



Hasia R. Diner, "Broom, Loom, and Schoolroom: Work and Wages in the Lives of Irish Women," in *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983, pps. 84-94.

One reason why Irish women flocked to domestic labor stemmed [84] from the almost unabated demand for household workers. That other women-native-born and immigrant—refused it and that daughters of middle- and low class American families experienced greater educational opportunities from the mid-nineteenth century onward, thereby being less available to "help" the routines of home tasks, all helped to create a labor vacuum that Irish women filled. Irish women from the pre-Famine decades well into the twentieth century recognized the workings of the law of supply and demand supplied to American homes their services and labor, which were such demand.

Since Americans hungered so for servants, Irish women generally had an easier time getting work than did their brothers. Employment agencies that served both men and women found Irish females easier to place than males. The *Irish World* in 1870, for example, noted that a Free Labor Bureau in New York provided jobs to 81 Irish men and 628 females. John Francis Maguire in the late 1860s had a chance to examine the register book at the Intelligence Office and Labour Exchange at Castle Garden, noting, "The chances employment are generally more in favor of females than of males and t they are terribly against the latter, if they come out at a wrong season— which is towards the Autumn, and all through the Winter." Irish women could a hold onto their jobs longer than could Irish men, because in periods economic disorder and decline job security for domestic servants did not seem to suffer as severely as did the jobs Irish men normally held in public works, construction, and factories. Not atypically, during a period of sever unemployment in Albany, New York, in 1855, the wives, daughters, and sisters of Irish men endured little job dislocation and continued to work in their places. In 1887, 19.4 percent of all Irish-born men in Massachusetts found themselves unemployed, while only 13.3 percent of Irish-born women also were out of work. Among French-Canadian- and English-born workers however, an equal number of men and women

suffered from lack of work according to the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics and Labor.²³ Even periods of economic decline, which saw the reduction in factory and mill jobs, the need for houseworkers seemed almost untouched. One Irish writer seeking to discourage the outward flow from the Emerald Isle noted that golden economic opportunities did not await the Hibernian newcomers in North America. "Pauperism is already upon us. The market for all the lighter calling is overstocked, and I doubt whether... there is much demand for mechanics though there is still a demand for farm labourers and domestic servants." Year after year, in prosperity and panic the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor reported to charitable-minded New Yorkers that domestic servants rarely appeared among the ranks of the needy, and in 1866 after chronicling the miserable wages of laundresses and needle women the commission's annual report [85] asserted, "Of females in domestic service, chiefly foreign born, it need here only be said that they occupy the places for which they are best fitted, and having abundant employment and very liberal wages they cherish no higher aspirations."²⁴

Statements about "suitability" of ethnic groups for particular work and about the paucity of aspirations aside, nineteenth-century New Yorkers and Bostonians and Philadelphians did in fact hunger for the labors and services that basically only Irish women would provide. Josephine Goldmark, a twentieth-century progressive activist, noted in her autobiography, as she retold the stories of her midwestern childhood, that the shortage of servants was perceived so sharply there that "the advent of an Irish newcomer on the streets of the little town was almost immediately spotted. Any prospective employer made haste at once to accost and engage the stranger, and for the sum of \$4.50 per week her not unwilling but usually quite unskilled services were obtainable."²⁵

Partly because of the ample opportunities to find work few domestic servants showed up in the various studies of prostitution, and one 1867 survey of women's work, *The College, the Market, and the Court; or Woman's Relation to Education, Labor, and Law* noted that among prostitutes, "almost none of these women are drawn from domestic servants." So acutely did American women feel the need for servants that they overcame the intense American prejudice against the Irish and the deep-seated distrust of Catholicism and brought Irish women into their homes.²⁶

