Ethnic Jokes: Mocking the Working Irish Woman

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Catherine Healy

ABSTRACT

The figure of the laughably ignorant Irish maid was one of the most recognizable Irish stereotypes in Anglo-American print culture over the late nineteenth century. Jokes about ‘Bridget’ and ‘Biddy’ crossed the Atlantic in both directions, contributing to a transnational repository of comic Irish tropes. While the cultural representation of Irish immigrants was often shaped by regional concerns, Irish servant gags were comparable, and at times identical, across locations – an indication of just how interlinked domestic sensibilities were in England and the United States. Ethnic humour of this kind partly reflected the prevalence of anti-Irish sentiment, echoing older anti-Irish caricatures. The class and racial biases revealed by transatlantic depictions of the Irish is stressed in the existing literature on Irish diaspora history, and certainly such biases help to explain many of the jokes told about servants. This essay moves beyond these perspectives, however, in arguing that comic representations of domestic service also spoke to the anxiety of the middle and upper classes reliant on external help to maintain household order, an intricate endeavour in the context of elaborate Victorian domestic protocols. The huge volume of social commentary devoted to the so-called servant question over these years was a marker of the discomfort felt by employers about managing domestic labour, and joking about the competence of maids and cooks was one means of alleviating some of the tensions prompted by servant-keeping.

KEYWORDS: Irish immigrants, ethnic humour, jokes, England, United States, domestic servants, transatlantic culture, domestic ideology

A gentleman observing an Irish servant girl, who was left-handed, placing the knives and forks on the dinner table in the same awkward position, remarked to her that she was laying them left-handed. ‘Oh, indade!’ said she, ‘so I have – be plased, sir, to help me turn the table round.’

Readers sitting down with New York’s Poughkeepsie Journal on 16 January 1847 might have raised a smile on reading these lines in a humour column on the newspaper’s back page. This seems to be the first time they appeared in print, although its target – the unassimilated Irish maid – was on the receiving end of many Irish jokes disseminated in American publications of the day. Even as famine ravaged their country, Irish immigrants continued to be ridiculed in the media as buffoons ill-equipped for modern life. Such caricatures appealed to propertied classes on both sides of the Atlantic. Four months later, the same joke was repeated,
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without attribution, in the London newspaper *Bell’s New Weekly Messenger.*\(^2\) The process by which it came to England cannot be retraced, but it was most likely taken from a shipment of newspapers imported by one of the transatlantic lines. By this period, steamships could cross the ocean in as little as 14 days, and the news carried on board was widely relayed by the press on arrival.\(^3\) Less pressing but still pervasive was the trend of reproducing American newspaper jokes, particularly those concerned with the problems of domestic employment. Once a snappy servant gag had reached English shores, it had the potential to find audiences all over the nation. The joke quoted above, for instance, went on to feature in at least 44 more publications, the last recorded appearance being in Oxford’s *Banbury Advertiser* on 30 March 1939. It continued to circulate widely in the United States, too, with 25 regional newspapers – covering areas as diverse as Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Louisiana and Hawaii – reprinting it in the years up to 1880. One comic anecdote could thus remain intelligible to audiences across a broad temporal and geographic terrain.

While Irish immigrants were far more prevalent in the American domestic service sector, Irish servant jokes proliferated in print culture in England as well as the United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century.\(^4\) The figure of the clumsy Irish maid was one of the most recognisable Irish stereotypes in Anglo-American print culture, with jokes about ‘Bridget’ and ‘Biddy’ crossing the Atlantic in both directions. Such humour was part of a transatlantic cultural exchange facilitated by so-called scissors-and-paste journalism, contributing to a shared repository of comic Irish tropes. As Bob Nicholson has written, in publishing imported snippets along with their own content, newspapers and magazines of the period forged a space in which national boundaries were broken down and cultures entangled.\(^5\) While the cultural representation of Irish women was often shaped by regional concerns over Irish immigration and politics, Irish servant jokes were comparable, and at times identical, across locations. This might strike some as surprising, considering the differences in how Irishness was perceived in the two countries. American representations of the Irish certainly reflected discomfort over their growing political and economic strength as an immigrant community, but there was usually a more bluntly racist tone to discussions of the Irish in England, in line with deeply rooted English views of the Irish as inferior colonial subjects. However, on household matters, writers and employers in, say, New York could find much common ground with commentators in London, Liverpool or Manchester. Complaints were similar on both sides of the Atlantic, as were bourgeois domestic standards. Andrew Urban has pointed out that Americans and Britons at times even imagined themselves to be in a sort of class alliance, with the former admiring and drawing on British models of servant management, and the latter examining American responses to the arrival of Irish immigrants in view

\(^2\) *Bell’s New Weekly Messenger*, 9 May 1847, p. 6. The material cited in this essay is primarily drawn from digitized print collections, allowing for a reasonably comprehensive picture of how content was copied and spread through the press.

\(^3\) Joel Wiener, *Americanization of the British Press, 1830s–1914: Speed in the Age of Transatlantic Journalism* (Basingstoke and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 64, 77.

