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# Women and Work in Clonmel: Evidence from the 1881 Census

By Maria Luddy

The nature of women's employment in nineteenth-century Ireland has received almost no attention from historians of the period.<sup>1</sup> The following article is an attempt to look briefly at the employment available to women, aged 20 years and upwards, in the town of Clonmel. The research is based on the results of the 1881 census and the information covers the whole town, most of which was in county Tipperary and a portion in county Waterford.<sup>2</sup>

Published census data tells us a lot about the opportunities available to women as workers. A comparative analysis between different years shows areas of decline or opportunity for women. In 1851, for example, almost 28 per cent of the total female population had specified occupations; by 1911 that total had dropped to 19.5 per cent.<sup>3</sup> Typically, domestic service was the occupation which offered most employment to women. In 1881 48 per cent of women were employed in this area.<sup>4</sup>

Agricultural work for women declined dramatically over the years from 1850 to 1911. In 1851 just over 15 per cent of women were engaged in agricultural work; that figure had dropped to just over 3 per cent in 1911.<sup>5</sup> The professional occupations of teacher, nurse, government official, etc. began to open up to women from the last decades of the nineteenth century. While just 2.5 per cent of women were so engaged in 1881, such professional workers made up almost 9.5 per cent of the female workforce in 1911.<sup>6</sup>

The census information available on the work of women in Clonmel is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, we are dealing with an urban environment, where the range of occupations available to women were broader than those available to rural women. But despite the attachment to an urban district it is clear that typically "rural" occupations also took up women's time. There were, for instance, 91 women listed as agricultural labourers in Clonmel in this period.

Secondly, due to the number of town directories available for Clonmel during the period 1870-1890, we can name some of the women who appear in the census report. Thirdly, using other information (such as newspaper reports) we can look at some of the innovations which were occurring in women's work in the 1880s.

Before examining the census information available for Clonmel, Table 1 provides a breakdown of the Irish population in 1881.

Table 1

Male	Female	Total	Percentage Female to Male
2,533,277	2,641,559	5,174,863	51.04

To place women's employment in Clonmel in context, a glance at the employment figures for all women in Ireland for 1881 is revealing. This is shown in Table 2.





**Table 2**  
**Female Occupations in Ireland: 1881**

<i>Class I:</i>	Professional	62,195
<i>Class II:</i>	Domestic	392,093
<i>Class III:</i>	Commercial	1,496
<i>Class IV:</i>	Agricultural	95,946
<i>Class V:</i>	Industrial	262,931
<i>Class VI:</i>	Indefinite & non-productive	1,826,900

Some weaknesses with the census material require to be pointed out. Historians agree that there is a general under-recording of women's work in such material. Evidence suggests that part-time, irregular, or seasonal work was ignored by census enumerators. Much of women's work is seasonal and irregular, whether it is, for example, domestic service or agricultural work. Often women's contribution in work terms within a family business was not recorded as an "occupation".

Factors such as pregnancy, family circumstances, marriage, etc. contributed to women's irregular forays into the workplace. Instructions given by enumerators were often unclear, particularly when dealing with women's work within the household or family economy. From 1871 only wives who had specific occupations which were not connected with the family business were placed in one of the "productive" categories used by enumerators. Wives who engaged in the family business, for example, were placed in the domestic class in 1871, but in 1881 were removed to the "indefinite and non-productive" category.

Also in 1881 daughters and granddaughters of farmers, who had previously been included as farm workers, were removed to the "indefinite and non-productive" category. It is possible also that many women recorded as domestic servants were the daughters, wives or relatives of the head of the household. The number of wives working in family businesses was also probably under-recorded, and the category for "non-productive or indefinite" occupations masks the level of labour contributed by women to the family business.

