

EDWARDIAN BELFAST: A SOCIAL & ECONOMIC PROFILE

Liam Kennedy

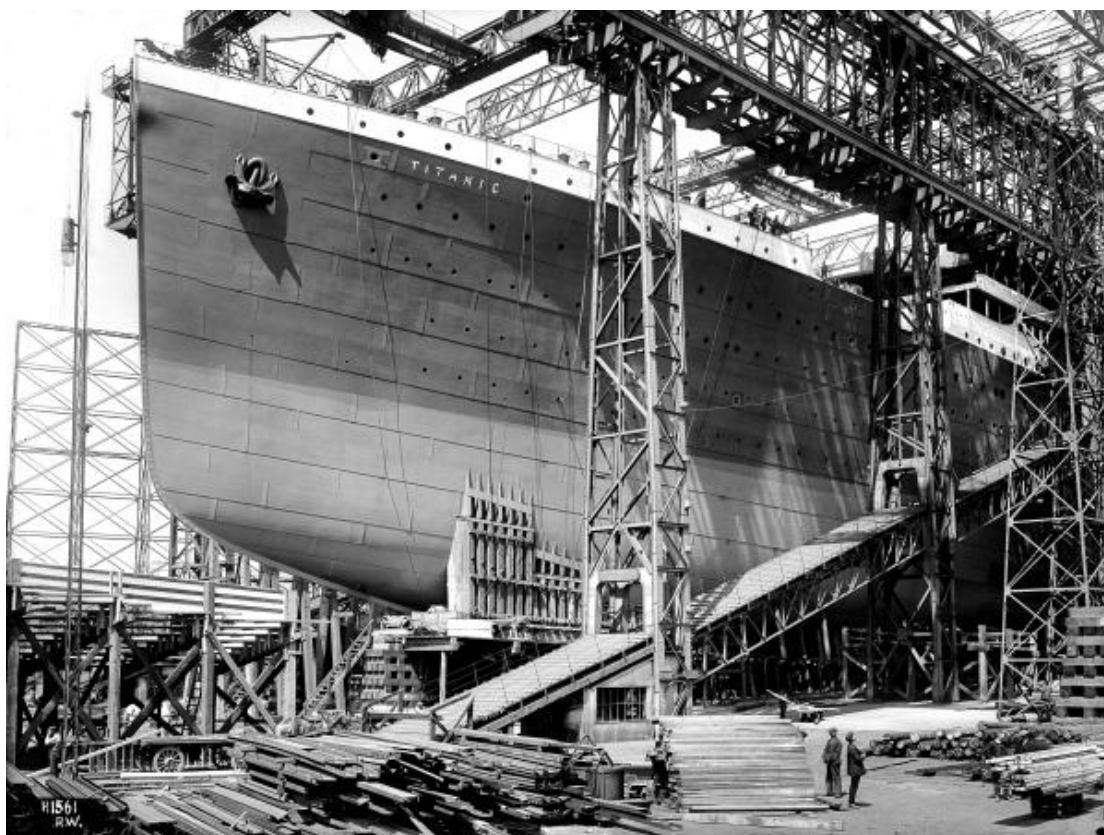


Photo: Building the Titanic

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Belfast is a latecomer in the story of European urbanisation. Unlike many towns and cities, it does not have deep medieval roots. Its origins as an urban settlement only stretch back to the early 1600s and the Plantation of Ulster by English and Scottish settlers.¹ Situated strategically at the mouth of the river Lagan, the town enjoyed vigorous though hardly spectacular commercial growth during the course of the eighteenth

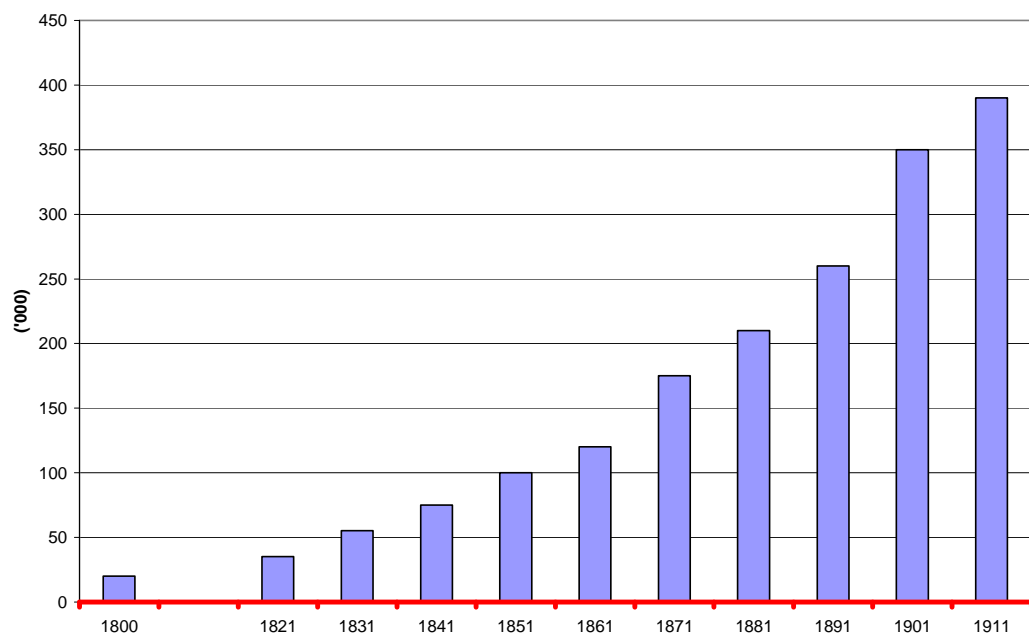
century. Its vibrant civic culture earned it the title – half-serious, half-mocking – of the ‘Athens of the North’. Thus by 1800 it was a thriving market centre and port town, with a strong merchant community serving the agricultural and handicraft industries of its hinterland in east Ulster.² Its population, in round figures, was about 20,000.³ In religious terms it was overwhelmingly Protestant, though there was a small minority, perhaps ten per cent, that was Roman Catholic.⁴ It housed the beginnings of a factory-based cotton industry, though this would be superseded within a few decades by mechanised linen manufacture. When the Halls visited the town at the beginning of the 1840s, they described it as ‘Ireland’s only manufacturing town’:

It was something new to perceive rising above the houses numerous tall and thin chimneys which are indicative of industry, occupation, commerce and prosperity, with the volumes of smoke that issued from them giving unquestionable tokens of full employment⁵

During the course of the nineteenth century Belfast grew phenomenally, with its population multiplying more than fifteen fold. This was on the back of linen manufacturing, shipbuilding and a range of engineering and other industries.⁶ Belfast is thus an outstanding example of the transformative power of modern industrialization: in a very real sense it was a child of the British Industrial Revolution. Its progress bears comparison with the growth of other industrial towns in the north of England and the west of Scotland. In some decades of the nineteenth century it was the fastest-growing town in the United Kingdom. Within Ireland it was the undisputed industrial capital, beginning to challenge

Dublin in terms of size, if not social and political prominence. Marking its transition from a provincial town to a modern Victorian city, it was accorded city status in 1888. By the eve of the First World War the city hosted a range of internationally-competitive firms in linen manufacture, shipbuilding and engineering. The port of Belfast was the nerve centre of a global set of connections, linking the city to sources of raw materials for its industry and final markets for its sophisticated products.

POPULATION OF BELFAST, 1800-1911 ('000s)



The population of the city stood at 387,000 in 1911. The gender division was distinctive: more than half (53 per cent) were women.⁷ In the working and largely unmarried age group of 20-24 year olds, the imbalance was greater still, with women accounting for 56 per cent of this age category. This female surplus had its basis in the opportunities for female employment in the city. The linen industry, the largest employer of labour, was dominated by women, though the supervisory and managerial roles were largely reserved for men.⁸ In 1911 some

53,000 persons were employed in textiles and clothing, most of these in the city's linen mills and factories. Three out of every four of these employees were female, thereby contributing to the gender imbalance in the city.

Gender ratios had implications for marriage opportunities, as for much else. The marriage prospects for men in the city were much better than for women, or indeed as compared to their male counterparts in the Irish countryside. In Ireland as a whole in 1911 some 29 per cent of men and 25 per cent of women in the age group 45-54 years were unmarried and were unlikely ever to marry.⁹ Viewed in international context, Irish society was remarkable for the restraint shown in relation to marriage. In Belfast, however, only 13 per cent of males remained unmarried in this older age range, which is less than half the celibacy rate for Ireland as a whole. The prospects for women in the marriage stakes were less good, though, with one in five (21 per cent) unmarried in the 45-54 age category. To some extent, of course, spinsterhood may have been by choice. The urban economy furnished economic niches that could sustain women living independently, much more so than rural Ireland where there was a deficit of women relative to men. Single or widowed women with some financial resources could take in boarders or engage in retailing, while working class women might find employment in the mills and factories, and in domestic service. Within marriage, the shadow of death wasn't far away. Infant and child mortality was an ever-present danger, while one in five (19 per cent) of all women were returned as widows at the time of the 1911 census. Most of these were in the upper age range, and often heads of households in their own right, such as Frances Sarah McIlvenny of the Falls Road, Belfast. Frances was 61 years old in 1911, a spirit grocer and Catholic, with three surviving children.¹⁰ Occasionally, though, one comes across a very young widow,

such were the vagaries of the times in terms of disease and industrial accidents. Margaret McCartney, who worked as a living-in servant and cook for a Presbyterian minister in the Malone area of Belfast, was only thirty years of age and widowed at the time of the census.¹¹ Her religious background was Church of Ireland and she apparently had no children.

SOCIAL CONDITIONS

Contrary to popular impression, working class housing was both affordable and of good quality. Only a tiny proportion of families huddled together with another family. In most instances this was a temporary economy measure, at an early stage in married life or as a result of a downturn in employment. So we find Jonathan Burns, a ‘gate man’, and his wife Catherine mentioned in the household schedules for 1911 as sharing their four-roomed rented house in Dewey Street in west Belfast with their married daughter, also named Catherine, and her husband, Robert Murdie, a general labourer.¹² The younger couple had been married for less than one year, and as yet had no child. The presumption must be that this co-residence was a brief stage in the life cycle of the Murdie couple and that they got rented accommodation of their own not long afterwards. The overcrowding to be found in the slum dwellings of Dublin or Glasgow was largely unknown in Belfast, while the suburbs of Malone and Belmont catered for an expanding middle class.