\(^4\) The 1880 US census recorded that Irish-born servants made up more than a third of the domestic service workforce in cities including New York, Philadelphia and Boston, whereas only 2.7% of domestics in England around that same period are estimated to have come from Ireland. David M. Katzman, *Seven Days A Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 66; Bronwen Walter, ‘Strangers on the Inside: Irish Women Servants in England, 1881’, *Immigrants and Minorities*, 27 (2009), 279–99 (p. 286).

\(^5\) Bob Nicholson, “‘You Kick the Bucket; We Do the Rest!’: Jokes and the Culture of Reprinting in the Transatlantic Press’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17 (2012), 273–86 (p. 274).
of their own struggles with the Irish. Readers in both locations were regularly exposed to discussions of each other’s domestic challenges – although reprinted articles were sometimes tweaked to accord with national sensitivities and vernacular practices. The cross-national appeal of the ethnic jokes considered here attests to the fact that transatlantic audiences also shared a common sense of humour in regard to the travails of housekeeping.

Traditional research on Victorian representations of the Irish has tended to focus on the aggressive treatment of working-class types, citing light-hearted jokes, if at all, as colourful asides. The image of the simianized or ape-like Irishman has received particular attention as a counterpoint to constructions of the rational Saxon. The jokes discussed here cannot be considered interchangeable with such crude material, even in cases where a categorically racist illustration or commentary was evidently intended to amuse. While comic servants were primarily designed with laughter in mind, depictions of the Fenian agitator or Irish apeman shored up an explicit political agenda or ideology, using humour merely as a tool to dehumanize. The portrayal of violent, irrational Celts in satirical publications such as Puck and Punch is obviously significant as an example of the base prejudice directed at the Irish during times of political ferment, but these figures performed a very different purpose to the typical Irish jokes found in the transatlantic press. Print humour built around Irish female immigrants cannot, for instance, be adequately explained by looking only to the tensions stirred up by Irish nationalism, or ethnic conflict more broadly. While indicative of popular and elite attitudes towards immigrants, Irish servant jokes could equally be a reflection of middle-class unease about modernization and rising standards of etiquette. Paying attention to these more ambiguous kinds of humour offers a new way of thinking not only about the dynamics of household service but also about the construction of transatlantic class identities.

1. ‘STUPID’ DOMESTICS

By the late nineteenth century, American and English audiences were well acquainted with jokes about the apparent uselessness of Irish servants. Much of this humour turned on blundering encounters with household products or appliances, or with modern ways of life. In newspapers, magazines and comic publications, Irish domestics were depicted as making basic mistakes due to their ignorance of bourgeois housekeeping. Needless to say, the women who left Ireland in the decades after the Great Famine of 1845–1852 mostly grew up in much more modest conditions than those in which they worked. The rural homes of the emigrating poor tended to be sparsely furnished and lacking running water or gas. Waste would have usually been emptied outside the property, and simple meals prepared on an open fire rather than on a cookstove. The butt of Irish servant jokes was often a recently landed immigrant with little experience of modern urban life. In one widely printed 1870s gag, a New York family

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6 Andrew Urban, ‘Irish Domestic Servants, “Biddy” and Rebellion in the American Home, 1850–1900’, Gender and History, 21 (2009), 263–86 (pp. 271, 275–77).
7 Stephan Pigeon, ‘Steal it, Change it, Print it: Transatlantic Scissors-and-Paste Journalism in the Ladies’ Treasury, 1857–1895’, Journal of Victorian Culture, 22 (2016), 24–39 (p. 27).
8 L. Perry Curtis Jr., Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971); Roy Foster, ‘Paddy and Mr Punch’, in Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History (London: Allen Lane, 1993), pp. 171–94; Michael de Nie, The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798–1882 (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).
9 Caitríona Ó Laing, Social Change and Everyday Life in Ireland, 1850–1922 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 142–49.
discovers that their maid, a woman not long off the boat from Ireland, has been replenishing a salad dressing container with castor oil.10 The subject of another joke, a decade later, is sent to post a letter at a pillar-box only to return with it still in hand. ‘Shure, surr, the door wis locked’, she informs her master.11 In a related vein, a 1890s column filler tells of how an Irish domestic is instructed to wash cut-glass dishes with ‘deliberation’, which she assumes to be a cleaning agent, prompting her to go in search of some at a grocer’s store.12 The humour was occasionally reinforced by comic visual imagery. In an illustration run by the British comic Big Budget in 1900, for example, an Irish maid described as ‘just over’ is shown ringing a doorbell. ‘The missis wor afther tellin’ me to ring the bell for dinner’, reads the caption underneath.13 Unfamiliarity with middle-class terminology is similarly stressed in a 1908 Tatler cartoon portraying a servant who has neglected to fill her employer’s carafe with water the night before. ‘Sure, now, I thought a giraffe was a bird’, she tells him.14 Irish culinary abilities were an especially common target of satire. Irish immigrants figured as inept domestics in countless magazines, novels and plays, but discussions of the so-called servant problem treated Irish women’s knowledge of food as a particular obstacle to the smooth running of households.15 Comic anecdotes about kitchen gaffes provided a lighter alternative to such commentary. In an 1880s joke published on both sides of the Atlantic, an Irish cook is asked whether she has cleaned a chicken for dinner. ‘As well as I could, mum, with nothing but yellow soap to clane it with’, she says.16 Another extensively circulated snippet describes a servant’s surprise on being given macaroni to prepare for the table, causing her mistress to enquire if she had cooked any at her last place. ‘We used them things to light the gas with’, responds the cook.17 Elsewhere, a domestic is found to have doused a plum pudding with paraffin after spilling the brandy she had been given to set it alight, not realizing her chosen replacement would cause a more serious fire.18 In some instances the physical appearance of such kitchen workers was part of the humour. A Puck cartoon printed in 1905 shows a burly-looking Bridget telling her employer that she has never made lobster à la Newburgh, since she ‘niver worruked farther up th’ Hoodson than Nyack’.19 The cook’s physical size here is significant, given the connotations of large bodies in medical and popular culture of the era.