Keeping these issues in mind, Table 3 outlines in detail the occupations engaged in by women in Clonmel in 1881.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 3**  
**Occupations of Females in the Town of Clonmel: 1881**

<b>Class I: Professional</b>	
<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number</b>
Prison Officer	3
Municipal Officer (parish, union, district)	13
Nun	42
Midwife	2
School Mistress/Assistant	31
Teacher/Professor/Lecturer/Governess	28
Student	6
Music/Mistress	1
Photographer	1



Table 3 (continued)

**Class II: Domestic**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number</b>
Domestic/Indoor servant	1,246
Lodge/Gate/Park-Keeper	1
Inn/Hotel servant	9
Charwoman	13
Washing and bathing service	99
Hospital and institution service	36
Others engaged in service	344

**Class III: Commercial**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number</b>
Merchant	1
Broker/Agent/Factor	1
Saleswoman/buyer	3
Commercial clerk	2
Omnibus/coach/cab-owner; Livery stable keeper	1
Errand girl	1

**Class IV: Agricultural**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number</b>
Farmer/grazier	218
Agricultural labourer/cottager	91
Shepherdess	2
Farm servant (indoor)	83
Gardener	2
Fisherwoman	1

**Class V: Industrial**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number</b>
Publisher/bookseller/librarian	1
Bookbinder	1
Cabinet maker/upholsterer	4
Furniture broker, dealer	1
Inn keeper, Hotel keeper, publican	19
Lodging house/boarding house keeper	10
Coffee house, eating house keeper	1
Wine and spirit merchant, agent	4
Milkseller/dairy keeper	11
Cheesemonger/butter dealer	3
Butcher/meat salesman	1
Provision — curer, dealer	5
Poulterer/game dealer	7
Fishmonger	3

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**Table 3** (*continued*)

**Class V: Industrial** (*continued*)

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number</b>
Corn miller	1
Baker	2
Confectioner, pastry cook	3
Greengrocer/fruiterer	29
Grocer; tea, coffee, chocolate-dealer, maker	22
Woollen cloth manufacture	14
Cotton manufacture	2
Cotton, calico-printer, dyer, bleacher	1
Lace-manufacture, dealer	1
Weaver [undefined]	11
Draper/linen draper/mercier	2
Fancy goods (textile) — manufacture worker, dealer	3
<b>Others working and dealing in mixed or unspecified materials</b>	1
Tailoress	13
Milliner/dressmaker/staymaker	195
Shirtmaker/seamstress	108
Hosier/haberdasher	2
Shoe, boot-maker/dealer	17
Umbrella, parasol, stick-maker/dealer	2
Old clothes dealer, and others working and dealing in dress	3
Willow, cane, rush, basket-worker/dealer	1
Coke, charcoal, peat cutter-burner/dealer	1
Road-contractor, surveyor, inspector (not local board officer)	1
Road labourer	1
Earthenware, china, glass-dealer	1
Ironmonger/hardware-dealer/merchant	1
General shopkeeper/dealer	152
Pawnbroker	3
Costermonger, huckster, street seller	6
Manufacture/manager/superintendent [undefined]	1
General labourer	142
Apprentice, assistant (undefined)	15
Machinist, machine worker	16
<b>Class VI: Indefinite and Non-Productive</b>	<b>3,793</b>

In the professional class the commonest occupation for women was nun, followed by schoolmistress or assistant and then by teacher or governess. The Presentation Sisters were well established in Clonmel, having arrived in the town in 1813. They were followed in 1845 by the Sisters of Charity. The Loreto convent was established in the year of the census, when six nuns arrived to found a branch of their congregation. The majority of the nuns in Clonmel engaged in teaching and the visitation of the poor of the town.<sup>8</sup>



Teaching was the most respectable occupation for lay women in nineteenth-century Irish society. Many women of the middle classes, who found themselves in financial difficulties or who found it necessary to support themselves, turned to teaching or governing. Although generally badly paid, it allowed them to maintain their status in society. The remuneration of a first-class governess in the 1880s averaged £40 to £60 per year. The cost of board averaged £35; this, included with the salary, made it a relatively attractive occupation for women. Unfortunately there were very few governesses who managed to earn this amount. The most common situation offered to governesses only allowed them a salary of £20 per year.

