuing trend of rural to urban migration which had been a feature of the first half of the century, arguably the Watts' experiences were entirely typical. Sidney might have been 'a good talker' and the transcript suggests he was an excellent interviewee, but this does not mean that his experiences, or those of his family were exceptional, simply that he was more able than some to articulate those experiences. As I go on to show in the next section Sidney's and Willie's moves in and out of the fishing industry were more illustrative of the broader experiences of their peers, in East Anglia, and the Scottish fisheries too, than any fixed idea of 'a fisherman' might suggest.

III

The massive expansion of the fishing industry in general and the herring fleet in particular towards the end of the nineteenth century—driven as much by the development of the railway network and the introduction of ice on boats as it was the introduction of the steam drifter—could never

⁴⁴ BL: QD8/Fish/5, 27.

⁴⁵ Peter Howlett, 'The Internal Labour Dynamics of the Great Eastern Railway Company, 1870–1913', *The Economic History Review* 57 (2004), 396–422.

⁴⁶ BL: QD8/Fish/5, 58–9.

have been sustained by hereditary fishermen alone. As with the expansion of factory work earlier in the century, the explosion of the herring industry relied on mobile labour and significant numbers of extra hands willing to go to sea for the months when work was available. It was estimated that the 1913 herring season drew in an additional two thousand Highlanders working as deckhands on Scottish boats and five thousand English workers on boats registered south of the border, to which can be added twelve thousand Scottish female fish gutters.⁴⁷ Even though the Scottish boats were reputed to be crewed by members of the same extended family, in fact they too took on extra hands see them through the herring season.⁴⁸ As George Murray who sailed out of Buckie in Banffshire recalled:

We carried three Irishmen in the summer and they were in Yarmouth with us and then the next summer. I got on great with the Irish and the Lewismen too. The Irish followed boats gutting. They did same as girls. Then when they came to Buckie we gave them a job. My father used to work with a black man, Sam, on the drifter. He was an engineer.⁴⁹

Mobility, in terms of movement up and down the coast in pursuit of the fishing, and in terms of long-distance moves—most notably of the Scots to East Anglia, but also, in smaller numbers, of East Anglia fishermen north—has been a long recognized, and even celebrated part of the herring industry.⁵⁰ Less recognized has been both more local forms of mobility and circulation—between the rural hinterland and its coast—and how these intersected with seasonality, on sea, but also on land. These two driving factors—seasonality and mobility—profoundly shaped workers' relationship with fishing, as did a third factor—precarity—as fishers could neither be certain of a catch nor necessarily of a market.

The herring season began in May, in the Shetlands, and moved south through the year following the herrings' migration, until it ended in the grounds off East Anglia in early December. From then until the beginning of the new herring season vessels commonly took time out for repairs and refurbishment, but some also continued fishing: over winter East Anglian boats typically went to the mackerel fishing off Britain's south-west coast; Scottish

boats used to go on to the West coast, Stornoway, the Minches, Mallaig, Oban, to work the herring during the winter. But most of the

⁴⁷ Thompson, *Living the Fishing*, 34.

⁴⁸ In contrast, East Anglian boats tended to be company- or skipper-owned, with the rest of the crew hired for the season.

⁴⁹ BL: QD8/Fish/63, 6.

⁵⁰ Perhaps most famously in Ewan McColl and Peggy Seeger's 1960 radio ballad, *Singing the Fishing*.

fishermen worked the haddock lines from the middle of December right up to the month of March, or end of February again. Haddock lines all the winter. That's with the mussels telling and the baiting in the day time. When the weather was bad the boat couldn't get out to shoot the lines and the herring nets would be mended.⁵¹

For those who didn't take part in the winter fishing, or who hadn't earned enough over the season to be able to live off their earnings, this meant having to find other work. As government fisheries expert William Hodgson observed, out of season many of the deckhands involved in drift-net fishing living in the inland villages surrounding Yarmouth and Lowestoft 'would be found working on the farms, digging trenches. . . to drain the fields'.⁵² Sidney Webb remembered how people took on, 'all sorts of jobs. . . a lot of 'em didn't do anything at all if they'd got a few quid, they—you know, hang on 'til they went to sea again. . . if they—ran short they'd be on the farm doing all sorts of jobs, any job they could pick up you see'.⁵³

