

Margaret Maher

(b. Killusty, Co. Tipperary, 1821, d. Amherst, MA, 1924)

Irish immigrant and domestic servant, Dickinson household, Amherst, MA, USA.



For those wishing to learn more about Margaret Maher (pronounced "marr"), affectionately referred to as "Maggie," you can listen to the podcast we've produced of a presentation by international journalist and book reviewer, Anna Mundow on the topic "Emily Dickinson's Irish Servants" (December 2016 AIA event). Anna is herself an Irish immigrant, born and raised in County Wicklow, not far from Tipperary, Margaret Maher's home place. She's lived in Amherst since 1985 and is one of the founding members of our Amherst Irish Association. You will find this podcast on our website. It's located just under the flyer for the September 2015-May 2016 program of events.

Another excellent source of information on Margaret Maher and her relationship with the Dickinson family is the book by Aífe Murray, *Maid as Muse: How Servants Changed Emily Dickinson's Life and Language*, published in 2010. Anna Mundow draws on Aífe's work during her presentation. Aífe is a graduate of Hampshire College, Amherst, Massachusetts. She completed the foundational research for this book during her time studying in the Pioneer Valley.

In *Maid as Muse* Aífe Murray explores the relationship between Emily Dickinson and

her Irish servants, with a particular focus on the Maher and Kelley families, who were, in fact, related through marriage. Aife's argument is that through their labor, the Mahers and the Kelleys not only allowed Emily Dickinson more time to compose her poems, but their strong Irish accents and creative use of the English language may have influenced Dickinson's work and syntax. Since Margaret Maher was most probably raised speaking Irish as her first language, her use of English was likely influenced by the language constructions of her mother tongue, Irish.

When English is spoken or written in this way it is often described as Hiberno-English (a play by John Millington Synge, written in the nineteenth century, entitled "The Playboy of the Western World," is the best example of this phenomenon). Hibernia is the Latin word the Romans used for Ireland, its literal meaning - the place of Winter. The term Hiberno-English simply means Irish-English. While we cannot draw definite conclusions about the influence of Irish language syntax or expressions on Dickinson's writing, Murray makes the case that Hiberno-English made its way into some of Dickinson's poems. As an example, Murray points to the use of "himself" in "Silence is all we dread": *Silence is all we dread. There's ransom in a Voice—
But Silence is Infinity. Himself have not a face.*

Both the Maher and Kelley families came to the US in the massive emigration after the Great Famines of the 1840s. They arrived some time between the years 1854-1855. They all hailed from a magical place in Ireland called Sliabh na mBan/Slievenamon - the mountain of the women in South Tipperary, close to the Golden Vale and its lush agricultural land. After arriving in America, it appears that the Mahers had sufficient funds to come to Amherst in search of work.

Irish servants were employed inside and outside the Dickinson homestead. A series of Irish domestic servants from 1851 included Rosina Mack, Margaret O'Brien and then Margaret Maher. According to Murray, Emily Dickinson spent long hours in the kitchen with Margaret Maher, baking and chatting.

The most poignant claim made by Murray is the one that will resonate with most of us of Irish heritage. There is evidence that Emily Dickinson stored her poems in the trunk Margaret Maher used to come to America.

“Dickinson starts storing her poems in her maid’s trunk, the one she brought over from Ireland. It’s still in the family,” says Murray. “That always gets Irish people going ‘Whoa!’ and I think Dickinson kind of knew it. The one [trunk] that comes bobbing across the sea...she didn’t travel broadly but decided to put the poems in the trunk that had been across the Atlantic and up and down the eastern seaboard with Margaret Maher.”

Margaret Maher spent thirty years working for the Dickinson family. According to Murray, after the poet's death, Maher saved Dickinson's poems from being destroyed by the family and was responsible for also saving the one image we have of Emily Dickinson, a daguerreotype.

Emily Dickinson left very clear instructions about her wishes upon her death. She wanted six Irishmen, all former employees, including the one-armed Tom Kelley to carry her casket from the house to the graveyard nearby. They carried her out through the kitchen and the back door of the Dickinson residence, not the front door.

In the final moments of her presentation, Anna Mundow cautions that it's folly to try to determine particular influences - such as Margaret Maher expressions and use of language - on the poet's work. Anna reminds us that Emily Dickinson had her own celestial muse, that she was connected to the heavens by what the American scholar Daniel Aaron (Anna's late father in law) referred to as a "copper wire." Nonetheless, there is now general acceptance that Emily Dickinson and Irish immigrant Margaret Maher were genuine friends, despite the employee-servant dynamic. Margaret's facility in two languages, Irish and English, and her use of playful expressions enlivened their exchanges in the kitchen of the Dickinson household.

Author Aife Murray describes herself as a third-generation Irish American on both sides of her family. In her book she wanted to reclaim the immigrant story: "More people...can relate to the servants because that's mostly our story," Murray says. "It's the immigrant story. So Dickinson becomes more human; she becomes more fully realized." We in the Amherst Irish Association couldn't agree more.

Íde B. O'Carroll, Co-Chair
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