

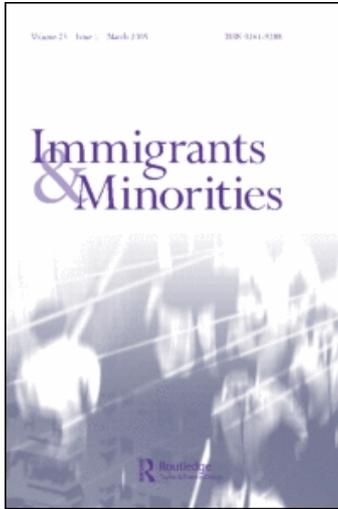
This article was downloaded by: [Walter, Bronwen]

On: 17 November 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 915678871]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Immigrants & Minorities

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713720544>

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To cite this Article Walter, Bronwen 'Strangers on the Inside: Irish Women Servants in England, 1881', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 27: 2, 279 – 299

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/02619280903128160

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02619280903128160>

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Strangers on the Inside: Irish Women Servants in England, 1881

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Domestic servants are widely recognised as prime ‘others’ to white, middle-class male English householders in the later nineteenth century. However the symbolic role of the racialised identities of Irish women who were domestic servants in constructing the boundaries of white middle-class English masculinity is often overlooked. This study uses both qualitative and quantitative sources to explore the presence and significance of Irish servants in English households. It examines ways in which both contemporary and present-day fiction can begin to embody women whose lives are missing from historical records. New data from a 5% sample of the 1881 census provides more concrete statistical evidence about the size and demographic characteristics of the Irish servant population, and their social relationships within middle-class English households. Details from the London sample show that although numbers were still quite small, Irish servants had distinctive profiles. Census statistics confirm close daily contact between English middle-class children and women whose religious faith and national affiliation were strikingly at odds with their employers’ cultural and political values. Yet despite being placed at the heart of English society, the identities of Irish domestic servants have remained largely unrecognised, in contrast to the high visibility of ‘Bridgets’ in the United States.

Introduction

By far the largest proportion of Irish-born women in paid employment in later nineteenth-century England were domestic servants.¹ However, in contrast to the USA, they did not have a high public profile. Whereas ‘Bridget’ became synonymous with ‘female servant’ across the Atlantic,² and was simultaneously understood to signify generic Irish women, Irish servants in England had no such label and remained much less visible. Yet

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their presence was far from unimportant. This essay explores ways in which Irish domestic servants were placed at the heart of English society and contributed to social constructions of Englishness, and argues that these have remained unremarked and largely taken for granted.

The lack of open references to the ethnic identities of Irish servants does not mean they were absent from representations. Indirect signals, such as Irish accents or Irish names, appear in English fiction and film during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, pointing to unspoken English assumptions about the linkage of Irishness with domestic service. For example Valerie Martin, in her fictional retelling of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, chooses the name 'Mary Reilly' for her eponymous heroine.³ This is the unnamed and wordless maid who appears in a key scene in Stevenson's novel when Hyde's body is discovered, in the sentence: 'Blank silence followed, no one protesting; only the maid lifted up her voice and now wept loudly'.⁴ According to Marta Bryk, Martin chose to place Mary Reilly centre stage because '*due to her class and gender*, the heroine exemplifies the underprivileged of nineteenth-century society whose voices were marginalized or excluded from the body of Victorian fiction' (emphasis added). It is revealing that Martin also gives Mary an exemplary *ethnicity* through her invented name, but that this is not noted either by the author or subsequent critics.⁵

As outlined in my book *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place and Irish Women* (2001), the overlooking of servants' ethnicity also characterises historical analyses of the cult of domesticity in the later nineteenth century.⁶ Arguments about the hidden centrality of domestic servants to the construction of white, male, middle-class identities and households have been made by historians and cultural theorists. However whilst they link gender and class to the othering of servants, they do not examine the role of ethnicity. I suggest that a fascinating extension to the notion of the cult of domesticity is the possibility that the national/ethnic origins of Irish servants have contributed to the construction of the invisibility of the servant class as a whole through the double association of their externally and internally racial identities.

In order to explore the material basis of this connection, a more detailed examination of the nature and extent of Irish women's participation in the residential domestic labour force is necessary. This work has not been possible on a broad scale until recently because the published census tables do not link occupation with birthplace.⁷ Again the effect of this statistical representation has been to emphasise the ethnic homogeneity of the population rather than to allow the importance of ethnically differentiated migrant labour to be taken into account. All that can be

gleaned from existing sources is that over the course of the nineteenth century Irish women became a more important and sought after source of domestic labour.

However, it is now becoming possible to throw light on the place of Irish servants at this important late nineteenth-century period. A 5% sample of the 1881 Census has been made available in a form which allows cross-tabulations by occupation and birthplace.⁸ We can therefore begin to quantify Irish women's contribution to the domestic labour force and assess their relative importance in different types of household and in varying geographic locations. This essay attempts to link earlier theorising about the wider significance of Irish servants' ethnic identities with findings from a small project which analyses findings from this sample.