Employers kept hiring "green" Irish girls to cook and clean and sew

as well as care for the children and the household despite the pervasive judgments offered— almost universally—against the colleens who, it was said, could not cook, whose standards of cleanliness fell below that considered appropriate for middle-class Americans, and who might in fact be disguised agents of the Pope bent on converting the Protestant children in their charge. Despite these prejudices against Irish servants, despite the constant litany against Irish habits and lack of skills, employers seemed to have lived in constant dread of the moment when Bridget or Norah might decide to quit. Knowing this, Irish servant girls seem to have moved from job to job with ease, recognizing that their services were needed and that they therefore operated out of a position of strength. They could, in fact, set some of the terms of their employment and in essence could "shop around" for an ideal situation. So secure were these servants in the knowledge that they could always find work that one Boston domestic from Ireland responded forthrightly to Frances Kellor's query as to why she did not want to receive training in cooking and other household craft, "Shure, now, why should I be l'arnin' when I kin shove my ear in anywhere and get a good job?"²⁷

Irish women entered American homes despite the almost universally stigmatized image that domestic service carried in American society. Irish women had migrated precisely because domestic work abounded, and they seemed almost impervious to the demeaning, if not scathing, things being said about them on the stage and in the popular press, in employers' letters and diaries, in fictional and in what purported to be factual accounts of nineteenth century American life. Travelers to the United States in the nineteenth century repeatedly remarked on the plethora of Irish servant girls and noted how dependent Americans were on the new arrivals. British visitors, with their own anti-Irish heritage, found the phenomenon somewhat amusing, noting that now Americans who had expressed support for Irish home rule demands were getting a real glimpse of what the Irish were really like.²⁸

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Autobiographies and reminiscences of upper-middle-class life in nineteenth-century America similarly abound with memories of Irish servants, some warm and tender recollections, others humorous mockeries of foibles and failings of the "help."²⁹ Even advertisements for household products emphasized that it was the Irish servant who would use them; the *Ladies' Home Journal* sang the praises of Kirkman's Soap, as it was heartily endorsed by "Mrs. McCarthy."

Dozens upon dozens of statements, evaluations, judgments, and comments were offered during the last half of the nineteenth century about merits—and mostly the demerits—of the Irish servant girl. The greatest tribute of the Irish female domestic worker rendered during her heyday was her availability. Most commentators, when searching for other words of praise emphasized that she was chaste and that her employers rarely had to contend with sexual deviance and with the problems of having to fire her, unmarried and pregnant. Despite these grudging compliments, the bulk of the material describing and detailing the "Doings and Goings of Hired Girls" lamented the Irish servants were: terrible cooks, poor house cleaners (having been born and bred in the mire of the bogs), temperamental if not violent, and clumsy and awkward in handling the family's precious china and crockery. Whereas some employers thought that Irish girls worked slowly, out of a combination of laziness and impudence, others were convinced that the Irish servant sped through her work at an amazing speed, so as to get through her tasks no matter how sloppily.³⁰

Typical of the voluminous testimony offered against the Irish domestic was the following, which appeared in 1889 in *Our Day*:

Introduce into a home thoroughly fitted up with them [improvements] a green daughter of green Erin, whose sole training for domestic service has been in her native cabin, and to whom furnaces, gas, and water pipes are unknown quantities; keep in mind the antagonism which seems to exist between ignorance and labor saving machinery, as indicated frequently by Nora's refusal to use even a wringer, and you have a reason other than incompetency of the mistress for things not running smoothly. . . . Nora has faults which we can hardly put up with in any position, faults plenty and glaring; she is often untruthful, dishonest, slovenly, impudent, and generally provoking.³¹

Elspeth MacDonald shared with the readers of *Success* in 1907 the [88] trials and tribulations she endured with the "Hired Girls I Have Met," and described one Mary McGuire, the only person available who had an "infinitesimal share of common sense ... her mistakes seemed almost diabolical." Edwin Lawrence Godkin, editor of the *Nation*, went so far as to say that the behavior of the Irish Bridgets in American kitchens had been a major factor in turning American public opinion against the Irish cause in Ireland. Whether intended as serious analysis or as satire, the massive outpouring of the American employer class drew an unflattering portrait indeed of Bridget and Norah and their ability to perform their jobs in the homes of middle-class Americans.³²

No matter how much American employers disliked Irish servants and despite complaints about Irish failings, middle-class Americans in fact depended heavily on this single source of help. As a result of the twin forces of dependence and dislike yet another common theme emerges in the contemporary literature on the "servant problem," that of the employers living in fear of their social inferiors. Throughout the material that sought to dissect the nature of servant-employer relations runs the constant leitmotif that since servants were scarce, employers could not ask too much of them. Since servants could find work just about any place, it was the servant who set terms of the job.

