Meet the Irish-American Hellcats!

(Molly, Nellie, Anne and Mother)

By Steven G. Farrell

"Row now, row! Molly Brown shouted at the other 23 survivors on the life boat. "You row like a galley slave!" she roared at one young girl who was crying instead of pulling her weight.

Thanks to the "Unsinkable" Molly Brown all the survivors on life boat 6 survived the sinking of the Titanic.

"Much of what I remember about Tewkbury is indecent, cruel and melancholy," Anne Sullivan, one of America's greatest teachers and an innovative educator of the deaf and blind wrote about her dismal childhood late in her life.

"I want to go to school!" the young Anne had cried out as she pushed herself into a group of investigators who were examining the alms house Anne Sullivan had been assigned to by the state.

"I wish I was at the other end of the earth!" exclaimed journalist Nellie Bly one morning as she grappled over ideas for an early morning deadline planting inside of her mind the idea of trying to best Phileas Fogg's record of going around the world in

eighty days. Phileas Fogg was a fictional creation of Jules Verne, the famous 19th century French author.

"It's not if you can do it, but whether or not you want to do it!" later wrote in her book, *Around the World in Seventy-Two Days*.

"Brothers and sister, I am Mother Jones, the wicked woman," Mother Jones was fond of saying as a hook to all of her speeches.

Her audience would shout back, "do you have enough room, Mother Jones?"

Mother Jones pat response was always the same: "I have enough room as long as I can shake my fist at the owners, landlords, fat cats and high class burglars."

A few years back I was presenting a paper on an Irish-American theme and a female member of the

audience challenged me about not writing about famous Irish-American women. I fired back that I would research what I chose to research. I also challenged her, as well as other Irish-American female scholars, to do the task. However, I slowly came around to the idea. Why not study some Irish-American women who tickled my fancy. The ones I selected would have to be individualistic, imagine and as tough as nail. I also was interested in candidates who had contributed to American popular culture.

I had always been interested in Molly, Nellie, Anne and Mother because they were tough Irish-Americans who fought like banshees for causes that were important to them but rubbed against the fabric of American society. All four of these women were products of 19th century America, an epoch commonly known as the Victorian era. I became more interested in them as representatives of the fighting Irish tradition that I grew-up in but is rapidly disappearing here in the 21st century. I don't view them as saints and I'm not greatly concerned with their causes. I love them by my affectionate label of *Irish-American Hellcats*.

Molly Brown was born in Hannibal, Missouri on July 18, 1867. It is true that Mark Twain, the famous author, was also from Hannibal, but it is patently untrue that it was this great man who persuaded her to move westward when she was a young adult. The Mark Twain account was a fabricated myth she created to jazz-up her past. Molly Brown was self re-inventor. It is also untrue that she was daughter of drunken Irish immigrants. Yes, she came from an Irish family but they were a tightly-knit, church going family, as well as and respectable members of the tiny Catholic community that worked the railroad line that had sprung up along the Mississippi River. Her family called her "Maggie" and her legal name was Margaret. The Denver newspapers later coined her as "Molly." She was also not illiterate as later writers tried to put out. However, she did leave school at the age of 13 to work in a Tobacco factory.

Margaret followed members of her family out west to Leadsville, Colorado in 1886. It was later claimed she had been a saloon girl who job was to entertain customers and to shout "belly up to the bar."

Actually she tended house for her brother and, later, worked as sales clerk in a dry goods store where

she sold carpets and draperies.

Molly never objected to the tall tales about her past. In fact she was quoted as saying, "I don't care. It makes a damn good story."

She was fortunate enough to marry a man who struck it rich in the mining business. J.J. Brown became one of Colorado's leading "Silver Kings.

Molly's reputation began to be soiled when she and her family moved to a three story mansion at 13400 Pennsylvania Avenue that included indoor plumbing and a stable. It is felt by many scholars that Molly was made a social pariah by Denver's high society known as the "Sacred 36." The blue bloods may have considered her too Irish, too Catholic, and too outspoken. Recent research indicates that she was friendly with many of the city's leading citizens and her name was prominent on the society pages of the Denver newspapers.



Young Molly

Molly supported many charities, once raising \$20,000. She supported Woman's Suffrage and she worked to improve the lives of the miners in her husband's minds. She became famous in neighborhood for staging moonlight chamber music concerts on her front veranda.

She was also notorious in the city of Denver for her bright Kelly green dresses that went well with her red hair. She was a tall and husky lady who set about to self-educate herself by reading books and attending lectures. She also took singing and acting lessons. Her behavior fits in well with the American

fixation on self-improvement.

Molly Brown claim to national fame, however, was forged on April 14, 1912 when the mighty Titanic sunk in the icy waves of the Atlantic. From then on people knew her wherever she went.

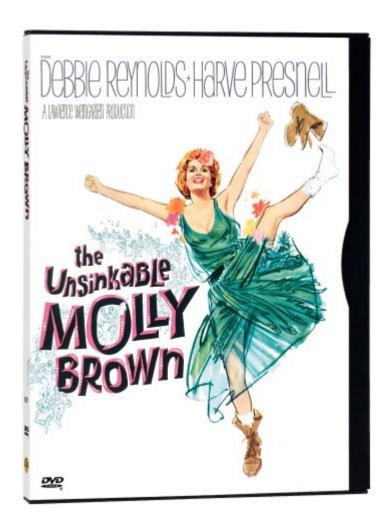
She was a quite popular in the rich American hub of Newport, Rhode Island. Up until her death on October 26, 1932 in a New York hotel, Molly spent most of her time on ships traveling to such places as India, Egypt, France, Scotland and, naturally, Ireland.