The census year 1881 is of particular significance for a number of reasons. It marked the beginning of a decline in total servant numbers at a national level after a massive expansion since mid-century. Charles Booth redefined census groupings to give greater comparability between decades.⁹ He showed that domestic service increased from 13.3% of the total labour force of England and Wales in 1851 to 14.6% in 1861 and peaked at 15.8% in 1871. The slight fall to 15.7% in 1881 signalled a fall in supply, as the result of the movement of working-class women into better paid jobs, rather than a decline in demand. In fact, as symbols of respectability, domestic servants were increasingly required to support the status of middle and even lower-middle class households.¹⁰ The fall in supply of indigenous women marked the growth in demand for outsiders, for whom the major source was Ireland.

At the end of the nineteenth century Irish women were both available and in demand to fill growing gaps in the paid domestic labour market. In Ireland, girls benefited from the higher levels of education in the second half of the nineteenth century so that most were literate before emigration.¹¹ Moreover, girls from higher status backgrounds began to take up this form of work. Those who would have been forbidden by their fathers to undertake domestic work in rural Ireland were under no such ban in London.¹² Unlike English working-class women who were increasingly reluctant to forgo their freedom by taking live-in posts, Irish migrants continued to need accommodation, and were encouraged to seek it in English households by Catholic priests concerned for their moral protection. Moreover Irish women's urgent need for work made them more willing to accept the subservience necessary to please English employers.¹³

Irish-born Servants and the Cult of Domesticity

Historians and cultural theorists have developed detailed accounts of the significance of domestic service to the construction of male middle-class identities in nineteenth-century England. They argue that the cult of domesticity was central to asserting the authority of white, middle-class English males, which was being challenged in the second half of the nineteenth century by growing external European threats to the British nation.¹⁴ The othering of both women and the working classes drew boundaries which ensured that the key attributes of wealth-generation and independence were assigned to 'masters of the house'.¹⁵

The home had therefore to be represented as the antithesis of the marketplace. Women's paid work in the household had to be hidden from sight,¹⁶ and as a result 'the domestic labour of women suffered one of the most successful vanishing acts of modern history'.¹⁷ Middle-class women performed the 'laborious mimicry of idleness' which did not mean the absence of work but the conspicuous consumption of leisure in order to highlight men's ability to create wealth through work.¹⁸ However, the main physical burden involved in maintaining this outward appearance was thrust onto paid domestic servants, who performed both necessary household maintenance and the arduous task of underpinning the symbolic aspects of middle-class women's leisure.

Yet the importance of Irish women's contribution to the servant workforce has been ignored in academic writing.¹⁹ Although it has been widely acknowledged that domestic service was the principal source of paid work for Irish women, no connections appear to have been drawn between more general representations of the Irish and the symbolic roles of servants as representing the other to white middle-class men. For example, in Leonore Davidoff's work *Mastered for Life*, first published in 1974,²⁰ the contribution of Irish women is commented on ambiguously in a footnote:

Note that during this period Britain had neither an indigenous nor imported ethnically or religiously disadvantaged population (*with the possible exception of the Irish*). Such groups often make up the majority of domestic servants and thus blur the effects of the master-servant relationship.²¹ (emphasis added)

Again, in a later overview, Davidoff elaborates on the 'particular obsession' in England in the mid nineteenth century with denoting distinctions between sections of the population, especially when confronting a growing waged and urban working class.²² However, she argues that this was 'paradoxically partly due to lack of external differentiation', although earlier she describes 'the remarkable homogeneity

of the English nation *with the constant exception of Irish Catholics*' (emphasis added).²³ In this theorisation, class differentiation alone is seen as a sufficient explanation, leaving the Irish as an anomaly, included politically within the United Kingdom between 1801 and 1922, but still excluded socially by their Catholic religion.

In her interdisciplinary work *Imperial Leather* (1995), Anne McClintock focuses on the development of the cult of domesticity in the later decades of the nineteenth century. This was a period of crisis both at home and abroad.²⁴ In the colonies there was imperial rivalry from Germany and the USA, whilst at home there was growing unrest in Ireland over demands for Home Rule and fears about dark, uncontrollable inner cities where the population was seen as 'a race apart'.²⁵ McClintock vividly describes the parallel racialisation of servants: 'like prostitutes and female miners, servants stood on the dangerous threshold of normal work, normal money and normal sexuality and came to be figured increasingly in the iconography of "pollution", "disorder", "plagues" "moral contagion" and "racial degeneration"'.²⁶

But she does not pursue the national and ethnic origins of the servant classes in England on whom this structure was built. What is missing is a recognition that the racialisation of the servant underclass may have incorporated an understanding of their Irishness, in a similar way to arguments about the discourse of 'slums'. It has been argued that this was dependent on pre-existing racialised representations of the Irish,²⁷ reinforced by *Punch* cartoons of the 1860s to 1880s which demonstrate the greatest use of simianised images of the Irish.²⁸

Failure to recognise the ethnic origins of the servant workforce is another facet of the much wider erasure of the work of domestic servants in nineteenth-century Britain. Yet the lack of information about domestic servants' social and economic place in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain, and their personal experiences, is sharply at odds with their numbers. Census totals show that domestic service was the second largest category of employment after agricultural work. Numbers rose from 750,000 in 1851 to 1.3 million in 1891 and remained above 1 million until the late 1930s.²⁹

