Marriage, fertility, social class and religion in an Irish industrial city: Belfast 1911

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Abstract

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We know much about the demography of rural Ireland, particularly its slowness in participating in the European fertility transition, but much less about urban Ireland. Belfast was Ireland’s only industrial city. For this reason alone the demography of the city commands interest. It was also the most socially divided of Irish cities, with the major form of conflict running along ethno-religious lines. Using the original manuscript census returns completed by households in Belfast in 1911, we focus attention on marriage and fertility and their interrelationship with social class and religion. Women’s age at marriage bore a negative relationship to fertility, as expected. Fertility also varied by social class, with the wives of professional men having the smallest family sizes. Fertility appears to have varied by religious denomination as well, though this finding is dependent on the particular specification of the regression model. After controlling for age at marriage, socio-economic status, and geographical area within the city, a negative relationship emerged between Protestant religious affiliation and fertility. That is relative to Catholics in the city. Wealth and literacy variables appear to have had no discernible impact on fertility behaviour, though the measures used are admittedly crude. Thus, deliberate family limitation was beginning to be implemented in the early twentieth century, with Protestants more likely to restrict family size than Catholics – a divergence that was to became much more pronounced as the century progressed.

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Keywords

Fertility; religion; marriage; socio-economic status; urban Ireland; Belfast