In an article titled "Which Is Mistress?" the *Ladies' Home Journal* described the "poor little mistress [who] yields tremblingly, because 'it would be too dreadful if Bridget were to leave.'" This 1886 piece noted that servants held the trump card and used it. Typically, Bridget or Maggie would announce "'In all the iligant first-class families I've lived in (an' ontill I cam to yez lived in none but quality houses) I niver was axed to send up soup on Sunday afore.'" Margaret Poison Murray, an active proponent of the women's club movement, believed that the middle-class American woman was trapped. "In her household from January to December, from start to finish, she lived under the nineteenth-century dictatorship of homesick young women from foreign countries, spinsters and widows who must 'support' themselves." Bridget, it was said, "knows that no 'character' is needed to find a new place; so if her tea is not strong, or her mattress not of good hair, if breakfast is ordered too early, or dinner kept waiting, she packs up her traps, demands her wages, and off she goes." A British traveler in the 1870s went so far as to attribute the growing tendency of Americans to live in hotels and therefore not being required to cook (that is, not requiring an Irish girl to do the cooking) to the "terror of the Irish servant." Particularly hard hit were employers in smaller towns, since they had the most difficulty in replacing discontented Irish servants, as few were willing to live outside the teeming cities. One such American woman in the 1860s, Harriet Jane Hanson Robinson of Malden, Massachusetts, became so obsessed with her annoyance and fear of her servants that she devoted extensive passages in her diaries to various servants. After firing one she determined to "wash . . . my hands of the Tribe called Paddy and mentally painted on my door posts . . . 'No Irish Need Apply!'" Unable, in fact, to liberate herself from Irish help, Robinson found a new Irish servant named Julia. On March 29, 1864, the employer confided to her diary that Julia "told me that my work was too hard unless I would pay her two dollars a week,"

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and two days later, she poured out her heart with trepidation, "I am preparing for another *domestic revolution*." Annie Adams Fields, a wealthy Bostonian and a dabbler in charity, recalled how in 1875 she had helped place an elderly Irish woman in a domestic job. The woman quit and, according to Fields, "went to see my Irish washerwoman who told me she would not work for her because she locked up everything and called her by her Christian name when she was an aged woman."³³

Clearly, domestic service carried a stigma for the Irish just as it did for women of other origins. Yet Irish women closed their eyes to the grotesque cartoons, shut their ears to the mawkish portrayals of "Biddy the Kitchen Canary," and continued to cook and clean and scrub and tend. It was almost as though Irish women remained impervious to the mockery and scorn that accompanied the job. Despite the mockery, domestic service constituted an almost universal experience for women of Irish origin in the United States. As late as 1900 60.5 percent of all Irish-born women who labored in the United States worked in domestic capacities. In Buffalo in the 1850s 90 percent of all daughters of Irish families had left home by age eighteen, most apparently taking jobs as live-in servants. In the 1850s Irish women cornered the domestic market in Milwaukee, Janesville, and Madison, Wisconsin. In that same decade a staggering 80 percent of all women engaged in paid household labor in New York City had come from Ireland.³⁵ By the 1860s numerous Irish servant girls had arrived in frontier communities like Jacksonville, Illinois.