Houses were graded as first to fourth class in the Irish census reports, fourth class being the most undesirable. Four out of every five houses in Belfast were graded as second or third class, with most of these dwellings falling into the second class category. These were the rows of red-brick terraced houses – often in the shadow of a great mill or factory – that characterised much of the city’s streetscape. In all, out of a housing

stock of 75,172 inhabited dwellings in the city, only 288 were one-roomed tenements occupied by two or more persons. A quarter of these one-roomed tenements were clustered in one ward alone (out of fifteen), this being the Dock ward. The strong supply of housing, relative to demand, which was the product of speculative building in the 1890s, meant a good range of rented accommodation and house rents that were among the lowest in the United Kingdom.¹³ Suffice it to say that some of the photographic evidence of extremely poor housing that can be found for the period - for example, a grim image of Mitchell's Court, Brown Square, which features in the Hogg Collection - is untypical of working class housing in general in Edwardian Belfast.¹⁴

Belfast was a city of in-migration. The proportion of people with birth places in counties Antrim and Down (including Belfast), who were resident in the city on census night, was typically three in every four during the period 1851-1911. But this understates the extent of movement as many of these inhabitants had made short-distance migrations from the other towns, villages and rural areas of counties Antrim and Down to the city. Belfast, it should be explained, was largely located in County Antrim but the city expanded across the river Lagan into County Down during the course of industrialization. Unfortunately the census report only gives birthplaces for the gross entities of County Antrim and County Down, whereas ideally one would like more geographically detailed points of departure.

In addition to those who migrated to the city from counties Antrim and Down, most other migrants came from the other counties of the province of Ulster. This conforms to a larger British pattern of internal migration occurring over short distances. Thus, 78 per cent of the inhabitants of the city in 1911 were born either in Belfast or in other parts of counties Antrim and Down, and a further eleven per cent came from

the other Ulster counties.¹⁵ A tiny three per cent came from elsewhere in Ireland but perhaps the really striking figure is the seven per cent whose birthplace was across the sea in Britain. McRaid makes the point that one of the largest concentrations of Scots, living outside of Scotland, was to be found in Belfast.¹⁶

Few of the city's inhabitants were born outside of the United Kingdom, less than one per cent in total. This tiny stream of newcomers included 424 Russians, mostly Jewish migrants it may be surmised.¹⁷ These were followed in descending order of importance for European immigrants by 151 Germans and 149 Italians. America supplied 867 foreign-born residents, most of whom were from the United States and a majority of whom may be assumed to have been of Irish extraction.¹⁸ We may sum up by saying Belfast was a city of in-migration, largely from the Ulster countryside, but not of immigration from distant parts.

Inevitably of course some departed the city, for one reason or another. It might be trade depressions, for instance, in which case skilled labourers might well migrate across the channel to the shipyards on Clydeside or Merseyside, returning again when employment picked up. Others might be permanent migrants to North America, to Canada in particular where the links with Ulster were strong. But unlike most of Ireland, where emigration was endemic, the outflow of people was small compared to the inflows. Emigration from counties Antrim and Down (including Belfast) totalled 3,628 in 1910. Three-fifths of these were male, a further confirmation of the opportunities for work for women in Belfast.

Many commentators have remarked on the Presbyterian character of Belfast, and this is borne out by the demographic facts as well as by architectural features of the city. The largest denominational grouping was Presbyterian, accounting for 34 per cent of the population, closely

followed by the Protestant Episcopalians, or members of the Church of Ireland, at 31 per cent. The Roman Catholic share was lower at 24 per cent. Significantly this had been falling during the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1861 its share had been as high as 34 per cent but while the Roman Catholic population had grown in absolute size in each successive decade, the proportion of Roman Catholics within the city's population was in long-run decline. (This trend towards relative decline would be reversed, ironically enough, after the formation of the Northern Ireland state and during the course of the twentieth century). Whether this was due mainly to discrimination against Catholic job seekers or informal recruitment mechanisms that favoured labour market 'insiders' and their kinfolk, or still other factors, is not clear.¹⁹ Outside of the big three churches, Methodists accounted for a further 6 per cent of the population. In line with other protestant nonconformist groups, the Methodists had grown in strength since 1861 (the first year in which a question on religion was included in the Irish census). This suggests some fragmentation of the Protestant denominational bloc during the course of rapid urbanisation and industrialization. The quest for low-church or more fundamentalist forms of religious devotion may in turn have been associated with the stresses and strains affecting the lives of the recently-recruited industrial proletariat.

