

**Canadian Association of Irish Studies**  
**Canadian Journal of Irish Studies**

---

Sources for Further Research: Irish Female Domestic in Canada: Evidence from the 1901 Census Sample

Author(s): Kevin James

Source: *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Irish-Canadian Connections / Les liens irlandais-canadiens (Spring, 2005), pp. 86-89

Published by: [Canadian Association of Irish Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25515563>

Accessed: 18-06-2015 17:26 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Canadian Association of Irish Studies and Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Sources for Further Research: Irish Female Domestic Servants in Canada

## EVIDENCE FROM THE 1901 CENSUS SAMPLE

### Irish general domestic servants occupy a prominent place

in studies of female immigration to America and Canada in the mid-nineteenth century. They have become a focus in studies of social mobility, ethnic stereotyping<sup>1</sup>, gendered experiences of work and migration<sup>2</sup>, and the intersection of gender, ethnicity and labour.<sup>3</sup> But was the Irish servant as prevalent later in the century and, if not, what are the broader social, economic and cultural implications of the changing face of domestic service in late-Victorian Canada? This preliminary research seeks to locate Irish female domestic servants in Canada in 1901, highlighting the utility of one of several census samples that have been (and are continuing to be) developed by a consortium of Canadian universities. These public-use micro-data samples have opened the door to a range of inquiries into the demographic, social and economic history of nineteenth-century Canada. In contrast with detailed urban studies which have illuminated Canadian urban domestic service in 1871,<sup>4</sup> this research draws on a national sample to reconstruct domestic service in Canada in 1901.<sup>5</sup> So doing, we can more closely examine a trend which Marilyn Barber identified as the disappearance of the Irish Bridget by the Great War<sup>6</sup> and place Irish-born servants alongside other women and girls engaged in domestic service at the turn of the century. This in turn can help advance our understanding of the character of Irish migrant experiences in Canada, and the changing ethnic complexion of the largest recorded female occupational category through most of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Considerable attention has already been paid to the disproportionate level of Irish females in domestic service in the 1870s.<sup>7</sup> There are noticeable changes in the complexion of the workforce in 1901 which reflect broader changes in immigration patterns and economic conditions in Canada. The following data on Irish-born female servants are drawn from the 4,281 records of female domestic servants in the 5 percent sample from 1901.<sup>8</sup> The data suggest that the largest proportion of female servants were Canadian-born: those from Ireland were the second-largest non-Canadian-born grouping. At about 4 percent of the sample total, their numbers were double the 1.9 percent of the country's population that was Irish-born. Scots, who were 1.6 percent of the population in 1901, represented 2.2 percent of female domestics. The most substantial U.K. immigrant cohort recorded in domestic service were the English, who at over

8 percent of female domestic servants, were greater in number than all of the other districts of the United Kingdom combined (the overall English-born population of Canada in 1901 was 3.8 percent).

**Table 1**  
**Place of Birth of Female Servants and Maids**  
**1901 Census Sample (n.=4,281)**

<i>Place of Birth</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Canada	78.7
Ontario	39.2
Quebec	21.1
Nova Scotia	8.1
New Brunswick	5.3
P.E.I.	2.0
British Columbia	0.2
Manitoba	1.2
North-West	0.1
Alberta	0.1
"Keewatin"	0.02
"Canada"	1.7
England	8.4
Ireland	3.9
Scotland	2.2
U.S.A.	2.0
Newfoundland	0.9
Germany	0.7
Iceland	0.6
Other*	2.2
Unknown/Illegible/None	0.3

\* In no case is any birth place in this category claimed by more than 0.4 percent of the sample.

While the Irish-born clearly did not predominate in domestic service, such work was the principal recorded occupation for Irish-born females. Indeed, 34.7 percent of those who recorded an occupation in the sample listed some work related to personal household service. The proportion of such workers in the Irish-born female population in the sample was higher than that of Scottish-born females, but lower than those who were born in England and in Wales.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 2**  
**Servants as a Proportion of Female Immigrants from Various Countries of the U.K., 1901 Census Sample**

Country of Birth	Females	# of Servants	Servants per 100 of female pop.
Wales	45	8	17.8
England	4,206	361	8.6
Ireland	2,591	169	6.5
Scotland	1,902	94	4.9

Just over half of the Irish-born servants were Catholic, followed by Episcopalians and Presbyterians. This is further evidence that the stereotype of the Irish Catholic “biddy” which dominates American scholarship cannot easily be applied to turn-of-the-century Canada. Indeed studies have shown that the confessional complexion of the Canadian Irish immigrant cohort contrasted with that of America’s Irish at many points in the nineteenth century. The periodisation of Irish immigration to the two countries, and related differences in source regions for immigrants, contributed to distinctive features in the two populations.<sup>10</sup> The experience of Irish immigrant servants does not, therefore, fit neatly within a historiography dominated by American scholarship.