Although Irish women refused to listen to the jibes hurled at servant girls in America, they did pay attention to a counter message, which asserted that the household worker, when "compared with her sisters in the industrial field . . . certainly is well compensated." Undoubtedly, young Irish female migrants did not bother to read the statistical studies issued by the various progressive organizations in the late nineteenth century analyzing comparative female earnings. Even if they could read, they did not have to pore over the various government reports that noted the relatively high earnings of domestic servants. More importantly, they could read the letters of women who had migrated, glowing with pride as they told relatives and friends back home that servant girls in America could earn and save. Guidebooks written for prospective Irish immigrants also noted that

servant girls in America get from eight to sixteen dollars a month—sometimes they get as high as twenty. Now if they save half of that amount every year, and place it at interest, they will have acquired a considerable sum at the end of ten years. Many of them, to my

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certain knowledge, have, in the course of twenty or thirty years, by faithful industry and moderate economy become owners of from three to five thousand dollars.³⁶

Compensation for domestic service varied from city to city, responding in part to the supply of young women who were willing to work. Whereas in New York in the 1850s servant women could expect from \$4 to \$7 per month, in San Francisco, plagued by a shortage of women who would be either wives or servants, Irish women were reported to be earning between \$50 and \$70 per month from 1849 to 1853. Wages also differed within a given city, and employers of household workers had greater leeway in deciding on a salary than did the employer of garment workers or textile mill hands, who had to consider the cost of supplies and materials. Yet even given the wide regional variation and despite the capriciousness of the wage-setting system, domestic workers had an economic edge over women employed in industry and certainly over needle women.

In Massachusetts, for example, in 1906 the only group of women who earned more than domestic servants were schoolteachers. Domestic servants over the entire state averaged \$9.08 per week, whereas textile hands earned \$7.15 and saleswomen a mere \$6.21. Since domestic workers generally lived with their employers, they had no expenses of food, shelter, transportation, or the like. Most employers preferred that their servants dress in some sort of livery provided by the employer, so that the servants did not incur expense in clothing, something that cost women who worked in sales a great deal of money.³⁷

Descriptions of nineteenth-century women who tried to make a living sewing stress the dirty, oppressive conditions under which they lived and the poor diet by which they attempted to sustain themselves. Servants lived in strikingly more healthful environment, residing in the best neighborhoods of the city, eating the same food—albeit leftovers—as their employers. Descriptions of nineteenth-century women who tried to make a living in the textile mills and the canneries, in the laundries and in the factories, emphasized the high rates of accident and industrial disease they endured and the miserable hovels to which they returned after grueling hours tending the machines for low pay. Servants usually had their own rooms or shared with only one other servant and could do with their earnings as they wished—spend it on themselves, send it home, donate it to some charity, save it, squander it, invest it. What they did with their earnings became their own choice and was not dictated by the basic demands of survival. For women who had migrated for economic reasons, for women who had

decided to leave their homes in order to fulfill certain material goals, domestic service basically provided an ideal forum. Unlike the Italian culture, which stressed both female supervision and early marriage, nothing in Irish culture worked against the young female migrants who had chosen to live in other peoples' homes and perform domestic duties. Irish women had been reared in an environment characterized by rigid sex segregation and late and infrequent marriage. To them, the idea of living apart from their communities, apart from Irish men, would not have appeared aberrant, and for many the economic rewards of domestic work provided a good reason to postpone or perhaps permanently swear off marriage.

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Interestingly, Irish communal leaders and organs of public opinion expressed mixed feelings about the Irish servant girls. On the one hand, there was tremendous pride over their independence, their earning power, and their continued devotion to parents and kin back home as evidenced by the generous sums servant women remitted across the Atlantic. An Irish priest in Memphis in the 1880s unequivocally asserted that "the most faithful specimens of womanhood that ever crossed from the shores of Europe, are the Irish servant girls of America." John Francis Maguire reported back to Ireland that "in domestic service her merit is fully recognized. Once satisfied of the genuineness of her character, an American family will trust her implicitly; and not only is there no locking up against her, but everything is left in her charge." Church leaders took pride in the scattered cases that came to their attention of Protestant employers being so impressed by the religious zeal of their servant women that they converted to Catholicism. Almost all Irish-American observers united in asserting that regardless of other faults, the Irish domestic woman remained chaste and uncorrupted by sexual temptation.³⁸