In Scotland, seasonal working could also mean returning home for the harvest between the end of the fishing in the Shetlands and the beginning of the Norfolk fishing in the autumn, Jim Slater regularly resorted to farm work to see him 'between seasons. . . at harvest time or like that'. The summer of 1937 saw him harvesting, 'forking the sheaves onto the bogies [carts]. . . and I was earning £2.5s a week. I had my dinner at the farm and that was a fortune in that day. . . oh aye'.⁵⁴

This seasonality worked both ways: if the fishing off-season saw men looking for work on land, we likewise find Scots farm workers, as with their Norfolk counterparts, moving into fishing. Buckie fisherman George Murray was one of many boat owners who took on Banffshire farm-workers as below-deck crew, reasoning their on-farm experience with traction engines made them the 'best engineers'.⁵⁵ But others worked on-deck. If we look at Jim Slater's memories of his friend and shipmate Jock Sutherland, we get an insight into the everyday mixing which might actually have existed between supposedly eternally separate fishing and farming families:

there was men who. . . when the fishing season was ended could turn their hand on the farm. . . Jock Sutherland, I was shipmate with him, he was a farm servant in his younger day and he went to sea on his brother's boat as engineer and between the fishings he just went up to

⁵¹ BL: QD8/Fish/74, 22.

⁵² William Hodgson, *The Herring and its Fishery*, London, 1957, 30.

⁵³ BL: QD8/Fish/5, 17.

⁵⁴ BL: QD8/Fish/74, 24.

⁵⁵ BL: QD8/Fish/67, 5. This was also remembered by other informants, see QD8/Fish/74, 3 and /79, 7.

the farm and ploughed or harvested it or whatever was required and when the season was ready for herring he would come and go back to sea again. . . That Joe, he did it all the time. And there was others like him who could turn their hands to the regular farm work.⁵⁶

We cannot tell, from Jim's account of Jock, whether he was from a 'fishing family', as indicated by his brother's status as a boat owner, or a 'farming family', which would explain his first employment as a farm servant rather than a ship's cook. In this way, Jock points to the existence in north-east Scotland of individuals whose moves in and out of farming and fishing were shaped by season rather than by heritage. Indeed, this is something which Thompson, writing in his notes of his interview with George Murray, hinted at, but did not pursue, when he observed that employment by farm workers on boats was 'as a regular job, not seasonal'.⁵⁷ Thompson's statement goes to the heart of the assumptions surrounding who was 'a fisherman'. If someone worked on the fishing as their 'regular' job, why was it that they continued to be described as a 'farmworker'?

Here it is useful to reflect on how individual's relationships with the fishing industry might have been mediated by larger structures, most notably differing patterns of boat ownership in between the East Anglian and Scottish fisheries. Thompson believed that skippers were the 'heart' of the former's fishing industry. Here, boats were generally owned by companies, and able crewmen could get promoted over time to first mate, and then skipper. At this point, skippers might be granted a share in a company boat, or even buy their own; in turn their sons, Thompson and his team found, were more likely to go into fishing than the sons of deckhands: three quarters of skippers' sons became crewman, compared to half of deckhands' sons.⁵⁸ In this way, we can locate the experience of Sidney Webb and his brother, as deckhands, willing to work on the fishing when it proved lucrative, but not wedded to it as an identity or way of life. For Scots fishers, we would expect something less fluid. There boats were more often family owned and crewed—so that fathers, brothers, uncles and cousins might all own a part-share in a boat as well as working on them—suggesting they had a tighter relationship with fishing.

But even here we need to be careful of making assumptions. As Jim Slater's and Jock Sutherland's experiences showed, men might move in and out of fishing according to the season, irrespective of their initial start in life. Moreover the Scottish transcripts contain plenty of evidence, as with the Webbs in Norfolk, of siblings and other family members actively

⁵⁶ BL: QD8/Fish/74, 21.

⁵⁷ BL: QD8/Fish/67, 5.

⁵⁸ UKDA: Thompson, Final Report, 28 & Table C2.

seeking employment outside of fishing. When asked by Thompson whether the rest of his family were in fishing, George Murray replied: 'My brother Peter was an iron-monger and he married a town's girlie. My brother Willie who had a confectioner shop married a town girl. We have fishermen here who have married people from Keith'.⁵⁹ Even for someone like Jean Murray, who came from a family where her father 'went to fishing all his life', her mother worked mending nets and supporting his fishing from the shore and her brothers went into fishing, their fishing heritage was not as clear-cut as we might assume. Her father's brothers were shoemakers and 'joiners. He was the only one who went to sea', while two of her maternal uncles were plasterers and two others were coopers.⁶⁰ And more than this, she stressed that in her home town of Peterhead, in a different way to the fishers of East Anglia, people used the fishing as a means to financial security:

A lot of fisher people went to College. A lot of my chums went – became schoolteachers. They used to work at the herring to pay for their education. Some people went to the fishing to pay for medical school. And became doctors.⁶¹

We see the tension between a more stable or 'hard' fisher identity—something which might have been underpinned by boat ownership and hence significant personal and familial investment in fishing—and the impact of precarity on livelihoods in the inter-war period when hardship, desperation even, met many Scots fishers faced with the successive poor catches and low prices of the early 1930s. The system by which men on the boats got paid—when they received a share of the profits rather than a fixed wage—meant that both boat owners and share-fishers could end a fishing trip, or a whole season, out of pocket⁶²:

You could be unlucky. If you came home and you've 4 ladies to pay for mending nets and you're not making money its difficult... I worked on the roads with a pick and shovel. Then went to [mending] cod nets. It was hard... "very degrading".⁶³

Others reinforced George Murray's recollections of the 1930s depression: 'Some fishermen worked a winter at deepening the harbour... Some fishermen worked on the roads'. Although some insisted that '[f]ishermen

⁵⁹ BL: QD8/Fish/63, 19. Keith is approximately twelve miles inland.

⁶⁰ BL: QD8/Fish/68, 2–3.

⁶¹ BL: QD8/Fish/68, 7.

⁶² As a general rule, those working below deck—the cook, ship's engineer and fireman were paid a wage; casual deckhands might also receive a wage, but others working on deck, particularly when they were also part-owners of a vessel, would get paid a share of the total profit—price received for catch minus expenses, including wages, chandler's fees, coal, food costs—from a trip.

⁶³ BL: QD8/Fish/63, 19.

didn't work on farms', ⁶⁴ others said otherwise.⁶⁵ Jim Slater acknowledged that 'lots' of fishermen, including himself, turned to farming when 'things got really bad':⁶⁶

in the 1930s when things were really desperate. . . most of the fishermen, except actual [boat] owners went to work in farms. In fact I went to one about a couple of miles from here just to do general farm work. . . and worked 10 hours a day, six days to the week – that was 60 hours for 30/- . . . Glad to get it, aye.⁶⁷

As with the rest of the working and precarious poor, these kind of decisions were also governed by the availability, or not, of other forms of income, poor relief or, by the 1930s, unemployment assistance. In common with the wider 'respectable' working class, interviewees had strong memories of thrift, mutual aid and seeking credit from shopkeepers in order to get by in hard times. In contrast, they vehemently rejected the idea that fisher families might have sought poor relief: '[t]here was the Social Security. . . the parish relief. The fisher folk would starve rather than go there. I've heard my parents say that they would die of hunger rather than go there. I never knew any fisher folk go there'.⁶⁸ Although here George Murray articulated fishermen's refusal to accept welfare support in terms of pride, the reality was that right through the 1930s, those who were paid through the share system were ineligible for unemployment assistance.

We wasn't allowed to draw general unemployment benefit because we were classed as share fishermen. . . those classed as share fishermen weren't entitled to benefits you see. So we had to go and find work elsewhere – the situation was fairly desperate⁶⁹

Thus although in popular imagination, in north-east Scotland as well as in East Anglia, there was no mixing between farm and sea, the reality was more mixed than either informants, or the research team, might have acknowledged. Significant numbers of farm labourers worked whole seasons, and consecutive seasons, on the fishing; and when times were hard, those who normally fished for a living were forced to look for other work. The idea of 'being a fisherman' or from a fisher family might have been more fixed for those with greater investment in the industry—normally though being a skipper and/or having a share in a boat or being an

⁶⁴ BL: QD8/Fish/66, 3.

⁶⁵ BL: QD8/Fish/67, 7.

⁶⁶ BL: QD8/Fish/74, 3.

⁶⁷ BL: QD8/Fish/74, 21.

⁶⁸ BL: QD8/Fish/63, 1B.

⁶⁹ BL: QD8/Fish/74, 21.

outright owner—but even so, economic recession and a run of bad luck in the fishing grounds could push even these men into work on the land.

IV

This is not, though, simply a history of materiality, of the difficult and dynamic choices made by people living by their labour at a time of limited, or no, state support. It is also an intensely personal history, one shaped by individuals' responses to the extreme physicality of life at sea. These were not overtly emotional interviews, neither did the interviewers seem to try to elicit from their interviewees how they *felt* about the sea or working the fishing, nor did the interviewees often volunteer their thoughts on the subject. Nevertheless, often in understated terms, the demanding nature of life at sea was a thread running through their interactions.