10 The original American source of this joke cannot be located, but it was extensively reproduced in 1873 – sometimes as part of the same series of American jokes – in provincial English newspapers including the Banbury Advertiser, Twistock Gazette, Henley Advertiser, Alnwick Mercury, West Somerset Free Press, East Kent Gazette, Croydon’s Weekly Standard, Tenbury Wells Advertiser, Witney Express, Maryport Advertiser, Alcester Chronicle, Exmouth Journal, and Thames Gazette.11 The joke, credited to The Bailie, a Glasgow-public comic periodical, was published between 1882 and 1884 in a similarly wide range of English papers, among them the Lancaster Gazette, Rugby Advertiser, Nuneaton Advertiser, Otley News and West Riding Advertiser, Banbury Advertiser, Woolwich Gazette, Maidenhead Advertiser, Gloucester Citizen, Aldershot Military Gazette, Buxton Herald, and Hendon & Finchley Times.12 Youth Companion, 11 December 1890, p. 677. This spread widely on both sides of the Atlantic, featuring in at least 42 other American publications over the following year, as well as eight English newspapers up to 1893.13 Big Budget, 3 March 1900, p. 192.14 Tatler, 15 July 1908, p. 65. The text of the joke was repeated in the Newcastle Daily Chronicle and Sheffield Weekly Gazette, as well as finding its way into American papers such as the Nashville Banner and El Paso Times.15 Diane Hotten-Somers, ‘Relinquishing and Reclaiming Independence: Irish Domestic Servants, American Middle-Class Mistresses, and Assimilation, 1850–1920’, Éire-Ireland, 36.1–2 (2001), pp. 185–201 (pp. 190–2); Margaret Lynch-Brennan, The Irish Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840–1930 (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), pp. 10–11.16 Chicago Tribune, 17 July 1889, p. 4. The joke was still in circulation three decades on – see Missouri’s Fair Play, 25 December 1920, p. 8.17 This was widely printed between 1881 and 1910, although the original source is unclear.18 Northern Daily Telegraph, 26 January 1900, p. 4. It appeared in several more English newspapers over the next five years.19 Puck, 20 September 1905, p. 14.
From the late nineteenth century, as Amy Farrell has written, physicians and social commentators increasingly linked fatness to lower levels of civilization, and thinness to progress and sophistication. Notions of health and beauty were intertwined with ideas about the racial inferiority of the Irish, and comic illustrations provided a ready canvas on which to illustrate and perpetuate such prejudices. As in the above example, cartoons of fat Irish servants often included a slimmer bourgeois woman as a point of contrast, the former denoting primitivity and the latter refinement.

The Irish servant as a cause of social embarrassment was another prominent theme of Irish ethnic jokes. One of the most common joke narratives – repeated in various forms over many years – describes an Irish maid revealing to a caller that their employer is avoiding visitors. In a typical example of this type of joke, a domestic is asked when the master of the house will be returning, to which she responds, ‘Shure I dunno, sir; when he’s in he’s always ‘out’. Other comic snippets poked fun at servants’ appearances before household gatherings. In one such instance, a woman’s attempt to mock her Irish help in front of guests ends in embarrassment for herself:

‘Why, Bridget,’ said a lady, who wished to rally her servant-girl for the amusement of the company, upon the fantastic ornamenting of a huge pie, ‘did you do this? You’re quite an artist. Pray, how did you do it?’ ‘Indade, mum, it was myself that did it,’ replied Bridget. ‘Isn’t it pretty? I did it with your false teeth, mum.’

Servants’ supposed unguardedness also had the potential to stir up tensions between husbands and wives. In a joke printed by the British magazine Tatler, an employer tells his Irish maid to ensure a note is passed on to her mistress, to which she responds: ‘Yiss, sorr, I’ll just leave it in the pocket of the trousers ye’ve taken off. She be sure to go through them.’ Such disclosures, though not necessarily malicious, highlighted the perceived untrustworthiness of servants.