**Table 3**  
**Denominations of Irish-born Female Servants 1901 Census Sample (n.=169)**

Denomination	Proportion of Female Servant (%)
Roman Catholic	53.8
Church of England	21.9
Presbyterian	13.0
Methodist	7.1
Baptist	1.8
Holiness Movement	1.2
Congregationalist	0.6
Quaker	0.6

The Irish-born female domestic servant was outnumbered by Canadian- and English-born colleagues, though there was a much higher proportion of Canadian-born servants who claimed Irish ethnic origins. Indeed, English origins were most commonly claimed by female servants, followed by French, and then Irish “tribal or racial” origin.

**Table 4**  
**Ethnic Origins of Female Servants and Maids 1901 Census Sample (n.=4,281)**

“Race/Tribe”	Percent
English	28.3
French	22.0
Irish	21.2
Scottish	16.6
German	6.1
Other*	4.6
Unknown/Illegible/None**	1.2

\* In no case is any one origin claimed by more than .07% of sample  
 \*\* Includes one “FRE (SCOT)”

**Table 5**  
**Ethnic Origins of Can.-born Female Servants & Maids 1901 Census Sample (n.= 3,371)**

“Race/Tribe”	Percent
French	27.1
English	24.0
Irish	21.1
Scottish	17.5
German	6.0
Other*	2.9
Unknown/Illegible/None	1.3

\* In no case is any one origin claimed by more than 0.83% of sample.

We can begin to understand the position of Irish-born females in the domestic service workforce if we analyse (1) the relationship between paid domestic service and life-cycle amongst females of all ethnic origins and places of birth; and (2) the broader contours of Irish immigration to Canada in the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. There were strong links between the age structure of immigrant cohorts and labour in paid domestic service:<sup>11</sup> the Irish-born in Canada were ageing, and the Irish emigrant cohort during this period was expressing a very marked preference for America,<sup>12</sup> raising the age structure of the Irish-born population living and working in Canada. Overall numbers of Irish immigrants were lower than at other points in the century, and the Irish were a smaller proportion of total immigrants from the United Kingdom to Canada. Between 1904-14, for instance, 54,396 English female domestic servants arrived at ocean ports compared to 25,692 Scots and only 8,983 Irish.<sup>13</sup> As an occupation historically linked to life-cycle, domestic service drew on a much smaller pool of young Irish-born women as their numbers fell. This is confirmed by the markedly higher average ages of Irish domestic servants, especially in comparison to Canadian- and English-born counterparts:

**Table 6**  
**Average Ages of Domestic Servants By Selected Places of Birth, 1901 (n.=4,258)**

Country	Average Age
Ireland	42
Scotland	35
U.S.A.	29
England	30
Canada	27
Wales	27
Other <sup>1</sup>	24
Newfoundland	23

*Only those records with ages recorded have been calculated in these averages.*  
 \* The “other category” comprises those servants and maids for whom a place of birth was specified.

Employment in domestic service was historically highly correlated to age, with periods of such paid work usually preceding marriage. After marriage many women withdrew

from paid domestic service. In 1901, 86.6 percent of the sample of female domestic servants was single, 7.2 percent widowed, and 6 percent married.<sup>14</sup> Amongst the Irish a much high proportion were both widowed (17.9 percent) and married (10.7 percent). As Irish immigration to Canada slowed, the bulk of women who had participated in domestic service earlier in their lives had withdrawn from such work, and were not replaced by Irish-born immigrants in equal numbers. Those Irish-born females who remained in domestic employment were drawn in relatively high proportions from women in more advanced stages of the life-cycle.

**Table 7**  
**Quartiles for Year of Immigration of Female Servants and Maids from Ireland, Scotland and England, 1901 Census**

Country	1 <sup>st</sup> Quartile	Median	3 <sup>rd</sup> Quartile
Ireland	1864	1883	1892
Scotland	1881	1890	1896
England	1884	1890	1896

The number of records which included this data was 117 for Ireland, 291 for England and 69 for Scotland.

There are a number of agenda for which this preliminary exploration of census data provides a foundation. One asks to what extent overall features of the domestic servant cohort were subject to regional influences. We know that immigrant numbers increased as we move westward<sup>15</sup>, given the different ethnic composition of the population in Canada's regions, we might find that the Irish-born occupy different positions in regional workforces.<sup>16</sup> We also know that Irish-born servants had a propensity to work in urban centres: in 1901, they constituted 5.8 percent of servants in centres with populations of 1,000 or more, while Canadian-born servants stood at 74.3 percent. The varied complexion of populations and domestic service workforces in these diverse environments remind us that the study of such servants' work resists a homogenizing narrative of a "Canadian" experience. There are also interesting comparisons and contrasts to draw with domestic servants in places such as Australia and America: certainly Irish female immigration to the United States remained much higher in the later nineteenth century, affording opportunities for comparative study with Canada. Last, there is a set of cultural and social questions that revolve around the dissolution of the Irish biddy as the archetype of immigrant domestic service. Did contemporaries recognize the changing complexion of the workforce, and did images and discourses that surrounded the Irish servant girl, and domestic servants generally, change? The pronounced contrast between the high proportions of female Irish servants which Marilyn Barber, Claudette Lacelle and others have examined in earlier decades and relatively modest numbers in Canada by the turn of the twentieth century can now be explored using this new empirical base to answer these questions. It allows us to examine the relationship between place of birth, ethnicity, gender and work and will yield new insight into female immigration and Canadian labour structures in years of declining Irish immigration.

