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***Keep the 'Whoam' Fires Burning: Domestic
Yearning and Working-Class Leisure Culture
in Mid-Victorian England***

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the cult of domesticity had gained a broad currency in Victorian England, and working-class people were among those to whom certain of its elements appealed—a comfortable home, a healthy and happy family sharing simple and wholesome pleasures around the hearth. From at least the 1840s Chartist leaders, short hours' advocates, and trade unionists invoked visions of this kind

of domestic bliss as an inducement to persuade working people to support their various causes.

Historians' interpretations of domesticity's place in working-class culture have become more complex in recent decades and an earlier general consensus that the domestic ideology was clumsily foisted on to a passive working class has given way to a number of schools of thought. The latter include the ideas: that there were distinctly working-class versions of domesticity; that the domestic ideal was simply unattainable for most working people; that working-class men adopted certain aspects of bourgeois domesticity to rationalize their political and economic advancement; and that significant numbers of working women refused to be bound by the more prescriptive elements of domesticity.

This paper, which continues my exploration of women, gender and working-class leisure in Victorian and Edwardian England, is framed within the context of this more recent scholarship and examines the domestic ideal evoked in selected working-class literature from the industrial north west in the 1860s and 1870s. It argues that as much as these writings constructed an ideology that ultimately controlled and limited women to the home, they also expressed a yearning for a 'better' way of life that could appeal to both women and men. The paper specifically challenges the idea that this literature refused to acknowledge women as workers, gave voice to distinctly male views and desires, and evoked a kind of 'whoam' life to which working-class women either did not—or, more problematically, should not—aspire. Susan Zlotnick, for example, has argued that these sentiments are expressed in dialect poems such as Edwin Waugh's famous *Come Whoam to thi Childer an' Me* (1857); I offer a more complex reading of this and other, similar works here. The primary sources for this study are the poems and autobiographies of Waugh, Fanny Forester, Ellen Johnston, Samuel Laycock, and other regional working-class authors of the period.