As working-class immigrants unschooled in the norms of bourgeois life, Irish women were regarded as a particular liability to the reputation of their employers. Well-regulated households relied on domestic staff to maintain appearances, but the social and cultural differences of Irish servants meant there was always a risk of things going wrong, of things being shown up. Domestic service humour helped to ease such tensions while also poking fun at those whose status partly depended on the smooth running of domestic life. The currents of satire could flow in two directions even in a single joke, painting an unflattering picture of servants and employers alike. Such humour certainly drew on stereotypes about immigrant workers, but it did so without suggesting that native-born employers were entitled to respect from their servants. Defining one’s self against a domestic ‘other’ was one of the principal ways in which

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20 Amy Farrell, ‘“The White Man’s Burden”: Female Sexuality, Tourist Postcards, and the Place of the Fat Woman in Early 20th Century US Culture’, in The Fat Studies Reader, ed. by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2009), pp. 256–62 (p. 259).
21 The joke, credited to Fun magazine, featured in a number of provincial English humour columns between 1872 and 1873.
22 Tit-Bits, 24 December 1881, p. 13. The joke crossed the Atlantic and remained in circulation in Britain until at least 1907 – Tatler, 12 June 1907, p. 20.
23 Tatler, 10 May 1905, p. 10.
Victorians established a sense of elite or bourgeois status. Servant jokes provided a reminder of the fragility of this authority, demonstrating that self-importance was easily unmasked.

Employers were at times more the butt of the joke than servants. A newspaper gag with transatlantic circulation described a mistress trying to get her maid to wash her face by telling her it would make her beautiful, prompting the retort: 'Sure, it’s a wonder ye never tried it, ma’am.'24 On a different occasion, Bridget is asked what she would do if she could play the piano as well the lady of the house, to which she says she would go on learning until she could play ‘decently.’25 A male Irish servant similarly undermines his employer when the man asks if he would ‘rather be a bigger fool than you look, or look a bigger fool than you are’. Pat chooses the latter, but his employer quips that that would be impossible. ‘Faix, sor’, replies Pat, ‘whoivver shrpung that joke on yez was no liar at all, sor!’26 The occasional deflection of an insult back onto the master or mistress goes to show that ethnic humour did not merely function to disparage those of another ethnicity. The target of derision in some cases was rather the arrogance or incompetence of the established middle classes. These jokes encouraged readers to laugh at employers who considered themselves superior to their servants, diminishing the notion of a natural social hierarchy in the servant-keeping household.

Other types of subversive humour centred on a servant’s use of wit to justify ignoring or incorrectly carrying out work. In one popular joke, a mistress asks her maid why she failed to answer the door. ‘Shure, mum, an’ it never spoke to me’, replies the servant.27 Such verbal trickery was consonant with a long tradition of knowing humour in popular Victorian culture. It was a humour, as Peter Bailey has written with regard to music hall comedy, that destabilized ‘the various official knowledges that sought to order common life through their languages of improvement and respectability and the intensifying grid of regulative social disciplines’.28 Knowingness did not always make for subversive humour, in that it could fail to confront or question power, but it did at least position itself in opposition to the hegemonic discourses usually associated with the middle and upper classes. In the case of these jokes, Irish servants provided a counterbalancing force to employers’ sense of entitlement without explicitly challenging their command over the domestic scene.

2. HUMOUR PRODUCTION

Irish servant jokes followed the same template as many of the other comic snippets that criss-crossed the Atlantic. They were usually short, and reliant on stock characters and situations. As with most of the jokes featured in humour columns of the period, they also tended to be presented in dialogue form, a standardized model that made them well-suited to mass circulation.29 The uniformity of such material allowed it to flow easily between newspapers and magazines. By the late nineteenth century, Anglo-American publications had become prolific

24 This was printed in several English and American newspapers between 1882 and 1900.
25 Every Week, 31 January 1896, p. 144.
26 Fun, 8 September 1896, p. 96.
27 Judy, 28 July 1897, p. 356.
28 Peter Bailey, ‘Conspiracies of Meaning: Music Hall and the Knowingness of Popular Culture’, Past and Present, 144 (1994), 155, cited in Lucy Delap, Knowing their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 144. Andy Medhurst makes a similar point in A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), p. 67.
29 Daniel Wickberg, The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 143.
recyclers of each other’s jokes, taking them either straight from imported sources or indirectly from domestic competitors. Numerous English newspapers even had columns dedicated entirely to ‘Yankee’ humour from the 1870s – a mark of the centrality of American media culture to British New Journalism. While English humour did circulate in the United States, too, American publications were more inclined to print home-grown jokes. Newspaper staffers were sometimes assigned to write comic filler, but most jokes were the work of anonymous professional jokesmiths. Daniel Wickberg has estimated that about 15 to 20 men and women dominated the country’s joke market by the 1900s, contributing the great majority of gags featured in magazines and daily publications. In other instances, snippets were taken from joke books: William Harvey’s 1904 collection, *Irish Life and Humour*, for example, included 20 pages of servant gags, many of which went on to be reprinted in English and American newspapers. The widespread adoption of the humour column in both countries reflected the transatlantic emergence of popular journalism targeted at a mass readership. As Joel Wiener has observed, this was a development driven not only by the imperatives of an increasingly competitive media landscape but also by social and political changes, including growing literacy rates, new technology, and the evolution of representative forms of government. Such material was thus generally published for commercial ends, and not always an expression of seriously held views.