The average salaries paid by the National Board in 1885 to women teachers were — 1st class, 1st division, £118 5s 6d; 2nd division £85 1s 10d; 2nd class, £69; 3rd class, £54. Female teachers in rural areas were often also allowed a free residence. Many women could survive comfortably on these salaries.<sup>9</sup>

The occupation which provided the greatest employment to women was domestic service. In Clonmel 1,246 women were engaged as indoor domestic servants. This accounts for 39.8 per cent of all women above the age of 20 employed in the town in 1881. Domestic service was seen as a “natural” occupation for women. It allowed them to use and develop those skills which were thought to be uniquely female. Cleaning, cooking, washing, looking after the needs of master and mistress were considered distinctly female tasks.

Domestic service was considered to be a “respectable” form of employment for a woman. It was thought to provide good training for when she set up her own home on marriage. In 1899 a typical servant earned around £10 per year.<sup>10</sup> The highest-paid female servant was the cook, who could earn anything from £14 to £30 per year. In the 1880s the lowest rates offered to general servants, the most common type of servant, were £4 to £8.<sup>11</sup> It seems likely that servants in towns around the country earned less than their city counterparts.

It is not clear from the available evidence how many of these domestics lived in; a number may indeed have lived at home. Working conditions for servants varied and depended on the number of other servants employed and the wealth and attitudes of the employer to their servant's welfare. Servants often worked in single servant households, which usually meant they had to do most of the housework in an age that had few “labour-saving” devices. Their work was demanding and tiring and their working conditions often left a lot to be desired. Women also held employment as charwomen and provided washing and bathing services.

In the 1881 census women in Clonmel, when compared with men, were completely under-represented in the commercial class. This class included occupations such as merchant, accountant, railway workers, and carriers. Women's employment in this area accounts for only 0.28 per cent of women employed in the town, while it accounted for 4.8 per cent of male employment.

In the agricultural class we find that there were 218 women occupied as farmers or graziers and 91 women who were agricultural labourers or cottagers, with 83 listed as indoor farm servants. Farm servants would have been expected to do a range of tasks, including some field work. Indeed, there may have been few, if any, divisions between house and farm work. No study has yet been made of women landowners in Ireland and it is difficult to know how women engaged in farming conducted their businesses or how much of the farm work they would have done themselves.

Women industrial workers, as classified by the census returns, were quite numerous in Clonmel; 844, or 27 per cent of women, were engaged in some form of industrial employment. This ranged from being a greengrocer to a seamstress, corn miller or machinist. Ten women ran lodging or boarding houses. There were 195 milliners, dressmakers and staymakers.





No fewer than 22 women operated as grocers, tea, coffee or chocolate makers or dealers. Amongst these may have been Margaret Slattery, family grocer, who had a premises at 1 Dublin Street. Another was certainly Anne Hill, who ran a spirit and grocery store at 16 Parnell Street. In 1889 that business had been established for over 50 years. From Bassett's 1889 *County Tipperary* we find Mrs. E. A. Coffey running a hardware shop at 65 and 66 Main Street and a Miss C. Burke who kept an hotel at 17 Gladstone Street.<sup>12</sup> Many of the dressmakers who worked in the town would have operated from the town's drapery shops; a number of them would also have taken in work to do from their own homes.

The skill of sewing was one which was used by many philanthropists to broaden the work opportunities of women during and after the years of the Great Famine. Sewing work could be done at home, which meant that the woman's wifely and motherly duties need not be neglected. It also meant that the work could take up any spare time the woman had on her hands.

