“The people who worked for the family,” Jay Leyda wrote in the 1950s, “should they do no more than slide along the backdrop of this drama, carrying their dish and pitchfork?” (256). Though there has been increased attention to those people since Leyda’s seminal article, the general neglect of Irish domestics in our picture of nineteenth-century New England-New York households, particularly literary ones, has pretty much continued. Irish servants almost never appear in the literature itself, even marginally, though by 1850, 80 percent of the domestics in New York, for example, were Irish and a quarter of all Irish immigrants were employed as household help of some kind (Kennedy 102). When Asenath Nicholson traveled in Ireland in 1844–1845, she stayed with the families of Irish young women whom she had employed as domestics in New York (Kelleher 75). Numerous other New England writers and intellectuals grew up with the idioms and inflections of Hyberno-English in their immediate household environment or, like Mark Twain, lived in proximity to the dialect, and to some extent the culture, in later life. Sarah Orne Jewett and her sister, and Twain’s three daughters, grew up with an exposure to Irish people and their ways much more intimate and first-hand than anything Irish in the experience of the typical Irish American of today.

Twain often remarked on the central role Kate Leary, the family’s servant for thirty years, played in his Hartford household. Mary Lawton, recalling visits to the Twain house, noted that “besides the magic of Mark Twain, the gentle presence of Mrs. Clemens, and those three diverting daughters… was another figure: the unique figure of Kate Leary.” When Leary spoke, Lawton recalled, “you began to laugh with and love Kate… The Irish wit of her—the Irish quickness of her—the Irish deftness of her” (xi–xiii). Writing of the last thirteen days of his daughter Susan’s life, at which time her parents and sister Clara were in Europe, Twain noted that the dying girl had old
faithful friends about her including Kate Leary and Patrick McAleer (Autobiography 324). Of McAleer, the Clemens’s coachman born in County Tyrone around 1844, Twain remarked that he had never known a finer human being (“Mark Twain” 3).

McAleer began working for the Clemenses in 1870, in Buffalo, on the first day after the just-married couple took possession of a new house—a surprise wedding gift from Olivia Langdon Clemens’s father. When Ellen, the cook, consulted the new husband and wife that morning to make out the grocery list, neither he nor his wife, Twain recalled in his Autobiography, knew whether beefsteak “was sold by the barrel or the yard. We exposed our ignorance and Ellen was full of Irish delight over it. Patrick McAleer, that brisk young Irishman, came in to get his orders for the next day—and that was our first glimpse of him” (322). McAleer went with the Twains when they moved to the Hartford house and grew old in their service. On January 21, 1906, while on a lecture tour, Twain received a letter from his friend Joseph Twichell in Hartford with word that McAleer was dying of cancer.

I am sorry to say that the news about Patrick is very bad. I saw him Monday. He looked pretty well and was in cheerful spirits. He told me that he was fast recovering from an operation performed on him last week Wednesday, and would soon be out again. But a nurse who followed me from the room when I left told me that the poor fellow was deceived. The operation had simply disclosed the fact that nothing could be done for him....Poor Patrick! His face brightened when he saw me. He told me, the first thing, that he had just heard from Jean [Twain’s daughter]. His wife and son were with him. Whether they suspect the truth I don’t know. I doubt if the wife does; but the son looked very sober. Maybe he only has been told.

Twain was already aware of the sad facts, however. His daughter Jean had kept watch on Patrick’s case through correspondence with McAleer’s daughter Nancy “and so we already knew that it was hopeless” (322). He gave orders that everything possible should be done for Patrick’s comfort, and when the end came—Twain was sixty-six himself at the time—he traveled to Hartford to serve as one of the pallbearers at St. Joseph’s cathedral near the Twain house on Farmington Avenue, “taking his allotted place without distinction or favor” (Paine 1276). The Hartford Courant noted the author’s return to the city and the occasion for it. Twain described Patrick to the newspaper as “as full of life as a watch spring, and he knew everything there was to know about his business. His life ought to rank with that of the great