Irish ethnic jokes nevertheless did draw on a long tradition of Anglo-Saxon prejudice, emphasizing as they did the seeming ubiquity of Irish ignorance. As is well established, the blundering Irishman was a prominent figure in English popular culture from the seventeenth century, particularly in the theatre. The supposed simple-mindedness of such Irish characters – whether servants or general labourers – obviously tapped into long-established English assumptions about Ireland, seeming to justify the subordinate position of Irish people within the imperial hierarchy. Such representations ‘complemented the political discourses of the time period that sought to portray Ireland as an infant in need of British rule and civilization’, as Urban has argued. Irish stereotypes also furnished a comforting antidote to fears of Irish insurrection. Comic Irish types were typically unreliable but easily subdued, and in that regard might be said to have dampened the threats posed by Irish politics and immigration. In addition, ethnic humour worked to differentiate the English and Irish, given both their visual likeness and physical proximity. As Laura Salisbury has argued, if we think of such humour as an assertion of superiority over an uncomfortably close ‘other’, it makes sense that Irish jokes would be salient in England. This is not to say that the Irish were always the primary target of parody on stage and in jest-books. English humourists established ‘an entire gallery of repellent national stereotypes’ over the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries,
and native-born provincial types were routinely depicted as ignorant as well. However, Irish stereotyping was particularly sensitive to changing political conditions, and the resurgence of Irish nationalism in the nineteenth century gave rise to many more vitriolic representations in that period.

Irish caricatures had likewise long been a mainstay of American popular culture. Although served up to audiences in England going back to the seventeenth century, Paddywhackery only really began to proliferate in American theatre from the 1840s, in line with the onset of mass immigration from Ireland. In plays and in print, Irish caricatures reflected American views of the lower-class immigrants who had landed on their shores with few, if any, resources or marketable skills. Such constructions were in some instances a clear offshoot of popular anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiments, shoring up nativist critiques of the unassimilated Irish. Nineteenth-century American writers may have occasionally sympathized with the Irish national cause, but many were no more delicate than their British counterparts in drawing attention to the supposedly crude and ignorant nature of the Irish in their midst.

Like earlier Irish caricatures, Irish servant jokes of the Victorian era took shape against a background of ethnocentric prejudice. However, they also mirrored much of the humour centred on servant conduct more generally in this period. Readers in both countries appear to have been amused by servants of all ethnic backgrounds – an indication that issues of social class could be just as important to comic narratives. Native-born English domestics, for their part, had long been mocked over their dialect, their ignorance of middle-class etiquette, their physical appearance, and even their names. In the United States, Chinese, Swedish and African-American servants were also prominent comic figures, providing light relief in the press along with theatre and early cinema. In many instances, American humour columns featured jokes involving domestics of a range of nationalities. An 1894 issue of the New York magazine *Current Literature*, to give one example, collated as many as 21 servant gags from overseas as well as regional publications. The column included a joke from the *San Francisco Report* about Wang Hang Ho, a Chinese cook who calls his mistress by the wrong name; one from *Paris Voltaire* about Baptise, a servant who breaks china dishes; and another from Vienna's *Kikeriki* magazine about a confused maid named Betje. In most cases, though, Irish women were the butts of the joke: ‘Bridget’, ‘Mary’ or ‘Irish Domestic’ provided the humour in eight of the total number of 21, more than any other group. Similar comic tropes were

37 David Hayton, ‘From Barbarian to Burlesque: English Image of the Irish, c. 1600–1750’, *Irish Economic and Social History*, 15 (1988), 5–31 (pp. 28–29).
38 Jennifer Mooney, *Irish Stereotypes in Vaudeville, 1865–1905* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Peter Flynn, ‘How Bridget Was Framed: The Irish Domestic in Early American Cinema, 1896–1917’, *Cinema Journal*, 50 (2011), 1–20.
39 Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 222; Ronald Pearsall, *Collapse of Stout Party: Victorian Wit and Humour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), pp. 33–36; Frank Dawes, *Not in Front of the Servants: Domestic Service in England, 1850–1939* (London: Wayland Publishers, 1973), p. 10.
40 Margareta Matovic, ‘Embracing a Middle-Class Life: Swedish-American Women in Lake View’, in *Peasant Maids, City Women: From the European Countryside to Urban America*, ed. by Christiane Harzig (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 261–98 (p. 289); John Haddad, ‘The Laundry Man’s Got a Knife! China and Chinese America in Early United States Cinema’, *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, 15 (2001), 31–47 (p. 41); Kerry D. Soper, *We Go Pogo: Walt Kelly, Politics, and American Satire* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 141–43; Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 5th edn (London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), pp. 29–32.
41 *Current Literature*, July 1894, p. 25.
nevertheless applied to workers regardless of ethnicity, demonstrating the wide applicability of domestic service humour.