This lack of academic interest may in part reflect the absence of documentary evidence in the form of social surveys and official reports. As Ebury and Preston point out, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, 'official enquiries were notorious in their disregard of domestic service. In fact, unlike most other areas of female work, no serious review of domestic service ever took place'.³⁰ They link this omission both to the individually isolated lives of servants, limiting group consciousness which

might lead to demands for improvements, and to the personal interest of those in official circles, who defined the terms of reference for enquiries, in keeping the costs of employing their own servants as low as possible. They note that the only official document on domestic service was 'Miss Collett's exceedingly uninformative report, based on wage information gathered between 1894 and 1898', which precluded any regional comparisons and whose terms of reference did not allow any other aspects of the service to be examined.³¹ Contemporary representations are therefore very meagre, contrasting with the outpouring of commentary in the United States of America.³² In Britain, by contrast, Davidoff points out 'considering the numbers involved, both autobiography and fiction were strangely silent'.³³

The silence was not total, however, and the small number of Irish servants' 'walk-on' parts in Victorian and later fiction so far identified underline their accepted place as distinctive cultural types in middle-class English households.³⁴ For example, in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, which first appeared in 1862 and rapidly became 'one of the most popular mystery stories in the English-speaking world',³⁵ 'Mrs Maloney' has the minor role of laundress in the main character's London house, making only eight brief appearances. The author makes clear that Irishness is central to Mrs Maloney's identity. Her appearances in the text are frequently accompanied by the additional description, 'the Irishwoman', and her unusual speech patterns are reproduced, often to produce a comical effect. For example, Braddon writes about her central character: 'he mentally reiterated his determination to engage "Parthrick", as Mrs Maloney's eldest son was called by his mother'.³⁶ Mrs Maloney's conversational style is presented as convoluted and indirect, causing irritation to her lucid and rational English employer:

Robert lifted his eyebrows in mute despair.

'If you'll sit down and compose yourself, Mrs.M.,' he said – he abbreviated her name thus on principle, for the avoidance of unnecessary labour – perhaps we shall be able by and by to understand each other. You say a blacksmith has been here?'
'Sure and I did, sir.'³⁷

Many common Irish stereotypes are brought into play by the author, including association with dirt ('the warm French roll wrapped in a napkin by Mrs. Maloney's careful but rather dirty hands'³⁸), stupidity ('it's that stupid Mrs Maloney, I dare say'³⁹) and poor cooking skills ('Mrs. Maloney's chops are apt to be tough'.⁴⁰) But there is also respect for her honesty and hard work: 'He found his chambers in their accustomed order. The geraniums had been carefully tended, and

the canaries had retired for the night under cover of a square of green baize, testifying to the care of honest Mrs. Maloney'.⁴¹

The importance of this small cameo to the portrait of an English gentleman's household is underlined by a return to this image in the penultimate paragraph of the book, when loose ends are tidied up. The author tells us, again slightly tongue-in-cheek: 'and Mrs Maloney has a little pension, paid her quarterly, for her care of the canaries and geraniums'.⁴² In some respects, the dual representation of Mrs Maloney as both inferior (dirty, stupid and unskilled) and 'lovable' (honest, hard-working, amiable, eager to please) echoes similar observations about Irish domestic servants in the USA at this time, which Diner contrasts with the unambiguously negative stereotypes of Irish men.⁴³

These fleeting glimpses are congruent with the physical and symbolic invisibility of servants within British households. They were literally hidden from the view of the outside world within the homes of their employers. In fact Davidoff argues that unlike servants in continental Europe, the social geography of English towns and cities meant that those in England were unusually segregated: 'The intense privacy of the English middle-class household in individual dwellings often surrounded by gardens in isolated settings or suburbs separated from working-class districts, made English domestic service exceptionally confining'.⁴⁴

The absence of servants from public discourse was not therefore an indication of their lack of importance, but rather a measure of the inadmissibility of their power.⁴⁵ Not only did they represent the necessity for, and middle-class men's dependence on, women's paid work, but their relationship with middle- and upper-class children placed them in an extraordinarily important position. Mothers' exclusion from close contact by the necessity to appear untouched by manual labour⁴⁶ meant that servants played a key role in the raising of children and thus in the early experiences of middle-class men. Like servants, children also represented disorder and dirt, which meant that they too had to be segregated into particular parts of the house and fed at separate times. Boys spent more time with nurses and domestic servants than with their own mothers, before being sent off to boarding school, ironically being closely influenced by the very class from whom their fathers separated themselves.

The following analysis explores possibilities for giving a material basis to powerful arguments about the importance of the cult of domesticity in later nineteenth-century England. It focuses on domestic servants in London, where the newly prosperous and confident middle classes were most heavily concentrated in 1881. Numbers of domestic servants in London rose continuously from 284,000 in 1861 to 399,200 in 1891,

against the national trend.⁴⁷ The 5% sample included 10 of the 28 London registration districts, in which Irish-born women comprised 3.4% of the domestic servant population.