[Table 1 at end of the essay]

Literacy is one of the concomitants of economic and social development and also a measure of the human capital embodied in the population. On this count, Belfast scored well by comparison with other parts of Britain and Ireland. If the census report is taken at face value, then 96 per cent of Belfast inhabitants, aged nine years or over in 1911,

were literate. This is in the sense of possessing basic skills in reading and writing. One of the limitations of this and other censuses, however, is that personal characteristics were self-reported. Signing up, as it were, for illiteracy was not an attractive proposition and no doubt gave rise to some social embarrassment. We know from examining the original census forms that a household head who claimed to be able to read and write on the census return – completed by another member of the family or perhaps more likely by the census enumerator (a member of the Royal Irish Constabulary) – was occasionally unable to sign the form. The “X” signatures amounted to 4.1 per cent of the households in our sample, which tallies well with the overall results for Belfast.²⁰

There is some minor variation in literacy by geographical area, by social class, by gender and by religion. For instance, in west Belfast, almost five per cent of people were returned as illiterate, whereas in more affluent south Belfast the corresponding proportion was less than half this. In terms of social class, there was virtually no illiteracy reported for the 7,300 males in Class 1 – this census classification refers to the professional stratum in the social hierarchy – whereas among the 20,000 or so general and factory male labourers the reported level of illiteracy was as high as seven per cent. When illiteracy is viewed along exclusively gender lines, a small advantage in favour of men emerges: only 2.8 per cent of men were illiterate as compared to 4.3 per cent of women in the Belfast population.

[Table 2 at end of the essay]

The higher incidence of illiteracy, or at least reported illiteracy, among women could have demographic as well as labour market implications in relation to fertility, child care and child mortality.

Illiteracy also varied by religious persuasion, affecting seven per cent of Roman Catholics but less than two per cent of Methodists (to take as reference point the most literate of the major denominations). Still, to use Akenson's felicitous phrase, while patterns of variation are apparent, we are dealing with 'small differences' in levels of illiteracy within the population, be it broken down by area, social class, religion or gender.²¹ The fact remains that more than 90 per cent of people in *all* social categories were literate, as reported to the census enumerators.

The language of Belfast was of course English, as it had been since its foundation in the seventeenth century. A tiny minority, a mere two per cent of the population, claimed an ability to speak Irish or Gaelic in 1911. According to the census of that year, some 7,591 people, divided roughly equally between males and females and most of them under the age of thirty, could speak the language.²² This was in addition to English as there were no monoglot speakers of Gaelic (if one discounts a handful of children aged less than ten years of age). Ironically, among the most fluent Gaelic speakers were members of the Royal Irish Constabulary, some of whom had been recruited from the West of Ireland where a knowledge of *An Gaeilge* was still widespread. Thus Neal Gallagher, an RIC (Royal Irish Constabulary) constable born in County Donegal but living with his family in the Shankill area of Belfast in 1911, put himself down as Gaelic speaking on the census form.²³ Others who did so, however, may have been expressing an aspiration as much as an ability. The recorded numbers of Irish speakers in Belfast doubled between 1901 and 1911, which raises the suspicion that the activities of the language revival movement had led, not just to an increase in Irish speaking, which was undoubtedly the case, but also to some inflation in the numbers of Irish speakers.

One measure of extreme poverty, or destitution, was the number of people accommodated in the Belfast Union Workhouse. This was a Victorian institutional building located on the Lisburn Road, at some distance from the centre of the city. The number of inmates varied according to the season, the trade cycle, business conditions in the city, and the proportion of older people in the population. On the night of the 2nd April, 1911, there were 3,426 inmates in the Workhouse, a majority of them being men. This represents just under one per cent of the population, suggesting buoyant trading and employment conditions in the city, as well as care by family and kinfolk of the elderly and the frail in the community (a burden lightened by the granting of Old Age Pensions to the over-seventies in Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' three years earlier).²⁴

What of the age structure of the population? While the city boasted six inhabitants aged 100 years or over, Belfast was a comparatively youthful city in 1911. More than half the population (52%) was aged less than 25 years. This also implies a low dependency ratio. Belfast was a city of work, indeed of long hours of work. Engineering and shipyard employees, for example, worked an average of 53 hours per week, not counting meal times or overtime.²⁵ For skilled workers, wage rates were high, amongst the highest in the United Kingdom.²⁶ Nor were these high wages confined to a small section of the workforce. The proportion of skilled workers was relatively large. Gibbon concludes it was as high as one quarter of all male workers, which meant that the 'labour aristocracy' was more developed in Belfast than in most comparable industrial towns (where the proportion was much lower at ten to fifteen per cent of the male workforce).²⁷ In Belfast most craftsmen and mechanics were in high-technology industries such as shipbuilding and engineering, bringing

home wages of around forty shillings per week.²⁸ To place this in context, the rent of a five- or six-roomed terraced house, the kind of housing such households would have occupied, was five or six shillings per week, and so amounting to 15 per cent or less of weekly earnings.²⁹

The position of unskilled workers was very different however. Housing costs were low, admittedly, with a modest kitchen house renting for three to four shillings per week. But a surplus of labour in the Irish countryside kept wages low, at well under half the rate paid to skilled workers.³⁰

Some working class families were obliged to send their children out to work on the half-time system (half time spent in school and half time in the work place). It was only in 1901 that the legal starting age for work was raised from eight to twelve years.³¹ In the poorer families married women, particularly those within walking distance of a spinning mill or weaving factory, combined work and child rearing so as to make ends meet. Life was a hard grind. Yet despite the unhealthy working conditions of the many women who worked in the textile industry in Belfast, many recall the camaraderie, singing and storytelling of the workplace with affection.³²

SOCIAL CLASS, RELIGION AND SECTARIANISM

The rewards of work and enterprise were unequally distributed. As in other industrial cities, society in Belfast was stratified along the lines of social class. In the words of Sybil Gribbon:

The hierarchy of class dominated Edwardian society. At its apex were the three hundred families, whose households at Strandtown or on the high ridges of the Antrim and Malone Roads contained a gardener and coachman as well as several indoor servants.³³

These were the captains of industry and commerce, including a handful of self-made millionaires, and a sprinkling of the landed gentry. Beneath these were the middle classes, a diverse category that included top surgeons and lawyers as well as lowly clerks and commercial travellers desperately clinging to the coat-tails of respectability. The skilled working class we have already encountered, involved in church and trade union, trading at the Belfast Co-operative Society, and proportionately larger than in many other industrial towns. At the broad base of the social pyramid, if one excludes vagrants and the destitute, were the masses of semi-skilled and unskilled labourers. Among women these included female spinners and weavers, living-in servants, washerwomen, charwomen, machinists and factory labourers. The male occupations included carters, porters, coal heavers, male servants and over 20,000 general and factory labourers.

Paradoxically, modern industrialization co-existed with pre-modern forms of social conflict. Belfast was deeply divided, not just along class lines but along lines of religion and nationality as well.³⁴ There had been instances of united working class action to demand higher wages, such as the Dockers' Strike of 1907, and this spread quickly to other sections of the workforce.³⁵ But the more pervasive and enduring divisions were those revolving round religious and political identity. Simplifying, but only a little, Catholics and nationalists sought Home Rule for Ireland while Protestants and unionists were determined to maintain the union with Britain. Sectarian and communal conflict was the outcome of these contradictory political aspirations.

Social and economic differences as between Catholic and Protestant exacerbated but did not cause these divisions. The ownership of industrial capital was overwhelmingly in Protestant hands; Catholics

were underrepresented relative to their share of the population in law and medicine but were overrepresented among general and factory labourers.³⁶ We can get a summary view of social stratification by religion for 1901 from the work of A.C. Hepburn (see Table 3), where OD stands for Other Denominations or denominations other than Catholic:³⁷

[Table 3]

Classes 1 and 2 refer to the high end of the income and wealth distribution: professionals, higher civil servants, successful entrepreneurs and business managers. Class 3 is at least as heterogeneous, and is comprised of lower white-collar occupations and skilled (manual) workers. Class 4 refers to semi-skilled workers, many of whom were to be found in the shipyards and building trades. Class 5 was the most numerous and contained the teeming population of unskilled and casual labourers. Two points in the table are worth underlining: the Catholic population was disadvantaged relative to the Protestant population of Belfast; it was not, however, disadvantaged relative to British society as a whole. Thus, in Catholic-Protestant relations a sense of *relative* deprivation was a divisive force in Belfast social life, notwithstanding the fact that in absolute terms most poor working class people came from Protestant backgrounds.

METHODOLOGY

A number of writers have commented on the apparent similarities in demographic behaviour as between the Catholic and Protestant populations. As Collins and Hepburn show, mean household size was

much the same in 1901. The age of male household heads, on average, was broadly similar; as were the proportions of households with children, coresiding relatives and lodgers.³⁸ But fertility might be a different matter. Nuptiality might also vary by religion and social class.

To explore these issues in greater detail we have constructed a database of Belfast households in 1911. This, the BelFam database, consists of some 40,000 individuals or just over ten per cent of those enumerated. While it is not, strictly speaking, a random sample, the major geographical areas within the city are represented, as are middle class and working class districts.

The sample used in this study, however, is a smaller one, and is really a subset of our larger BelFam database. It is composed of the thousand or so couples (1,016), where the wife was aged 50 years or over in 1911. We have been able to trace almost nine hundred (894) of these married couples back to the 1901 census as well, even though in many instances the couple had changed addresses between census dates. Changes of address, it is worth noting, indicate high levels of residential mobility in the Edwardian city. The reason the sample was restricted to couples in which the wife was fifty years of age or older was to get at completed fertility. The husbands were typically a few years older than their wives but in a minority of cases were less than fifty years of age. We are also interested in seeing each couple in 1901 as well as in 1911 for a specific reason. This is because doubts surround the accuracy of the ages of older men and women, as reported in the 1911 census.³⁹ The introduction of Old Age Pensions a few years earlier gave older people an incentive to exaggerate their age, and this could skew badly the study of fertility and age at marriage. Richard Rice of Foxglove Street in east Belfast, to take but one example, aged inexplicably from 47 to 65 years, a difference of eighteen years, over the intercensus decade of 1901-11.⁴⁰

Rice's occupation was given as labourer, and he could read and write as is evidenced by the fact that he was able to complete and sign the census form, so illiteracy is not the obvious explanation.

In general, we have assumed that the ages reported in 1901 are the more accurate of the two. We cannot of course discount the possibility, indeed the certainty, that some of the ages reported in 1901 were not accurate either, but on balance the likelihood is that 1901 is the better benchmark.