It was possible to participate in such humour even without experience in employing certain ethnic groups. The extent to which servant jokes diffused into oral culture is impossible to gauge, but we can surmise that a good many went on to be shared in social settings. Some lived on in public memory long after their composition, judging at least by the fact they cropped up in readers’ joke competitions months or even years later. When newspapers invited members of the public to send in their best gags, previously published servant jokes were often among those submitted. An entry to the *Burnley Express*’s weekly ‘Prize Joke Competition’ in February 1889, for example, tells of how an Irish maid asked to serve tea with some bacon misunderstands the instruction, instead bringing out a pot with a few rashers floating in the tea. Readers might have assumed it was the work of a local wit, but it had in fact already appeared in numerous publications, both in England and the United States. Even the jokes featured in readers’ columns were themselves sometimes copied. In an April 1899 submission to a ‘Prize Jokes and Stories’ column run by the Yorkshire paper *Halifax Courier*, Bridget is found polishing a fireplace area with a copy of the paper. ‘I heard ye say the other day that it brightened ye up, and sure I’m trying it on the fender,’ she tells her bewildered mistress – a punchline that won the submitter a shilling. Six years later, the same lines clinched the top prize in *Tatler*’s ‘The Chestnut Tree’, a weekly competition offering readers one guinea for the best short story or anecdote. Some readers also tore humour columns out of newspapers for safekeeping. As Janet Theophano has documented, newspaper snippets were often pasted into recipe and cookery books of the period, and Irish servant gags have been found among several such documents. Comic tropes established in the press were passed into oral culture and thus incorporated into public memory, reinforcing existing biases about Irish domestic labour.

The sharing of these jokes might have complemented anti-Irish feeling, but their retelling was not necessarily an act of prejudice or malice. When his Irish housekeeper, in the summer of 1888, declined to go see fireworks in case a fire broke out while she was gone, the poet Walt Whitman is said to have responded:

> That is very funny, Mary – very funny. It makes me think of a story I once heard of a Bridget whose mistress found her weeping bitterly before a roaring big fireplace. “What is the matter with you, Bridget?” asked the mistress, and Bridget, still weeping, said: “Oh mum, it’s just this way: I might be after marrying Pat and we might have three or four children around and Oh the brats might fall into the fire and be burned to death!” That seems like you, Mary – anticipating trouble.

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42 *Burnley Express*, 2 February 1889, p. 2. The original source of the joke is unclear, but it was published the previous year in papers ranging from the *Lancaster Gazette* and *Leeds Mercury* to New Jersey’s *Monmouth Press* and the *Goldsboro Headlight* in North Carolina.
43 *Halifax Courier*, 1 April 1899, p. 7.
44 *Tatler*, 21 June 1905, p. 18.
45 Janet Theophano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women’s Lives Through the Cookbooks They Wrote* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 251–52.
46 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 1 (Boston, MA: Small, Maynard, 1906), p. 419, quoted in Joann Krieg, *Whitman and the Irish* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2000), p. 55.
While he saw nothing problematic in the joke, Whitman was by no means hostile to Irish female immigrants. He had written sympathetically in the past about those many women who sought household employment on their arrival from Ireland, showing a perceptive understanding of the demeaning treatment faced by prospective servants in intelligence offices. As Joann Krieg has observed, Whitman also regarded the Irish at large as proof that immigrants could be assimilated into American democracy, a viewpoint informed by the advancements they had been made in cities such as New York. He might have had harboured snobbish tendencies, but he at least saw Irish immigrants as having the potential to be equal to native-born Americans. The enjoyment of ethnic humour thus cannot be taken as evidence of the teller's politics.

Indeed, Irish newspapers themselves were not averse to publishing the sort of jokes popularized in the Anglo-American press. Humour centred on native Irish speakers’ misunderstanding of the English language was already a large component of oral culture in Ireland, as shown by evidence gathered by the Irish Folklore Commission in the 1930s and 1940s. As Séan De Fréine observes, by the late nineteenth century, many in Ireland had ‘accepted the ethnocentric Ascendancy viewpoint that Irish was a backward language.’ Servant jokes printed in Irish publications tended, however, to emphasize displays of wit or cunning. A good many highlighted the confidence of serving women, making light of their apparent propensity to invite friends and relatives over to their employers’ homes. In an illustrated gag printed by the *Skibbereen Eagle* in 1896, a mistress tells her Irish maid she does not want her going out that evening. ‘Nayther do Patrick, mem’, responds Bridget. ‘He’s coming to see me, mem’. Others turned the joke on servant-keepers, taking down mean-spirited or arrogant employers. A 1900 gag run by the *Cork Examiner*, for instance, involves a domestic being ordered to stay on in her position until a new girl can be found, to which the maid responds: ‘That was my intenshun, anyway. I want her to know what kind of woman ye are’. The widest range of Irish servant jokes appeared in the *Irish Times*’s weekly front-page humour column, ‘Cream of Jokes’, which offered readers five shillings for the best submission. The gags sent in covered more or less the same themes as similar English and American columns, telling of servants misunderstanding instructions and generally bungling their work. An Anglo-Irish newspaper catering to the middle and upper classes, it generally held a paternalistic view of the Irish Catholic poor – an outlook that made these kinds of classist tropes a natural content fit. The fact that ‘Bridget’ gags were also circulated to Irish audiences demonstrates that they were not necessarily considered a blanket slur on the country’s population. As Christie Davies has written, even individual members of an ethnic group may find amusement in ethnic jokes, given the diversity within such groups, and the fact that jokes can always be interpreted as applying to another subset of the group.
with the type of immigrant being mocked, in other words, or they might have simply related more to the employer doing the ordering. This is further evidence that such material could resonate with audiences primarily on the basis of a shared class identity.