1881 Census – 5% Sample Data for London

Size and Spatial Distribution of the Irish-born Servant Population

Despite observations that Irish women were increasingly acceptable as domestic servants over the second half of the nineteenth century,⁴⁸ the 1881 5% sample suggests that they were still a relatively small proportion of the domestic service labour force in 1881. The sample shows that Irish-born women contributed 2.7% of the total in Order 4 (domestic services and offices) in England in 1881. There was considerable spatial variation within this total, by far the largest concentration being in the North West region (where Irish-born women made up 8.8% of the total), followed by the South East (2.7%). Relatively fewer were located in Yorkshire and Humberside (1.6%) and the North (1.4%) and very small percentages (under 1%) elsewhere. The higher totals recorded in the North West region reflect the large total Irish settlement there, but for this project more detailed analysis was made of census data for London and the 'Home Counties' in South East England, the region in which the middle-class cult of domesticity was most fully developed.

A higher than average proportion of Irish-born servants was recorded in London in 1881, comprising 3.4% of the total (606 out of 17,796 in the London Division sample). This outnumbered the combined Scottish and Welsh totals (2.8%, including 254 Scottish-born and 240 Welsh-born) and the foreign-born (1.2%, 343 in total). However the great majority of domestic servants in London in 1881 were English-born women (81.6%, 14,524 in total). Nevertheless, despite these small proportions, by 1881 Irish women had already become more widespread amongst English households than in the 1850s when Lynn Lees described a situation where very large numbers arrived in Britain from conditions of extreme poverty in Ireland and were seen as a particularly undesirable birthplace group for such work:

Irish servants abounded in London. Allegedly saucy and incompetent, they seem to have taken up the less desirable posts in the metropolis. And many more Irish women wanted such jobs than could find them... One said in 1853 that positions were almost impossible to find. Girls usually had to accept work either in a pub or with an East End Jewish family, where they were paid only one or two shillings a week plus board.⁴⁹

According to the *Nation*, a Dublin weekly newspaper which published 16 lengthy articles on the condition of the Irish in England, the situation had not changed greatly by 1872:

The lower middle-class, the small shopkeepers – often devoid of religion and morals – or the still lower and more demoralised Jews of Spitalfields and Whitechapel, are the chief employers of the unsophisticated Irish girl when she first arrives in London. She is strong and willing, goes for low wages, and not over fastidious in matters of food and accommodation, and hence she becomes the prey of the mercenary and immoral classes I have pointed out [*sic*].⁵⁰

An interesting possibility is that the connections between Irish servants and Jewish households reinforced their otherness by linking two racialised groups. Another minor character in a contemporary novel offers a richer and more nuanced picture of this relationship. Israel Zangwill included an older Irish servant in upper-middle-class North London household, in *Children of the Ghetto*, originally published in 1892:

Mary O'Reilly, as good a soul as she was a Catholic, had lived all her life with Jews, assisting while yet a girl in the kitchen of Henry Goldsmith's father, who was a pattern of ancient piety and a prop of the Great Synagogue. When the father died, Mary, with all the other household belongings, passed into the hands of the son, who also came up to London from a provincial town, and, with a grateful recognition of her motherliness, domiciled her in his own establishment. Mary knew all the ritual laws and ceremonies far better than her new mistress...⁵¹

Mary's Irishness is not explicitly mentioned, but conveyed by numerous signals – her name, religion, servant status and speech patterns, such as 'Och, be the holy mother, Miss Esther, phwat a turn ye gave me!'⁵²

Plotting the spatial distribution of Irish servants provides further evidence of their degree of visibility. Despite the greater likelihood of being located in multi-servant households, Irish servants were not highly clustered together, but widely dispersed within neighbourhoods. They were rarely located in households with another Irish servant (only in 9/136 households in the 10 London sampling districts). At a locality scale, the highest proportion of live-in servants were in St Marylebone, Strand and Greenwich whilst highest proportions of live-out Irish servants were in the poorer districts of Poplar and St Pancras (which also had the largest numbers, 119 and 107 (9/136 households in the 10 districts). Although dispersal might reduce their visibility, Irish women's appearance was distinctive, at least according to the 'thoroughly Irish' Hugh Heinrick, Special Commissioner to *The Nation* in 1872, who observed:

I am in Bethnal Green, and the time is the summer twilight. A woman – evidently Irish – with the faint lines of beauty still in her face, and all the easy grace of her race in her carriage, emerges from the doorway of a dingy gin-shop.⁵³

He suggests that there was an Irish ‘look’ (facial structure, gait) which might identify Irish servants’ bodies visually.

Demographic Characteristics of Irish-born Servants

An analysis of age structure is crucial to the interpretation of Irish servants’ places in households and English society more broadly. This was markedly different from that of other birthplace groups, reflecting the exceptionally large outflow from Ireland in the famine years 1847–50 and their immediate aftermath. Whereas English servants’ ages in 1881 peaked at 15 to 19 and fell off sharply after 30, and Scottish, Welsh and foreign servants’ ages slightly older at 20 to 24, Irish servants’ peak ages were much higher at 35 to 54, the modal range being 45 to 49 (those born in 1832–37).