In October of 1886 Mrs. Bagwell started her Marlfield Embroideries, where she trained young women to "embroider with white flax thread on coloured cotton stuffs".<sup>13</sup> In the same year a group of ladies, including Mrs. Bagwell, also established the Clonmel Cottage Industries. Here "fine underlinen and babies clothes" were made, along with nightgowns, chemises and silk or wool stockings.<sup>14</sup> The number of women employed in these local industries was never large and certainly in the 1880s did not engage more than 30 women. However, the establishment of these enterprises does show that women were willing and able to organise industries which used their particular skills.

Within the industrial category there were also three women listed as pawnbrokers. One of these may have been a Miss Savage, who ran her business from 4 Mary Street in 1889.<sup>15</sup> We also find 16 women working as machinists, which suggests factory work. Four women worked as cabinet makers or upholsterers, and there was one female bookbinder in the town.

Almost 4,000 (3,793) women were listed in the "indefinite and non-productive" class. A number of these would have been the wives and daughters of well-to-do individuals in the town who would not have engaged in paid employment. Hidden in this figure also are those women who would have worked in the family business but would not have been listed as having an occupation, as noted earlier.

**Table 4**  
**Male and Female Occupations in Clonmel: 1881**

	Male	Female
Class I: Professional	743	127
Class II: Domestic	263	1,748
Class III: Commercial	288	9
Class IV: Agricultural	2,544	397
Class V: Industrial	2,156	844
Class VI: Indefinite & Non-Productive	342	3,793

What emerges from a study of the occupations available to women in Clonmel in this period is the fact that the range of their activities was quite extensive. Women worked as teachers, prison officers, domestic servants, hucksters, machinists, weavers midwives, farmers, etc. It is also clear that their opportunities in work revolved primarily around those skills they had as women,





for example, sewing and domestic work. In comparison with the opportunities available to men (see Table 4), women's work opportunities were more limited in all categories except that of the "domestic" category. Women were six times more likely to be occupied in this category than men.

It is perhaps impossible to gauge the real extent of women's work from census material. The definitions of work used by census enumerators may not have been the definitions many women would have used regarding their own work. Taking in a little sewing to tide the family over a harsh spell may not have been regarded by the women who did so as "real work". Housework, which took up so much of women's time and which was essential to the maintenance of the family, was not considered to be work for census purposes.

Even today much of women's work is done from the home and has no official status because it is not made known to tax inspectors or census enumerators. What seems certain from looking at the information available for the nineteenth century is that a great number of women worked to support themselves or their families, whether that work was enumerated or not.

## FOOTNOTES

1. See Mary E. Daly, "Women in the Irish workforce from pre-industrial to modern times", in *Saothar* 7 (1981), pp. 74-82. Idem., *A Social and Economic History of Ireland Since 1800* (Dublin, 1981), *passim*.
2. *Census of Ireland*, 1881.
3. *Census of Ireland*, 1851, 1911.
4. Mona Hearn, "Life for domestic servants in Dublin, 1880-1920", in Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy (eds.), *Women Surviving: Studies in Irish Women's History in the 19th & 20th Centuries* (Dublin, 1990), p. 148.
5. *Census of Ireland*, 1851, 1911.
6. *Census of Ireland*, 1881, 1911.
7. For writings on women's work in England, see Sally Alexander, "Women's work in nineteenth century London", in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (eds.), *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (London, 1976); Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society: England 1750-1880* (London, 1990); Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work, 1840-1940* (London, 1988).
8. See Maria Luddy, "Presentation convents in county Tipperary, 1806-1900", *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 1922, pp. 84-95.
9. Marianne Moffett, "The pay and position of teachers", pamphlet published by the Association of Irish Schoolmistresses and Other Ladies Interested in Education (Dublin, 1887).
10. Daly, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
11. Hearn, *art. cit.*, p. 159.
12. *County Tipperary 100 Years Ago: A Guide and Directory* by George Henry Bassett (Belfast, 1991 reprint), pp. 88, 104, 110.
13. Helen Blackburn (ed.), *A Handy Book of Reference for Irishwomen* (London, 1888), pp. 30-1.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Bassett, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