MARRIAGE, RELIGION AND SOCIAL STATUS

By the early twentieth century the Irish were famed for their late age at marriage and a low propensity to marry.⁴¹ But Belfast had many of the features of an industrial town of the kind found in the north of England or the west of Scotland, so generalisations about Ireland do not necessarily extend to Belfast. As we saw earlier, marriage rates for men were much higher in Belfast as compared to Ireland generally. Permanent celibacy was correspondingly lower, with only 13 per cent of Belfast men in the age group, 45-54 years of age, not married in 1911. This was much the same as in England and Wales.⁴²

One in five women in Belfast, however, remained permanently celibate, which is a high proportion forsaking marriage, even if the countrywide average was higher still at one in every four women. The corresponding proportion for women in England and Wales was considerably lower at 16 per cent.⁴³ So, men in Belfast approximated to the English standard while women in Belfast were situated mid-way between the Irish and English levels.

The proportion marrying is only one dimension of nuptiality. Age at marriage, which varies over time, is important, not least because it had major implications for the number of children likely to be born. The published census does not, however, present marriage ages broken down by religion, social class or locality. The aggregate picture though is that Irish men in 1911 delayed marrying, on average, until their early thirties while Irish women were not far behind at around 28 years.⁴⁴ By international standards these were late ages at marriage, contributing to the image of Irish society as the demographic freak of Western Europe. But what of urban Ireland, and of Belfast in particular? Our sample of older couples in 1911 provides a window on marriage age in the city. In view of our earlier discussion, it is important to bear the problem of age misreporting firmly in mind. Table 4 displays average age at marriage (AAM) for men and women in our Belfast sample, using age information for the same individuals from the 1901 census and the 1911 census.⁴⁵

[Table 4]

The differences between the 1901 and the 1911 estimates are striking. Correcting for age – assuming age in 1901 is the more accurate of the two reported⁴⁶ – makes a difference, and this is especially so in the case of women. So, on average, Catholic women married two and a half years or thirty months earlier than is suggested by the uncorrected information taken from the 1911 household schedules. Catholic men married some twenty months earlier. *These are worryingly large discrepancies*, and they apply to other denominations as well, though to a lesser degree.⁴⁷ Second, corrected age at marriage for men was broadly similar for all denominational groups, though Presbyterians appear to

marry a little later in life. Third, Catholic women are shown to marry at an earlier age than other denominations, and more than a year earlier than Presbyterian women for instance. This could have important implications for completed family size, among other issues. Finally, and most importantly perhaps, it is clear that both men and women married at much earlier ages in Belfast than in Ireland generally, the heavily rural character of the latter carrying much of the explanatory weight for that curious state of affairs. Belfast was different.

FERTILITY AND FERTILITY DIFFERENCES

A frequently noted feature of life in later twentieth century Northern Irish society has been the contrast between Catholic and Protestant fertility. In 1971 Catholic fertility was two-thirds higher.⁴⁸ But were there visible differences a half century or more earlier in time? The historical origins of this divergence – one replete with political as well as social and demographic significance – are not well understood. Perhaps it was the case that some Ulster men and women were less ‘tardy and unenthusiastic participants in the European fertility transition’ than is sometimes imagined.⁴⁹

Catholic fertility in 1911, it turns out, was higher than that for Protestant couples, but not by very much. But fertility was also higher among working-class families, as compared to middle-class families, and Catholics were over-represented among the working class of Belfast. So it may be that the apparent difference between the two religious groupings was down to social class rather than religion.

CONCLUSION

Belfast occupies a unique position within Irish economy and society, principally because of its status as the lone industrial outpost of any scale on the island of Ireland. There were other industrial towns in Ulster but none was remotely comparable to Belfast in terms of size and range of industries. We can get a sense of this by comparing Belfast with Derry, the second most important industrial centre in the north of Ireland. Derry had grown fourfold between 1821 and 1911 but the already larger town of Belfast grew tenfold in the same period.⁵⁰ In 1911 Belfast had ten times as many industrial workers as Derry.⁵¹ This is testament to the extent to which Belfast dominated the industrial landscape of Ulster and Ireland in the early twentieth century.

Consistent with this commanding position it attracted short-distance migrants to the city, and hence its youthful population, its low levels of emigration, and a gender ratio biased towards women. By virtue of its high-technology industries, which were geared towards exacting export markets, the city housed a substantial 'labour aristocracy', with up to a quarter of male workers in 1911 classified as skilled workers. To pursue the demographic characteristics of Belfast in more detail it was necessary to turn to the single most revealing set of sources on Belfast society during the Edwardian period, that is, the manuscript returns of the censuses of population for 1901 and 1911. They are generally believed to be reliable across a range of categories of information, from birthplace and religion, to literacy, occupation and marital status, and this indeed appears to be the case. However, we can be less sanguine about the ages reported in 1911, which in turn are vital to the study of issues such as fertility, mortality, age at marriage, age differences between spouses, and the age structure of the population in 1911. One of the principal findings

of this chapter is that age misreporting at the time of the 1911 census was serious for older people, particularly so when one seeks to compute measures such as the mean age at marriage of men and women, either for the population as a whole or broken down by religious affiliation. The misreporting of ages seems to have been most acute in the Catholic community, and particularly amongst women. We have, therefore, corrected the age information reported in 1911 by reference to the ages recorded against the same individuals in 1901, when the distorting effect of the introduction of the Old Age Pensions' Act of 1908 was not operative.