This top-heavy age structure resulted in fewer Irish female servants residing with their employers (29.0% of the total of Irish-born domestic servants, compared with 50.1% English-born, 63.8% Scottish-born and 66.3% Welsh-born). Those who did were older than average, 40.3% over 34, compared with only 15.9% of English-born servants. Live-in servants were overrepresented amongst cooks (12.9%, average 10.3%) and housekeepers (4.1%, average 3.8%). Those who lived out included 33.2% charwomen, 35.6% laundresses and 16.0% general servants. Although living out could indicate a lower level of acceptability of Irish women as members of English households, it may simply reflect their greater average age. At younger ages (15 to 24) Irish-born women were slightly more likely to reside with their employers than English-born women (a ratio of 2.1 : 1 compared with 1.7 : 1 for 15 to 19 year olds; 2.3 : 1 and 2.2 : 1 respectively for 20 to 24 year olds). A greater preference for live-in jobs would indeed be expected amongst migrants who would need accommodation, unlike women whose families were established locally.

The 1881 sample provides a context within which further questions may be posed about the meanings and content of contacts between employers and servants. For example, their greater average age may mean that Irish servants established close ties with particular families, as Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s ‘Mrs Maloney’ illustrates. Although most servants in England moved frequently, with relatively few staying two years or more,⁵⁴ there may be ethnic differences in length of service and thus attachment to – and influence on – particular families. More work on mobility between

households is needed to explore this, although the 10-year census gap will not allow a fine-grained analysis.

Levels in the Social Hierarchy of Employers' Households

The cult of domesticity was built upon accepted notions of class difference, which in turn it helped to solidify and reinforce. Although the symbolic use of servants spread downwards from aristocratic households towards the lower middle classes by the turn of the twentieth century, it would have been most fully developed in the upper-middle and middle classes in 1881. Census indicators were used to measure the social stratification of households employing Irish-born servants to assess their inclusion in the social hierarchy of employers – whether on similar terms to other women of their social class or in distinctive ways.

Two quantitative indicators are provided by the census data. Firstly, the status of employers of live-in servants can be measured. Despite the small numbers included in many categories, the distribution of Irish-born servants appears similar to that of other birthplace groups. For example, at the upper end of the scale, 9.7% were employed by those of 'property or rank', almost exactly the average proportion for London (9.6%). The considerably higher than average number living in professional households (22.1%, average 13.3%) may in part be explained by their employment by Irish-born professionals, especially doctors and dentists, but it also suggests that people of this rank saw Irish women as suitable 'servant material'.

A second index was the number of servants per household, assuming that wealthier households had larger retinues of live-in servants. An interesting finding was that Irish-born servants were *less* likely to be the sole servant in London households (45.0%, compared with 59.8% of all sample households). They were *more* likely to be found where there were two (30.0%, compared with 21.0%) or more servants. This might suggest that English employers were less willing to choose an Irish servant in the most intimate situation of a small family house or household, and/or that those of higher status were more willing to engage at close quarters with the Irish than those closer to themselves in rank.

Social Relationships between Middle-class English Households and Irish Servants

The quantitative data which would most clearly illuminate the thesis linking the significance of the ethnic difference of Irish women to the racialised othering of all domestic servants relates to social relationships

within households. What makes the servant relationship so distinctive is the ambiguity of the coexistence of extreme social distance and very close physical propinquity. Although servants represented the binary opposites of their employers – by social class, paid labour, clothing, naming, separate eating and sleeping locations – they also frequently interacted with them in ways which echoed or mimicked family relationships. This slippage was nowhere more apparent than in servants' relationships with children, whose own otherness from middle-class adulthood placed them similarly outside the domain of hegemonic masculinity which the cult of domesticity helped to create.

It could be argued that not only did servants perform the symbolic function of highlighting the boundaries of English, middle-class masculinity, but that they also interacted in a close personal way with the children of the householders as Zangwill's reference to Mary O'Reilly's 'motherliness' suggests. Far from providing boundaries for the middle classes, servants played an important role in the informal cultural education of the next generation. This is explored provocatively by Anthony Hale, who draws parallels between the black mammy in the US South and the Catholic servant in Protestant Ascendancy 'Big Houses' in Ireland, such as Coole Park, the home of Lady Gregory.⁵⁵ He suggests that 'the cross-cultural connection draws out the latent elements; the racial distinction in the nanny and the class distinctions in the mammy'⁵⁶ and that stories told to Lady Gregory as a child by her nanny informed her writing. He goes further: 'I would argue that Lady Gregory is in large part a 'nanny-made woman'.⁵⁷ Thus a knowledge of Irish culture absorbed from closeness to Irish servants by middle-class English children might remain with them into adulthood, long after its source had been forgotten. In English Protestant households there would be the added, and politically threatening, difference of a Catholic religious content, which would clash strongly with Protestant Englishness.

Anxieties about servants' impact on children had been common from the eighteenth century. As Carolyn Steedman argues 'parents of the polite classes worried constantly about their involvement in childcare and what they might really be teaching the children.'⁵⁸ Drawing on a range of Victorian texts, including the works of Sigmund Freud and Arthur Munby, Anne McClintock fleshes out the possibilities of influences arising from the presence and activities of servants. Her writing seems to resonate with a distinctively 'Irish' tinge through its references to oral culture and the supernatural.