3. ‘MINISTERS OF TRUTH’

Irish servant jokes were produced and circulated in the context of a growing popular press, but they were also a corollary of the increasing demands of bourgeois respectability. The jokes discussed thus far might be considered trivial jibes with little relevance to serious issues of power and class. However, comic Irish domestics did serve a significant cultural function in their transgressive energy – an energy that ran counter to the strict rules of Victorian domesticity. The private residence was of course a prime marker of social position in these years, providing as it did the most obvious indicator of a family’s economic status. Men generally relied on wives and servants to uphold and enhance the household’s standing by ensuring the proper display of wealth, a staging achieved through signifying practices ranging from dining and calling etiquette to architectural and furnishing styles. Victorian notions of rational order were strenuously applied to this domestic realm, coming to be manifested in what Anne McClintock has called ‘a geometry of extreme separation and specialisation’ that disciplined nearly all facets of life. The boundaries and regulations formalized in bourgeois households were nevertheless always unstable. There is a sense, in many middle-class accounts of domestic life, that homes could never be clean or neat enough, and household staff never sufficiently competent. In highlighting the impossibility of maintaining such high domestic standards, Irish servant jokes provided a humour of relief, allowing readers to laugh about something resembling reality without feeling responsible for it.

Humour based on stupidity was all the more relevant in settings with rising standards of etiquette and household management, where employers relied on domestics to complete an ever-higher number of specialized tasks. Davies has pointed out that ethnic jokes about stupidity became particularly prominent in urban, industrial societies because of the extent to which such societies depended on a fast-changing and expanding base of skills, knowledge and methods. The complex division of labour that accompanied modernization meant that stupidity posed a greater threat to order, making it a trait ‘best comically banished to the periphery’. While earlier Irish jokes took in qualities such as cowardice, dishonesty and drunkenness as well as stupidity, the servants of comic snippets were in the main simple-minded characters oblivious to the unspoken rules of modern bourgeois life.

Such humour could provide an outlet for personal or even class panic, but it was also capable of shattering class pretensions themselves. The unvarnished honesty of the working Irish woman served to highlight the falseness of bourgeois domestic life, parodying the illusions underpinning genteel sociability. Over the Victorian era, as David Scobey has written, ‘a complex repertory of presentational performances’ was central to generating ‘the

55 Elizabeth Langland, Nobody’s Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 9.
56 Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (New York, NY, and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 168.
57 Donald J. Gray makes a similar point about Victorian jokes in ‘The Uses of Victorian Humour’, Victorian Studies, 10 (1966), 145–76. I also draw here on Freudian notions of humour as a psychic release valve.
58 Davies, Ethnic Humor, pp. 17, 20.
normative “class selves” of a capitalist elite.’

Whereas in earlier times manners were framed within a moral discourse, Victorian etiquette literature promoted politeness as a means of both disguising and facilitating social ambitions. Such ambitions were readily discredited, however, in the presence of an unassimilated Irish immigrant. This was a risk acknowledged, among many others, by the anonymous author of an 1873 article in the New York periodical *Christian Union*. Discussing the intricacies of American housekeeping, the writer remarks that many a mistress ‘arranges her household not as it shall best forward the business of life, but as it shall make the most effective spectacle.’ It was a dishonest approach, the writer stressed, masking a falseness liable to be shown up in social gatherings. As the article put it:

> We would like to have it supposed that we were born to the purple, and should not be in the least discomposed on being bidden to dine at Chatsworth, having the elegance, though not the vastness, of Chatsworth under our own roof. And in comes blundering, candid Bridget, with a wrecked ambition in shape of an omelette soufflé, and unwittingly reveals to the visitor that we never had one before. It is our deep hope, as it is our conviction, that these rough-shod ministers of truth and simplicity will never cease to plague us with the pictorial exhibition of our small sins . . . until every household in the land is willing to lead a life no more showy than it can easily afford, and to attempt no difficult and unfamiliar pretences to impress visitors.

Here, as in many comic snippets, Irish servants represented an authenticity thought to be missing from bourgeois culture. Readers could laugh at their social gaffes because they recognized the insincerities being exposed, whether in themselves or others.