On the other hand, a whole range of complaints and criticisms arose at the same time. To some Irish apologists the persistence of Irish women in domestic service loomed as a symbol of Irish failure and their inability to rise. For those Irish leaders who believed the Irish would do better in the West, away from the congestion of big city life, the large numbers of Irish women in service bore testimony to the plight of the urban Irish. The founder of one Irish community in Iowa, in fact, wrote back to his fellows in the East exhorting them: "To every single man I would say: 'With or without money, move westward: Your labor is ample security for your living . . . marry some of those fine young girls buried alive in the basement kitchens of New York, and bring her West. She, in a business point

of view, will pay." Similarly, Bishop Hogan of Kansas City declared in 1877, "Young people should have been kept in families with their own. We have suffered them to become hirelings, to die in damp kitchens and cellars."³⁹ While the Irish press complained that Irish women were discriminated against by employers who always preferred Protestant to Catholic help, these same newspapers were not above engaging in some of the same kind of mockery of the Bridgets of the American home, and frequently printed jokes that depicted the ignorance of their own women. The *Irish Miscellany* in 1858 somehow was able to include this item:

"How old are you, Bridget?" said a gentleman to his servant girl. "About fifty, sir," replied Bridget. "You are mistaken Bridget; you are not over twenty." "Yes sir, that is it. I'm about twenty or fifty. Somewhere along there." This answer indicates about the same degree of intelligence as that of an grey-headed negro.⁴⁰

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To some, domestic service was responsible for the low rate of Irish marriage and what was considered to be the abnormal family life of Hibernians transplanted in the New World. They felt that since women could make good money in service they eschewed marriage and therefore helped cause lowering of the Irish birth rate. Finally, clergymen particularly believed that Irish servant girls spent far too much money on clothing and that their assertiveness on the job made Americans despise the Irish in general.

By far the most significant problem that the Irish community had with domestic service involved what was perceived as a threat to the religious life of Catholic girls who labored in Protestant families. Irish-Americans feared that employers exerted all sorts of pressure on their servants to hinder observance of Catholic ritual and often forced them to attend Protestant worship. Riots broke out in Boston in 1853 over one such young servant girl, Hannah Corcoran, and in Lawrence in the 1840s Bridget Horan's Catholic sister abducted her from her employers, who had taken her to their Protestant church. The Irish press published possible answers that Irish girls might offer to employers who sought to lure them away from the Church, and novels, sermons, and special books all appealed directly to the thousands of servant girls to remain firm in their faith and unsullied by the values and life styles that surrounded them.⁴¹

Yet whatever Irish men may have thought about the respectability morality of domestic service, they recognized that Irish women flocked to as a way to make money and that the money earned by these servants provided much of the financial support for the Irish-American communities

for charitable and religious institutions. Irish male community leaders of all sorts recognized what a tremendous contribution Irish servants' earnings in America had made to the economy of Ireland. Thus, they responded vehemently and often violently to any threat to that earning power. Much of the Irish hostility against blacks in both the antebellum North as well as in numerous southern cities after the Civil War sprang from the fear that black women might challenge the Irish monopoly in domestic service. Similarly when California employers in the 1870s began to employ Chinese men as servants the Irish, particularly in San Francisco, marshaled themselves to oppose this infringement. Led by an immigrant from Cork, Dennis Kearney, a massive anti-Chinese movement focused directly on the peril to women's employment, and as the crowds gathered they unfurled banners reading, "Our Women Are Degraded by Coolie Labor." Whether or not the Chinese newcomers really undermined the earnings of Irish women was less important than Irish male labor leaders, like Kearney or Frank Roney, recognizing how essential it was that Irish women hold onto their hegemony in the domestic marketplace. (Kearney turned his attention after the anti-Chinese agitation to running an employment bureau for Irish servant girls.)⁴² [93]