Can we not, however, more properly see this doubled image of women that haunts the glassy surfaces of male Victorian texts as arising less from any archetypal doubling in the male unconscious, than from the contradictory (and no less patriarchal) doubling of class that was a daily reality in the households and infancies of these upper-middle-class men? The goblins and faeries that populate male texts might more properly be seen to stream up not from a universal male unconscious but rather from the historical memory of the female working-class kitchens and back passages, from the laps of the *working-class nurses and maids who brought the echoing whispers of faery into the middle-class nursery*. The images of monsters and mermaids are remnants of an oral tradition borne by working-class women. These images are indeed images of female power, but they are specifically memories of female working-class power and are rooted in class divisions and historical mutability.⁵⁹ (emphasis added)

Empirical data to support this hypothesis is inevitably elusive or entirely missing. The activities themselves are small moments of everyday intimacy and the participants in such shared activities – servants and children – are amongst the least likely to leave records. The time period, now more than three generations ago, is beyond the reach of oral histories. Nevertheless an attempt can be made to explore the household setting within which Irish women were placed in 1881.

The 1881 data shows that Irish servants were located in middle-class English households in London at all levels of the domestic service hierarchy, and indeed were overrepresented in some ‘upper domestic ranks’, such as cooks (12.9% of Irish-born servants, compared with 10.2% of English-born). The distribution by type or hierarchy of domestic work and Irish birthplace is overall close to average for the London sample population, with a similar proportion of Irish-born children’s nurses and slightly more governesses. Since the majority of Irish servants were located in households with one or two servants (70%), this numerical evidence suggests that they may have had quite intense interaction with their employers’ children. One way in which the census findings may be used to paint a broader picture of the presence of Irish live-in servants in London is by examining individual households in selected London Registration Districts. Two areas, Wandsworth and Greenwich, fit the social class characteristics of middle to upper class suburbs, homes to higher-income professional and merchant families where the cult of domesticity would be well established in 1881.

The 5% sample of households in Wandsworth included 18 employing an Irish-born live-in servant. These servants had an average age of 34.2 years, mirroring the pattern for Irish-born servants in London as a whole.

Only half were under 30, in contrast to the great majority of English-born servants in London, and a cluster of four were in their forties, again echoing the wider London pattern described above. In all but one household where there were multiple servants, the Irish woman was older, often considerably so, than the other employees. The majority (11 out of 18) were described as domestic or general servants, with three housemaids (in establishments with differentiated duties), two cooks and two housekeepers. In nearly half (8) of the households the Irish woman was the only live-in servant. Where they were part of a larger team of domestic servants, no others were born in Ireland, the remaining servants originating in rural southern England (7), London and the Home Counties (6) and Wales (1).

The principal occupations of sample householders in Wandsworth included physician (3), merchant (3), officer in the armed forces (2), upper tradesman (4), civil servant, church minister and gentleman. The majority of heads of household (7) had been born in London, though only two in Wandsworth itself. Of the remainder, five heads had been born in other parts of England, with four male heads and two wives born in Ireland. This may suggest some tendency for Irish heads and/or their wives to employ Irish servants, but the great majority of Irish-born servants had English-born employers.

Nearly half (8 out of 18) of the Wandsworth sample households contained young children, confirming that Irish servants were living at close quarters with English families. In three cases they were the only servant in households with children, in a further three cases one of two and in two cases one of four. For example, 31 year-old Amie Drecker, a single woman born in Ireland, was housemaid to George B. Longstaff, aged 32. He was living on income from dividends, being an MA (Master of Arts), MB (Bachelor of Medicine) (Oxon) and Member of the Royal College of Physicians, though not currently practising. George had been born in Wandsworth, like his children, Mabel (3), Ralph (2) and Daisy (5 months). His wife Sarah L. Longstaff, aged 29, who had no recorded occupation, was born in Leamington, Warwickshire. The other live-in servants included Emma Murell (49), a widow, employed as a monthly nurse and born in Hingham Norfolk, Annie Ward (20), a single woman employed as a nurse, born in Bethnal Green, and Charlotte Amans (17), also a single woman employed as a nurse, who had been born in Sherborne, Dorset. Amie was therefore part of an English household to which she might remain attached throughout the childhoods of the householder's children and play a significant role in their daily care.

There are many similarities in the Greenwich sample of 17 households containing an Irish domestic servant, though also some differences. The average age was again higher than for English servants in London, but slightly lower, at 29.5 years, than in the Wandsworth sample. In Greenwich, 10 of the 17 Irish-born servants were aged under 30 and a clustering (4) of older women in their thirties. However in this case, in only 2 of the 7 households with multiple servants was an Irish woman the oldest employee. Again the majority of Irish-born servants were recorded as general servants, with 3 cooks, a housemaid and a kitchenmaid. In 10 out of 17 households the Irish servant was alone, sharing the household labour with 1 other person in 5 households and occasionally with a larger staff (2 in 1 household and 3 in 2 households). The majority of other live-in servants were from rural southern England (8), with 4 born in London and the Home Counties.