## Notes:

I am grateful for the Ireland-Canada University Foundation's support of this research, and to Dr. Kris Inwood and team members in the 1891 census digitisation project at the University of Guelph for advice on this piece. Data in this analysis is drawn from the 1901 census sample developed by The Canadian Families Project.

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Maureen Murphy, "Bridget and Biddy: Images of the Irish Servant Girl in Puck Cartoons, 1880-1890" in *New Perspectives on the Irish Diaspora*, ed. Charles Fanning (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 152-75.

<sup>2</sup> Marilyn Barber's studies have illuminated the experience of domestic service in Canada. See, for instance, *Immigrant Domestic Servants in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1991); "The Women Ontario Welcomed: Immigrant Domesticity for Ontario Homes, 1870-1930," in *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History* vol. 2, eds. Alison Prentice and Susan Mann Trofimenkoff (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1987), 102-21; "Sunny Ontario for British Girls, 1900-30" in *Looking into My Sister's Eyes: An Exploration in Women's History*, ed. Jean Burnet (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1986), 55-73; "The Women Ontario Welcomed: Immigrant Domesticity for Ontario Homes, 1870-1930," *Ontario History*, 72:3 (1980): 148-72. See also Lorna R. McLean and Marilyn Barber, "In Search of Comfort and Independence: Irish Immigrant Domestic Servants Encounter the Courts, Jails, and Asylums in Nineteenth-Century Ontario," in *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic, and Racialized Women in Canadian History*, eds. Marlene Epp, Franca Iacovetta and Frances Swyripa (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 133-60. Early works which drew on local urban census manuscripts from 1871 included Claudette Lacelle, *Urban Domestic Servants in 19th-century Canada* (Ottawa: Minister of the Environment, 1987). See also Genevieve Leslie, "Domestic Service in Canada, 1880-1920," in *Women and Work: Ontario, 1850-1930*, eds. Janice Acton, Penny Goldsmith and Bonnie Shepard (Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974), 71-125.

<sup>3</sup> In histories of Irish immigrant servants in the United States, key debates have revolved around motivations behind independent female migration and paid domestic labour, especially whether the primary motive was great economic independence and promise of prosperity (Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1983]) or expanded marriage opportunities (Janet Nolan, *Oneselves Alone: Women's Emigration from Ireland, 1885-1920* [Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989]). These debates are neatly summarised in Kerby A. Miller, with David N. Doyle and Patricia Kelleher, "For Love and Liberty: Irish Women, Migration and Domesticity in Ireland and America, 1815-1920," in *The Irish World Wide: History, Heritage, Identity*, vol. 4, *Irish Women and Irish Migration*, ed. Patrick O'Sullivan (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1995), 41-65. Diane M. Hotten-Somers has proposed to extend the study of domestic service to relationships between mistress and maid and how these operated within powerful gender ideologies of domesticity; see "Moral Maids and Materialistic Mistresses: Irish Domestic Servants and their American Employers, 1850-1920," in *Ireland Abroad: Politics and Professions in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Oonagh Walsh (Dublin: Four Courts Press 2003), 108-118.

<sup>4</sup> See Marilyn Barber's studies above; Lacelle, *op. cit.*; Courtney Harris, "Irish Women in Mid-Nineteenth Century Toronto: Image and Experience" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Guelph. 1999).

<sup>5</sup> The Canadian Families Project headed by Eric Sager and Peter Baskerville at the University of Victoria have developed this microdata sample from the Canadian enumeration of 1901.

<sup>6</sup> Barber, *Immigrant Domestic Servants in Canada*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Lacelle, *op. cit.*, 76-7.

<sup>8</sup> This data uses the occupational coding developed by the Canadian Families Project team to identify those in Canada engaged in "Personal Service in Households": hence, all records with occupational codes beginning with "614" are employed in this survey.

<sup>9</sup> At 45, the number of females returned as Welsh-born in this sample is low. Without more robust data, conclusions about the profile of Canada's Welsh-born population are tenuous.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Cecil J. Houston and W.J. Smyth, *Irish Emigration and Canadian Settlement: Patterns, Links, and Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> See B. W. Higman, *Domestic Service in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 58.

<sup>12</sup> See Eric Richards, *Britannia's Children: Emigration from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland since 1600* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), 210-14.

<sup>13</sup> Barber, *Immigrant Domestic Servants in Canada*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> The remainder of the 4,281 females had another, or no, marital status, recorded.

<sup>15</sup> Barber, *Immigrant Domestic Servants in Canada*, 8

<sup>16</sup> Higman, *op. cit.*, found significant regional variations in the proportion of Australian-born domestic servants throughout the nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries (61-3).



"A group of Irish maids." From Hasia Diner's *Erin's Daughters of America* (1983), 87.