

BOOK

**Fisherwomen by Craig Easton; Ten O' Clock Books, UK; 24 page limited edition**

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Early in the Scottish summer, the traditional herring trade starts to flourish. Shoals move from Shetland in the north towards Great Yarmouth in southern England. Fleets of Scottish fishing boats follow the shoals south and haul in their catch. From 1860 onwards, these journeys were further mirrored on land by the 'herring lassies' – thousands of Scottish, Irish and English fisherwomen. These pioneering women not only managed pre-harvest work, household chores, childbearing, raising and caregiving, as well as carrying their men out to the fishing boats to ensure they went to sea in dry comfortable clothing. They also travelled over a thousand kilometers every year to expertly gut, pack and sell the freshly caught herring along Britain's coastline. Photographer Craig Easton's book, *Fisherwomen – Portfolio Edition*, explores this long tradition and celebrates the fisherwomen who sustain it. In December 2020, ICSF connected with Craig to talk about his wonderful book.

From 1860 to the peak of the fishery in 1913, when over 6000 women would come to Shetland at the start of the season, much has changed today. Overfished herring stocks are no longer as abundant. An increasingly mechanized and capital-intensive fleet allows longer fishing trips and onboard processing. Without the need for skilled fisherwomen to travel to process and market the herring. And so, the annual wave of 'herring lassies', which made its way down the coastline in special trains, slowly came to a draw. The women who were a common sight at the quaysides, markets and towns – as iconized in the paintings and photographs of Winslow Homer, Isa & Robert Jobling, John McGhie and others – no longer make this journey. They have started working behind closed doors in larger processing plants and local family run businesses.

Easton's *Portfolio* dives deep by exploring the traditional journey and the women who keep it alive – both today as well as in its heyday. The portraits of the fisherwomen working today showcase a sense of deep pride in their work, confidence in their abilities, capability in themselves and support from their community. The up-close portraits of the fisherwomen who worked as young women over half a decade ago, requires the viewer to absorb the stories visible in the folds around Mary

Williamson's eyes, in the set of Rita McNab's shoulders or the tilt of Edna Donaldson's chin. The portraits are accompanied by incredibly insightful excerpts from the fisherwomen, which have the ability to vividly convey not only the incredibly difficult and skilful nature of their work but also the camaraderie they offer each other. The older generation's stories capture the heady thrill of young, highly skilled and confident women travelling across the coast and thriving in their financial and social independence. In the penultimate story, Sheila Hirsh – a trawler skipper – shares the terrifying experience of going overboard, only to nonchalantly conclude with, "It was quite fun, but that was my first time over the wall."

Across the *Portfolio* we see the support and strength that the fisherwomen share with each other; not only amongst their peers but also inter-generationally. The last series of breathtaking sceneries shades in the context within which these traditions, journeys and connections existed. In our conversation, Craig spoke of the increasing number of migrant fisherwomen from countries such as Malaysia and South Korea who are joining the processing workforce alongside women from local traditional fishworking families. In the book, Dawn Wilton comments that while many new employees might know the history of the women who came before them, those who don't are quickly introduced to their shared heritage. Considering today's workforce – both local fisherwomen and migrant fisherwomen – we can see that the traditions of travel, perseverance, skill and community are still very much alive and hopefully evolving to make space for new possibilities.

Easton's work deftly weaves together the rich traditions of skill and tenacity in the histories of these fisherwomen, their spaces in time and the connections built, fostered and lost between people from different parts of the country.

What truly shines through is the individual fisherwomen – visible through their portraits and audible through their stories which are shared in their vernacular speech. One is almost able to feel their individual stories of courage, struggle, independence, passion, determination, fear, belonging and good times!

Further information is available at [tenoclockbooks.com](http://tenoclockbooks.com) and [craigeaston.com](http://craigeaston.com). You may also explore Craig Easton's entire series *Fisherwomen* on his website. The photographs titled *The hands the gut the herring I, II, III and IV* are particularly noteworthy (see pages 10-11). **Y**



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note that write-ups should be  
brief, about 2000 words. They  
could deal with issues that are of  
direct relevance to women and  
men of fishing communities.  
They could also focus on recent  
research or on meetings and  
workshops that have raised  
gender issues in fisheries. Also  
welcome are life stories of women  
and men of fishing communities

working towards a sustainable  
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