In Greenwich the occupations of employers tended more to the commercial rather than the professional end of the middle-class spectrum. In addition to three annuitants, a general practitioner, a solicitor and a clerk in the War Office, they included a limeburner employing 30 men, a wharfinger, a woollen agent, a goldsmith/jeweller, an India rubber stamp maker, a bank manager, a civil engineer, a commercial clerk and a greengrocer. The heads were also of more local origin than those in Wandsworth – 10 were born in London, 5 in other parts of England, 1 in Germany and 1 in Ireland.

Unlike Wandsworth where Irish-born servants living in households with young children were more usually part of a larger team of servants (5 out of 8 were in multi-servant households), in Greenwich 8 out of 10 were the only employees. The majority of households in Greenwich contained a number of children (10 out of 17) so that again Irish servants were in close contact with English children. Examples included older women such as Caroline Coby aged 52 who was a general servant in the home of an annuitant, William Norfolk, who together with his wife Madilla, was born in Greenwich. They had six children, Arthur (21), Francis (18), both born in neighbouring Deptford, and Percival (12), Madilla (11), Stanley (9) and Emily (7) all born in Greenwich. Young Irish women were also placed in large English families. Martha Doyle (18) was servant to Will Seed (45), clerk to the war office. He and his wife Elizabeth were both born in Manchester, but their children Charles (17), William (16), Frances (13), Agnes (11), Elizabeth (10), Frederick (5) and Emma (3) were all born in London. The Seed household had another live-in domestic servant, Elizabeth Webb (27), born in Portsmouth.

The 1881 Census confirms that Irish-born servants lived at the heart of the English middle classes in London. However qualitative rather than quantitative data may be more telling evidence of the consequences of physical propinquity within households. In this context, one recent novel echoes key elements of McClintock's thesis concerning servants' influence on children in middle-class English households, and adds the crucial detail of a domestic servant's Irish origins. Helen Dunmore's *A Spell of Winter*,⁶⁰ published in 1995, describes the role of Dublin-born Kate, who becomes a mother-substitute to two children, Rob and Cathy, in a large country house somewhere in England. The book is set around the turn of the twentieth century and concerns a family headed by the grandfather, whose daughter has disappeared, abandoning her husband and children. The children's father suffers a mental breakdown and dies soon after entering an institution, leaving the children to be cared for by their grandfather and his servants.

A Spell of Winter opens with the housekeeper, Kate, telling the children a frightening but fascinating story about her own grandmother in Dublin, who was extremely religious and superstitious. She was overcome by grief when a son died in his twenties and refused to bury him. When eventually the body was brought down the narrow stairs an arm fell off in the process because of its decayed state. This is one of many stories about her family Kate tells the children which contrasts strongly with their own lives in terms of religion, culture and class. This striking episode illustrates vividly the unacknowledged importance of servants in the lives of young upper-middle-class children in England.

Although *A Spell of Winter* is a fictional source, novels are produced by authors whose own experience and understanding inform their writing and, since Helen Dunmore is a living author, one option is to explore the context in which her novel was written. She responded to questions concerning her research for this theme in revealing ways:

It's always hard to say where material for a novel comes from – it is such a mixture of reading, research and personal experience. I used some family material – Kate's story of the arm falling off the dead man was first told to me by my grandfather, and was a childhood experience of his, he said, (but it was a leg, not an arm). Again, the name Quinn is the maiden name of my maternal grandmother. When I think it over, there are many family stories in *A Spell of Winter*, but they are changed and rearranged.⁶¹

Dunmore's response confirms that the presence of Irish servants in English households was taken for granted, and reveals the hitherto unexamined depth of their impact on their employers' families.

Conclusion

The 'hard data' of the 1881 Census sample shows that Irish-born servants were present within English households and formed an integral part of the domestic arrangements of middle-class families in London. Statistics reveal the close intermingling within households of Irish-born women and English women of different social classes – employers and co-workers – bringing Irish servants into daily contact at all levels of the majority society. They allow Irish servants to be located comparatively with servants of other backgrounds, confirming distinctive characteristics such as age and living-in status. Numbers were still relatively small in 1881, however, and the continuing numerical domination of the occupational grouping by English-born women suggests that the outward movement from domestic service into 'white blouse' work had not yet developed a momentum. Further work needs to be done to assess its impact on servants' origins in subsequent decades. There is ample evidence that by the 1920s and 1930s Irish women were an indispensable part of the servant population of England.⁶²

Although this contextual framework provides material evidence of the presence of Irish women at the heart of the English 'establishment', interpretations of the social meanings of their location are greatly enriched by exploratory analyses of qualitative sources. This study has examined ways in which contemporary, and even present-day, fiction can begin to embody women whose lives were not recorded in conventional historical records. These sources both express authors' 'commonsense' beliefs about the stereotypes they convey and rely on shared understandings with their readers, thus reflecting and contributing to boundary constructions within households. Although the number of sources may be small, those examined so far confirm that Irish women's identities were both recognised as culturally distinct and had an impact on different generations of the households. They demonstrate clearly that racialised images of Irish servants were available to strengthen the classed and gendered constructions of others in the powerful cult of domesticity in late nineteenth-century England.