Although danger was a word rarely used, most interviews with men who had fished contained at least one dramatic story of a storm, shipwreck or rescue. As Jock Bruce put it, 'everybody whose been out on the boats has had a time when he didn't think he'd come back'.⁷⁰ The first of the East Anglian interviews, with Charles Knight from Caister-on-Sea, opened dramatically:

I'm the son of - Charles Knights, one of the survivors of the Caister Lifeboat disaster [14 Nov 1901], and brother to Henry Knights, the youngest member of that crew who was lost in the lifeboat, and a nephew of Arron Herrod the coxswain, and James Herrod, the second coxswain of that boat, which were both lost in the same disaster, and cousin to Walter Herrod who was saved from that disaster with my father.⁷¹

Despite coming from a family of lifeboat men and fishers, Charles himself, perhaps for obvious reasons, never worked at sea. For some men a brush with death pushed them to look for a different way to make a living. Harold Cook's father and uncle Jimmie used to fish together, but one day 'they come into Yarmouth harbour what they called then, clean swept, that was when a gale of wind had carried away their mast and sails. . . and Jimmie stepped ashore and said, 'I've had enough of catching fish. I'm going to try selling fish'.⁷² Jock Bruce himself was the only one of his five brothers who stayed with fishing as a livelihood: one had gone to sea briefly 'but his wife made him pack it in' and he became a butcher. Here we get a small glimpse of the place of intimate relationships in shaping individual life choices. We don't know if Jock's sister-in-law feared for her husband's safety, was unhappy about his long absences from

⁷⁰ BL: QD8/Fish/79, 3.

⁷¹ BL: QD8/Fish/4, 1.

⁷² BL: QD8/Fish/11, 3.

home, or their lack of a steady income—as Jock put it, ‘I worked two thirds of my life for nothing’—but we do know that she had enough of an influence on her husband to see him take up other work.⁷³

More prosaic but no less important, were the physical rigours shaping life at sea. It was cold, wet, isolating, with, for some, sea sickness a perpetual companion—I gave up fishing because I was continually seasick.⁷⁴

You were sleeping and vomiting. . . No cures for sea sickness. Gradually went. Two years before I drunk a cup of tea. . . You’d no money. You never saw a soul at Stornoway. The Highland folk were religious and tied down. Couldn’t associate with the girls. . . We wore oil skin. Leather boots, They were never dry, they were always leaking.⁷⁵

Given George Murray’s account here of his first seasons at sea, it is perhaps a surprise that he when asked about his life at sea he replied he had ‘enjoyed it very much’ and wouldn’t have done another job. This was not just an empty statement, during the depression he went into debt ‘over and over again’, to continue fishing and keep from having to sell his boat.⁷⁶ Compare this to Mr Killet’s, attitude, whose father had been a fisher and had taken him out to sea from an early age: ‘Well, we used to go to sea but—when I was at sea—and—I weighed the situation up. . . nasty day, storm job . . . thought, this is no life for me. . . I didn’t care much for the sea.’⁷⁷

Clearly, we are dealing with something other than straight economic choices here. Scattered across the transcripts is pride at surviving tough conditions or at one’s skill at navigating home through dense fog, of staying steady during a crisis, and, for the years before echo-location and other sounding devices, successfully finding rich fishing grounds against the odds of sea and weather. And, occasionally we get sight of some of the beauty of the sea, as in Sidney Watts’ description of fishing by moonlight while he and the rest of the crew were half-drunk:

I could hardly hold my head up. I got in the wheelhouse. . . well that was moonlight. When I could see those [nets] full of herrings. . . there’s a hundred cran shimmer if there ain’t any more. . . nets are full. . . we’d had a fortnight’s holiday and we’d been to sea and we were sort of half-drunk, well we worked them buggers in. We went to Yarmouth – into Yarmouth six o’clock in the morning. Hundred and seventy five cran of herring we had.⁷⁸

⁷³ BL: QD8/Fish/79, 3.

⁷⁴ BL: QD8/Fish/65, 9.

⁷⁵ BL: QD8/Fish/63, 3.

⁷⁶ BL: QD8/Fish/63, 7.

⁷⁷ BL: QD8/Fish/6, 2

⁷⁸ BL: QD8/Fish/5, 15–16. A cran was a measure of volume, standardized at 37.5 imperial gallons by the 1908 Cran Measures Act. In effect it was roughly 1,320 herring, or, more popularly, a thousand herring.