From around the turn of the century, Irish servant jokes took a new direction in also calling attention to the exploitation faced by domestics. There was an increasing recognition in these years of the need to reform the sector, both in England and the United States. The growth in opportunities available to working-class women was giving rise to widespread uncertainty about the future of service, and reports undertaken by concerned women’s groups and government bodies stressed the long hours and lack of independence experienced in service. Some gags showed an awareness of these poor conditions, as in this 1900 snippet run by London’s *Catholic Universe*:

> Mistress severely: ‘If such a thing occurs again, Norah, I shall have to get another servant.’
> Norah: ‘I wish yer would, there’s easily enough work fer two of us.’

In a departure from most earlier ethnic humour, it is the employer who is here depicted as lazy. The overworked servant responds with a knowing wit, showing she is well aware of the injustice at play. A *Harper’s Bazaar* joke from 1912 is even more ironic:

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59 David Scobey, ‘Anatomy of the Promenade: The Politics of Bourgeois Sociability in Nineteenth-Century New York’, *Social History*, 17 (1992), 203–27 (p. 213).
60 John Tosh, ‘Gentlemanly Politeness and Manly Simplicity in Victorian England’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 12 (2002), 445–72 (pp. 455–56).
61 *Christian Union*, 12 February 1873, p. 131.
62 *The Universe*, 15 December 1900, cited in Giulia Ní Dhulchaointigh, ‘Irish Women Domestic Servants in London, c 1901’, *Saothar*, 37 (2012), 87–96 (p. 91).
Maid: Plaze, mum, could I have one o’ yer red geraniums to kape in me bedroom?
Mistress: Oh no, Bridget, your room is too dark. It would die. Plants must have sunlight and fresh air.63

The employer’s meanness would have come as little surprise to those familiar with contemporary discussions of domestic service. Servant-keeping now tended to be discussed in much less positive terms than in Victorian times, with mistresses no longer having the same moral standing as their predecessors. By the new century, print humour displayed a greater sense of class consciousness in the way it portrayed domestic tensions, reflecting the changing contours of discourse on household service. American publications nonetheless moved away from Irish ethnic jokes as Irish women increasingly left domestic service over the early twentieth century. The ‘Bridget’ stereotype gradually faded from popular culture and the press in line with the incorporation of Irish people into the white American mainstream. Irish ethnic humour persisted for longer in England, where Irish immigrants were a valuable source of domestic labour well into the inter-war period. Anti-Irish discrimination remained a strong component of the Irish experience in Britain, of course, for social and political reasons that have been well documented by historians. However, parodies of greenhorn Irish servants had primarily been an American cultural product, and with the waning of such tropes on that side of the Atlantic they also came to lose much of their salience in England.

CONCLUSION

Irish servant jokes were spread and reproduced in great numbers across the transatlantic world over the Victorian era – a marker of just how interlinked domestic sensibilities were in England and the United States. Ethnic humour of this kind partly reflected the prevalence of anti-Irish sentiment on both sides of the Atlantic, attitudes shaped by concerns surrounding Irish immigration as well as ideological notions of Irish racial inferiority. The trope of the unmanageable domestic aligned with contemporary political views of the Irish as a population not yet equipped with the mature reasoning required for equal civic and political status. Waywardness was considered not just an attribute of working-class women but an actual ethnic trait – a mental flaw deriving from the archaic nature of Irish society. As Michael de Nie has written, British writers tended to emphasize perceived Irish defects so as to justify colonial rule, regarding their Hibernian neighbours as being, among other things, governed by temperament rather than logic.64 American commentators might not have had colonial interests to consider in making such judgements, but a good many of them still saw the Irish as a lesser people.

This article argues, however, that ‘Bridget’ jokes were a more nuanced cultural form than the politicized caricatures often prioritized in discussions of anti-Irish prejudice. The representation of comic Irish servants was about more than just ethnic stereotyping, reflecting as it did the anxiety of the middle and upper classes reliant on external help to maintain household order – an intricate endeavour in the context of elaborate Victorian domestic protocols. Irish female immigrants were a particularly common repository for concerns about domestic incompetence, but similar tropes could be found in jokes about servants regardless of their

63 Harper’s Bazaar, 12 August 1912, p. 422.
64 de Nie, The Eternal Paddy, pp. 176–77.
ethnicity. Making fun of those being ordered, rather than those doing the ordering, worked to minimize the extent to which bourgeois families depended on such domestic ‘others’. The huge volume of social commentary devoted to the so-called servant question over these years was a marker of the discomfort felt by employers about managing domestic labour, and joking about the follies of maids and cooks could at least alleviate some of the tensions brought up by servant-keeping. The humorous anecdotes told about domestics could in this sense be more of a release valve than a political commentary, providing as they did an escape from the pressure of daily life.

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Notes on Contributor

Catherine Healy is a Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholar in the Department of History at Trinity College Dublin. Her PhD thesis examines the cultural representation of Irish domestic servants in England and the United States from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. She is currently also developing a research project on single women in modern Irish history.