Domestic service provided the core of Irish female employment. It supplied the destinations to which millions of young Irish women went, choosing by themselves, and along female chains of family and friends, to leave Ireland and come to America. Irish women took these jobs for economic reasons and because the nature of the work did not jar their cultural patterns or the values they cherished. Most American women stressed that they objected to domestic work because it isolated them and denied them a meaningful social life that might lead to marriage. This objection, however, would not have struck a very responsive chord in Irish women, who were accustomed to functioning in a world where men and women shared few if any activities and matrimony was not the major objective. Similarly, though they might have felt isolated, tucked away in Protestant neighborhoods, they usually worked in the company of other servants, mostly other Irish women, with whom they could share both memories and aspirations. Although Irish women lived apart from their communities they continued to participate in church and church-related projects.⁴³

The job itself was difficult. Servants, particularly live-in servants, as were most Irish immigrant women, lived at the beck-and-call of their employers. Employers had access to servants and could demand that they

cook, clean, dust, iron, launder, scrub, and mind children around the clock. There was no standard since middle- and upper-class homes varied widely in terms of size, number of family members, amount of entertainment, and the like. All of these factors influenced the routine and schedule of chores for a servant.

Employers also differed widely as to pay, and the flexibility of wages in domestic service meant that servants could exercise some control over what they earned. An Irish girl, brought over by her sister, a domestic, was advised, "Don't ax a penny more than you're worth. But know your own vally and ax that." Furthermore, Irish women, although unschooled and often illiterate, recognized that what they had to offer was highly sought after by Americans and that they had basically no competition. Therefore, they could take a role in setting the terms of their labor, quitting a job when it did not conform to their needs or their standards. James Michael Curley, a son of Irish immigrants, chuckled over the story of "the Back Bay maid who served a Thanksgiving turkey with one leg missing. Fired when she explained that she gave it to the cop on the beat, she picked the turkey up by the other leg and threw it at the dowager who had called her a 'dirty Irish pig.' 'I'm not fired,' she said, 'I quit.'" Less dramatically, Irish women served notice if they were not permitted to attend church or if they were forbidden to socialize during off-hours. Irish women rarely were willing to work in small towns where they had no Irish Catholic community to return to on their day off and where they would indeed be isolated. Similarly, they had come to America from such extreme poverty and their first-hand ac- [94] quaintance with abject destitution was such that the room they had to themselves in their employer's house and the food that they could eat without fearing starvation made the jobs all the more attractive. Finally, by taking domestic service they avoided the quandary that plagued many other immigrant communities, where immigrant men and women, brothers and sisters competed for the same jobs. Irish women therefore could never be blamed by their men for depressing wages.⁴⁴

While economic considerations as expressed through Irish values loomed largest in explaining why Irish women willingly and eagerly took what others rejected, one final factor must indeed be considered. Irish women had come to America as permanent immigrants. They knew that there was no going back to their beloved Ireland. They had to come to terms with their home. Certainly, they had to begin immediately the process of acculturation on their own terms and domestic service provided perhaps the most

intimate glimpse of what middle-class America was really like. Throughout the literature on Irish America the domestic servant emerges as the civilizer of Hibernians in their new home. The servant girls in novels, sermons, and sociological studies provided the model to which the Irish were aspiring. They were the ones who set the tone that the immigrants were to emulate.

Robert Woods and Albert Kennedy, for example, asserted that among the Boston Irish, the young women who had been in domestic service were responsible for bringing "the family into larger and better quarters and add[ed] up-to-datedness in furniture."⁴⁵ From the kitchens and the parlors of Protestant homes Irish women were exposed to the "modern" world much more rapidly than were their sisters who, by necessity, labored in the factories or their brothers, married or single, who heaved their picks and shovels on construction crews. The American homes provided a school for the Irish women, a school where they could learn lessons that they would then pass on to their daughters, who might therefore be spared the necessity of being a Bridget.

Notes to Pages 84-94

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