

Chapter Three

WOMEN WHO WORKED IN INDUSTRY

Following long-standing traditions dating back to medieval and even ancient times, women worked in Britain, the United States, France, and many other countries during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many belonged to farm families and helped their fathers or husbands plant, harvest, and raise livestock. Others spun and wove yarn and made clothes in cottage industries. And still others worked as tavern waitresses, shop assistants, and chambermaids and other servants.

It was perhaps only natural, therefore, that when the Industrial Revolution gained momentum in the late 1700s and early 1800s, some women were drawn into its working ranks. The jobs they performed in factories and other industrial workplaces varied widely. At first, most worked in textile mills. By 1826,

90 percent of the twelve hundred workers in the mills in Lowell, Massachusetts, were women. By 1860, sixty-two thousand women worked in textile mills in the New England region.

Women also rolled cigars and made straw hats, umbrellas, artificial flowers, and shoes and boots. By 1837 factories in the state of Massachusetts alone employed 15,000 women shoemakers. Large numbers of women also ran printing presses and other large machines in the printing industry. In 1831 a survey of print shops in Boston found that 395 of the 1,082 employees were women. There were even some female coal miners, especially in Britain.

These examples were part of an overall trend. As the machine age progressed, the number of women industrial workers continued to grow, both in Britain and the United States. By 1850, for example,

24 percent of all American workers in the manufacturing sector were women, numbering more than 225,000 in all. In the half-century that followed, that figure multiplied. When journalist Jacob Riis examined the sweatshops of New York City in the early 1900s, he estimated that a hefty proportion of the half-million people who toiled in these horrible conditions were women.

Female workers in a nineteenth-century textile mill. Factory owners hired women because they could pay them lower wages.