Having corrected the age information, it is apparent that Belfast does not fit neatly an Irish template of demographic behaviour. The frequency of marriage was higher and age at marriage was appreciably lower than in Ireland generally. Broadly speaking, these variables conform to English and Scottish patterns, though the high incidence of non-marriage among women in Belfast is worth highlighting, being somewhere between Irish and British levels.

The fertility of married couples in Belfast deserves closer examination than is possible here. Fertility was generally high, though somewhat lower than in Ireland generally.⁵² Fertility varied by age at marriage, something that might be expected, and it also varied by social class. A large family size was more a feature of working-class than of middle-class life. Family size also varied by religious background, with Catholics, on average, having larger families. However, it is possible that social class was the real determinant of this fertility difference, as explained earlier.

As the Edwardian years drew to a close, Belfast had every reason to feel confident about its economic and social progress. But European rivalries

were sharpening, while at home the ‘Irish Question’ was coming to the forefront of politics at Westminster. The future was unknowable in 1911 but already some dark clouds were visible on the horizon. Within a few short years Belfast, Ireland and Europe would be plunged into wholesale slaughter. Millions would die, in the aftermath of which the Edwardian era would come to assume a retrospective golden glow.

Table 1. The Changing Religious Composition of Belfast, 1861-1911

	Catholic	Anglican	Presbyterian	Methodist	Other
1861	33.9	24.6	35.2	4.1	2.2
1881	28.8	28.1	34.4	4.4	4.3
1911	24.1	30.5	33.7	6.2	5.5

Source: Census of Ireland, 1861, 1881, 1911.

Table 2. Illiteracy (%) by gender and religion in Belfast in 1911

DENOMINATION:	MALE	FEMALE
Roman Catholic	5.4	8.6
Protestant Episcopalian	2.8	4.1
Presbyterian	1.5	2.2
Methodist	1.1	1.7
Other	1.1	1.7
Total	2.8	4.3

Source: *Census of Ireland, 1911: Province of Ulster: City (or County Borough) of Belfast*, British Parliamentary Papers, [Cd. 6051], 1912, p. 37.

Table 3. Social class by religion (male household heads)

	RC	OD	Britain
	%	%	%
Classes 1 and 2	13	13	15
Class 3	8	12	7
Class 4	31	35	33
Class 5	44	36	45
Not classified	4	4	0
	100	100	100

Source: Hepburn, *A Past Apart* (1996), p. 64.

Table 4. Average Age at Marriage of Men and Women by religion in Belfast in 1911

	Male AAM		Female AAM	
	1901 age	1911 age	1901 age	1911 age
Catholic	26.49	28.17	22.98	25.48
Church of Ire	26.15	27.31	23.54	25.11
Presbyterian	27.29	28.18	24.10	24.96
Methodists	25.42	25.94	23.22	24.26
Protestants	26.61	27.55	23.77	24.93
Overall	26.62	27.77	23.62	25.11
Number of cases	854	873	866	873

Source: Dataset of matched couples, Belfast 1901 & 1911.

¹ J. Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992).

² T.W. Moody & J.C. Beckett (eds.), *Ulster since 1800: A Political and Economic Survey* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1954).

³ W.A. Maguire, *Belfast* (Keele: Ryburn Publishing, 1993), p. 38.

⁴ A.C. Hepburn, *A Past Apart: Studies in the History of Catholic Belfast, 1850-1950* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 1996).

⁵ *Hall's Ireland: Mr & Mrs Hall's Tour of 1840*, edited by M. Scott (London: Sphere, 1984), p. 342.

⁶ L. Kennedy & P. Ollerenshaw (eds.), *An Economic History of Ulster, 1820-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985).

⁷ *Census of Ireland, 1911. Province of Ulster: City (or County Borough) of Belfast*, BPP (1912). All references to the demographic and related structures of Belfast in 1911, unless otherwise stated, are based on calculations from this source.

⁸ B. Messenger, *Picking up the Linen Threads* (London: University of Texas Press, 1978); M. Cohen, *Linen, Family & Community in Tullylish, County Down, 1690-1914* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1997). For some autobiographical reflections see William Topping, *A Life in Linenopolis: Memoir* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 1992).

