

Terri Rolfson

MA

Department of History & Classics,
Faculty of Arts

Image created from The Anne
Lambert Clothing and Textiles
Collection in the Department of
Human Ecology, University of
Alberta

*Images of Research Competition
University of Alberta*

In the Hands of a Washerwoman: a Mull Kerchief with Embroidered Borders, c.1780

Semi-finalist (2021)

I am researching female laundry labour and the cultural import of clean, white linen in 18th century England. There are very few examples of surviving linens anywhere. I am most fortunate to have access to some rare 18th and 19th century linens recently donated to the University of Alberta, including this kerchief in my photo. A linen garment over two hundred years old is a tangible, historical record which offers insight into the unrecorded and undetectable lives of laundrymaids, laundresses and washerwomen. Women often chose laundry labour as a last resort for economic survival. It was gruelling, labour intensive, repetitive, and the pay was meager. And it was always women! While there are almost no surviving personal accounts or records of female laundry labourers, material objects like these linens can prompt historical curiosity and lead to new understandings of the past. Since the Covid-19 pandemic started, I haven't been able to get back to the textiles collection to view these linen garments, unfortunately. I am grateful I have some photos, including this one, that I took over a year ago.