Acknowledgements

The 1881 Census was analysed with support from British Academy Small Grant SG-37492 *Irish domestic servants in England, 1881*. I am grateful to Dr Christine E. Jones at Essex University, research assistant on the project.

Notes

[1] Rossiter, 'In Search of Mary's Past', 16.

[2] Lynch-Brennan, 'Was Bridget's Experience Unique?', 489.

- [3] Reilly is a common Irish surname, whilst Mary was by far the most frequently occurring name of Irish-born domestic servants in London in 1881 (24.2% of the 5% sample). The names may also have been borrowed from the character Mary O'Reilly, housekeeper to the Goldsmith family in Zangwill, *Children of the Ghetto*, published in 1892. Mary was also a generic name for servants, see Robbins, 'Hidden Lives and Ladies' Maids', 219, fn.
- [4] Stevenson, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, 41, quoted in Bryk, 'The Maidservant in the Attic', 205.
- [5] Bryk, 'The Maidservant in the Attic'.
- [6] Walter, *Outsiders Inside*.
- [7] Irish women servants have been enumerated in local studies, mainly using mid nineteenth-century census data, for example: Lees, *Exiles of Erin*, 95; Letford and Pooley, 'Geographies of Migration and Religion', 100–4; Large, 'The Irish in Bristol in 1851', 45–6; Finnegan, 'The Irish in York', 67; Chinn, "'Sturdy Catholic Emigrants'", 72; Neal, 'Irish Settlement in the North-East and North-West of England in the Mid-nineteenth Century', 87; Kanya-Forstner, 'The Politics of Survival'.
- [8] Schürer and Woollard, *The 5 Percent Sample of the 1881 Census of Great Britain*.
- [9] Ebury and Preston, *Domestic Service in late Victorian and Edwardian England*, 2–3.
- [10] Mackenzie and Rose, 'Industrial Economy, the Domestic Economy and Home Life', 167; Ebury and Preston, *Domestic Service in late Victorian and Edwardian England*, 57.
- [11] Fitzpatrick, "'A Share of the Honeycomb'".
- [12] Hearn, 'Life for Domestic Servants in Dublin, 1880-1920'.
- [13] Tebbutt, 'The Evolution of Ethnic Stereotypes'.
- [14] McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 48.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 169.
- [16] *Ibid.*, 163–5.
- [17] *Ibid.*, 137.
- [18] *Ibid.*, 160–2.
- [19] Ebury and Preston, *Domestic Service in late Victorian and Edwardian England*, 2–3.
- [20] Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life'.
- [21] *Ibid.*, 35
- [22] Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, 5.
- [23] *Ibid.*, 5.
- [24] Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, 5.
- [25] Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England 1845*, 389–92.
- [26] McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 154.
- [27] Davis, 'Race and the Residuum'.
- [28] Curtis, *Apes and Angels*, 29–45.
- [29] Ebury and Preston, *Domestic Service in late Victorian and Edwardian England*, 20; Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950*, 156.
- [30] Ebury and Preston, *Domestic Service in late Victorian and Edwardian England*, 5
- [31] *Ibid.*, 5; *Great Britain Report (Miss Collett's)*.
- [32] Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 155.
- [33] Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, 3–4.

- [34] I am grateful to members of the Victorian List for suggestions of suitable sources. Other authors citing literary sources include Rossiter, 'In Search of Mary's Past', who mentions an anonymous whistling Irish servant in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (p. 4) and the eponymous *Bridget Kiernan* by Norah Hoult (1928), (p. 28).
- [35] Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, v.
- [36] *Ibid.*, 264.
- [37] *Ibid.*, 98.
- [38] *Ibid.*, 137.
- [39] *Ibid.*, 65.
- [40] *Ibid.*, 101.
- [41] *Ibid.*, 97.
- [42] *Ibid.*, 286.
- [43] Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 72.
- [44] Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life', 408–9.
- [45] McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 164.
- [46] *Ibid.*, 236.
- [47] Waterfield, 'Life in Service', 168.
- [48] Tebbutt, 'The Evolution of Ethnic Stereotypes'.
- [49] Lees, *Exiles of Erin*, 95.
- [50] O'Day, *A Survey of the Irish in England*, 29.
- [51] Zangwill, *Children of the Ghetto*, 239.
- [52] *Ibid.*, 344.
- [53] O'Day, *A Survey of the Irish in England*, 30.
- [54] Ebury and Preston, *Domestic Service in late Victorian and Edwardian England*, 99.
- [55] Hale, 'Nanny/Mammy'.
- [56] *Ibid.*, 170.
- [57] *Ibid.*, 163.
- [58] Steedman, 'Servants and Their Relationship to the Unconscious', 330.
- [59] McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 95–6.
- [60] Dunmore, *A Spell of Winter*.
- [61] Personal communication with Helen Dunmore, April 23, 2004.
- [62] Glynn, 'Irish Immigration to Britain, 1911-1951', 63; M. Lennon, McAdam and J. O'Brien, *Across the Water*, 42.

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