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- ⁹ Calculated from W.E. Vaughan and A.J. Fitzpatrick, *Irish Historical Statistics: Population, 1821-1971* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1978), pp. 81, 90.
- ¹⁰ BelFam (Belfast Family & Community History) database, compiled by Liam Kennedy. This contains digitised information on some 40,000 Belfast residents, as extracted from the household schedules of the census of Ireland, 1911. See <http://www.belfastfamilyhistory.com>. These and later references to individual and household behaviour are taken from this source.
- ¹¹ BelFam database: the Colquhoun household schedule, Wellington Park, Belfast.
- ¹² BelFam database: the Burns household schedule, Dewey Street, Shankill, Belfast
- ¹³ *Working Class Rents, Housing & Retail Prices*, BPP [Cd. 3864], 1908.
- ¹⁴ Mitchell's Court, Brown Square (Y2475 Hogg Collection, Ulster Museum, Belfast).
- ¹⁵ Among these counties, the largest source of immigrants was County Armagh, followed by County Tyrone. It is clear that Belfast fits the kinds of generalisations found in the literature: that internal migrations usually involve short- rather than long-distance movements of people.
- ¹⁶ D. McRaid, 'Migration and Emigration, 1600-1945' in L. Kennedy and P. Ollerenshaw (eds.), *Ulster since 1600* (forthcoming, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- ¹⁷ On the Jewish community in Ireland, though the primary focus is on Dublin, see C. Ó Gráda, *Jewish Ireland in the Age of Joyce: A Socioeconomic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) and D. Keogh, *Jews in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998).
- ¹⁸ This becomes clear from an inspection of the more detailed census enumerators' returns.
- ¹⁹ On the role of family and kinship networks in recruiting factory labour see M. Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971). For Belfast, see Messenger, *Linen Threads*, pp. 33-34.
- ²⁰ Our sample is described later and consists of information taken from the original manuscript forms filled in by households at or close to census night, 2nd April 1911. The originals are held at the National Archives, Ireland, Bishop Street, Dublin.
- ²¹ D.H. Akenson, *Small Differences: Irish Catholics and Protestants, 1815-1922* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1988).
- ²² For a longer time perspective see F. De Brún, *Belfast and the Irish Language* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2006).
- ²³ It is noteworthy, in terms of the religious composition of the force, that half of the policemen based in Belfast were from a Catholic background.
- ²⁴ C. Ó Gráda, "'The Greatest Blessing of All': The Old Age Pension in Ireland", *Past and Present*, 175, 1 (2002), pp. 124-61.
- ²⁵ *Report of an Enquiry by the Board of Trade into the Earnings and Hours of Labour of Workpeople of the United Kingdom*, BPP, 88(1911), pp. 154,176.
- ²⁶ J. Lynch, *A Tale of Three Cities: Comparative Studies in Working Class Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).
- ²⁷ S. Gribbon, *Edwardian Belfast: A Social Profile* (Belfast: Appletree, 1982), p. 17.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 16.
- ²⁹ Or to use other components of the cost of living, a shilling would have bought a pound of butter, one and a half lbs of pork, 20 lbs of potatoes, ten head of cabbage or a dozen herring. See, for example, the Belfast retail prices reported in the *Northern Whig*, 8 July 1911.
- ³⁰ The earnings of male general labourers in the linen industry, for instance, averaged about seventeen shillings per week in 1906. Female spinners took home ten to eleven shillings per week. *Report of an Enquiry by the Board of Trade into the Earnings and Hours of Labour of Workpeople of the United Kingdom*, BPP, 80 (1909), p. 49. The Report acknowledged (page 49 also): 'In Ireland the wages of labourers are noticeably low.'
- ³¹ Messenger, *Linen Threads*, p. 30.
- ³² Messenger, *Linen Threads*, pp. 226-7.
- ³³ Gribbon, *Edwardian Belfast*, pp. 13-14.
- ³⁴ H. Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1980); A.C. Hepburn, *A Past Apart* (1996).
- ³⁵ Gray, J., *City in Revolt: James Larkin and the Belfast Dock Strike of 1907* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1985).
- ³⁶ The Catholic share of the population of Belfast was 24% in 1911. Catholics accounted for 18% of positions in the legal profession and only 15% of those in medicine. However, they made up 32% of the general labouring class where wages were amongst the lowest and earnings intermittent. (These figures relate to male occupations only but the overall picture is little different.)

³⁷ Hepburn, *A Past Apart* (1996), p. 64. These findings are derived from a sample of 4050 household returns for Belfast 1901. The British data are for 1911.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 55.

³⁹ J. W. Budd and T. Guinnane, 'Intentional age-misreporting, age-heaping, and the 1908 Old Age Pensions Act in Ireland', *Population Studies*, 1992, 45 (3), 497-518.

⁴⁰ BelFam database: the Rice household, Foxglove Street, Belfast.

⁴¹ R.E. Kennedy, *The Irish: Emigration, Marriage and Fertility* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 139-72.

⁴² Ibid, p. 144.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 144.

⁴⁴ We have calculated the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) for men in Ireland in 1911 at 33 years and for women at 29 years. The SMAM is an indirect measure of age at marriage and the estimates will be affected by the problem of age reporting noted earlier, but only marginally, we suspect.

⁴⁵ The generic term Protestant in this table refers to the main churches only, that is, members of the Church of Ireland, Presbyterians, and Methodists.

⁴⁶ This seems reasonable in view of the changed financial incentives facing older people. The picture is somewhat muddled though by the fact that age heaping – reporting an age ending in a five or a zero – was more pronounced in 1901 as compared to 1911. This is likely to be the lesser of the two effects.

⁴⁷ Two points to bear in mind here: the 1901 ages are also subject to some error; the size of the sample is not large and could conceivably paint a misleading picture in relation to the population as a whole.

⁴⁸ Cormac Ó Gráda and Brendan Walsh, 'Fertility and Population in Ireland, North and South', *Population Studies*, 49 (1995), p. 266

⁴⁹ C. Ó Gráda, 'Economic Status, Religion and Demography in an Ulster Town in the early Twentieth Century', *History of the Family*, 13 (2008), 355.

⁵⁰ Vaughan and Fitzpatrick, *Irish Historical Statistics* (1978), pp. 36,38.

⁵¹ Calculated from the *Census of Ireland, 1911. Province of Ulster*.

⁵² M. E. Daly, *The Slow Failure: Population Decline and Independent Ireland, 1922-1973* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), p. 94.