Here we have Sidney's evocation of the moonlight shining on the nets full of fish alongside his allusion to the hard work and camaraderie involved in hauling tens of thousands of herring in time to dock for the morning market in Yarmouth. It was as much as an insight into the passion and commitment of men to life as a fisher as I found anywhere in the interviews. Fishing was hard, rough work, but it was a world away from the monotony of a factory line: initiative, graft and a willingness to take risks—many skippers would not put to sea if crew members had been drinking—could find reward in bountiful catches and the sight of moonlight on shoals of shining herring. It was not a life for everybody, nor even for those who cleaved to it. Storms, accidents at sea, poor catches, mounting debt and aging—Sidney was not alone in turning his back on the fishing as he got older—all served to push men back to the shore to find work, either temporarily or for good.

V

Despite their small numbers—just under twelve thousand out of Britain's 32.3 million economically active workforce in 2018⁷⁹—fishermen loom large in the British psyche. From the dozens of fishing and heritage museums scattered around Britain's coastline and the prominent placing of statues and fishing-related artefacts repurposed as art or street furniture across seaside towns to Fishing for Leave's high profile flotilla as part of the 2016 Brexit campaign, fishmen maintain an active position in public discourse and memory.⁸⁰ Whether politically motivated or used as a tool for economic regeneration, underpinning much of this activity is a celebration of the local, the traditional and the authentic. Within this the work of fisherman is understood as tough and dangerous, with the fishermen themselves often seen as stemming from a rarefied, almost guild-like worker group—like farmers—following an occupation which is inherited rather than entered through formal qualifications, unknowable for those not already in the know. In early twenty-first century terms, fishermen—and they are almost always described in these gendered terms—are the product of a 'somewhere' rather than an 'anywhere', standing in arch-contrast to the office worker of late capitalism.⁸¹

And yet when we revisit the heyday of the herring industry, roughly the first three decade of the twentieth century, we find something very

⁷⁹ Marine Management Organisation, UK Sea Fisheries Statistics, 2018: Full Report, Table 2.6; ONS, EMP04: Employment by Occupation, April–July 2018.

⁸⁰ These range in size Museum of London Docklands' displays in the First Port of Empire gallery and the Scottish Fisheries Museum to smaller initiatives such as Great Yarmouth's Time and Tide museum, Buckie and District's Fishing Heritage Centre and Polperro's Heritage Museum of Smuggling and Fishing.

⁸¹ David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (Oxford, 2017).

different than a fixed population of 'fishermen' who had inherited their work from their fathers, and who in turn passed their boats, nets and knowledge down to their sons. Rather there was significant moving in and out of fishing. For men this could mean shifting between fishing and farming or casual work, a process which was shaped by the seasonal availability of employment and through calculations over what might offer the most financial return at any one point. While all these labour choices were driven by proximity, opportunity and pragmatism, they were also underpinned by the force of personal preferences: for some the overwhelming experience of sea sickness, or fear of shipwreck trumped any family tradition of sea faring. The result of all this was that we find diversity of occupations in families of interviewees—even in 'fishing families'—as well as individuals' own life histories, as we see them move in and out of fishing over the course of their work lives.

This should not be surprising. Historians of the working poor have long pointed to the place of precarity and seasonality in their working lives, with migration—to towns but also overseas—a common response to the prospect of a lifetime of grinding rural poverty. Such insights off the advantage of highlighting the place of agency and acknowledging how individuals used their knowledge and connections to build livelihoods for themselves across their lifetimes. However, to date fishers have largely been side-lined from this discourse. Revisiting the transcripts collected by Thompson and his colleagues allows us to interrogate their working assumptions and find a far more diverse, complex, and fluid than perhaps they realized. The oral history movement of the 1970s was underpinned by a deeply progressive politics that sought to reveal hidden histories across diverse sites and social categories, and drove Thompson, Lummis, and Howkins' concern to record and deeply understand the family and community practices which created and sustained fishing livelihoods. Motivated now by different questions, ones emerging from the politicized experiences of work in the early twenty-first century—precarity, mobility, agency—we can mine these interviews in other ways. Paying attention to different threads of experience opens up the possibility of understanding the place of personal preference and intimate decision-making in choosing to become, and remain a fisherman. Seasickness, moonlight shimmering on herring, the freedom to gather and dance with one's friends all have their place in building our understanding of what kept some people with the fishing and what caused others to turn their back on the sea.