She once said, "I am a daughter of adventure. This means I never experience a dull moment." She also said she'd rather go out a 'snap out" rather than as a 'fade out."



It was always felt that she was an extremely wealthy women but her estate was estimated at \$25,000 to \$50,000. One of the last things she is recorded having said was "culture knows no boundaries and the fine arts are international."

Molly Brown has been forever transformed into an American icon with the Hollywood movies of *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (1964), staring Debbie Reynolds and Kathy Bates in *The Titanic*. Miss Reynolds and Miss Bates are both marvelous actors but Molly Brown wasn't as crude and rugged as the former presentation nor was she as portly and frumpy as the latter. Molly Brown Irish immigrant background was instrumental in freeing her from the strictures that bound most upper-class American women of her era. Why play by the rules if you and yours weren't the ones who had invented the rules in the first place.



Debbie Reynolds in The Unsinkable Molly Brown



Nellie goes around the world

Elizabeth Jane Cochrane, aka "Nellie Bly" was born in 1864 near the city of Pittsburgh.

Nicknamed by her family as "Pink" when she was a girl, Elizabeth's father was a county judge and she was privileged enough to be reared in a hamlet known as Cochran's Mills. Although she was of full-blooded Irish ancestry, her roots were solidly American and several generations removed from Ireland. Elizabeth was also a member of the Methodist-Episcopal Church and she was a reasonably well-educated for a female of her generation. However, like Molly Brown and Mother Jones, Nellie Bly wasn't above the distorting the facts in order to put herself in the best light in her re-invention.

By the time she decided to take her jaunt around the world, Nellie Bly was already a star in her own right. She had begun to win fame as soon as she was hired as a eager young cub reporter for the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* and, later, Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*.

Adopting the pen name of "Nellie Bly," (inspired by the title of a minstrel song by Stephen Foster) she was an early pioneer in of journalistic exposes. At the peak of her journalistic career, at the time when the going rate was \$10 to \$40 for most reporters, she earned a salary of \$200 a week. The drawing of her likeness next to her name and by-line made her face recognizable to the man and woman on the street. To add stark realism and flavor to her pieces, Nellie would actually put herself into the stories. Her hands on approach lent credibility to her eye witness accounts. Nellie worked in sweat shops, danced on chorus lines and hooked on the streets in order to bring color to her own brand of what is now known as "yellow journalism," a style of reporting which relied on sensation and scandal to sell newspapers. A few years into her journalistic career, Nellie had brainstormed the notion of faking insanity so she could get inside of a mental institution with the purpose of writing an expose about it.

Nellie Bly's first published book, *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, opened many eyes to the terrible conditions of American mental health establishment, as well as made Nellie a force to be reckoned with in the helter skelter world of print. Another one of her books, *Six Months in Mexico*, confirmed her credentials as a budding travel writer. Women writers on newspapers weren't as uncommon as one can be led to believe, but mostly they were restricted to what were known as the "culture: section of the paper:

theatrical tidbits, the latest fashions from Paris and advice for wives. Nellie was able to greatly expand her areas of expertise in the *World's* city room on Park Row (aka "Newspaper Row).

Her maxim became: "Energy rightly applied and directed will accomplish anything." She became the shining star to the category the media had coined as the "new American girl." Women were had the limited opportunity to write outlandish and colorful human interest pieces that would appeal mostly to the women readers.

When Nellie put forth her idea of following in the footsteps of Phileas Fogg her editor, Colonel John Cocherill, wasn't keen on the idea. Financing a trip around was a bit steep. However, he quickly realized that it would be a great publicity stunt whether she broke the record or not. Nellie broke the record with 8 days to spare. She covered the width of the globe, 24.899 miles, by taking trains and ships at the rate of 22 miles per hours.

Along with her monkey, "McCinty," she actually spent 15 days not traveling due to conflicts in her connecting points and late transportations. She later calculated that the expenses for her tickets (picked up by her newspaper) cost her about \$805.00 and her personal expenses ran to about \$300.00. She found it easier to trade with the British pound than it was in dealing with American dollars. Gold and silver were the

best currencies to barter with the various natives she encountered.

Ladies, you may find this interesting but she wore only one durable all-purpose dress the entire trip but she did bring along several changes of underwear and stockings.

"To sit on a quiet deck, to have a star-lit sky the only light above or about, to hear the water kissing the prow of the ship is, to me, paradise," she wrote later.

She sailed from New York to England and from England to France. She took trains through France and Italy. She jumped back on board a ship that took her into the salty waters of the Red Sea. She also passed through the recently constructed Suez Canal. She swooped around the Arabian Peninsula and stopped in Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan before catching another ocean liner from

Yokohama Bay to San Francisco. Heading eastward on an American train, Nellie suddenly found herself a national hero, and the young Irish-American lass loved it all.

She made numerous whistle stops on her way back to New York to greet wildly cheering crowd.

"There's Nellie Bly!"

"Hurrah for Nellie!"

"Nellie, did you ride an elephant!

The highlight of her trip was when she met Jules Verne and his wife in France. She also forever cherished the friends she had made on broad ship. I enjoyed her book immensely, especially her very Irish-Americans upon the obnoxious English passengers she encountered along the way. However, I cringed whenever she used such politically incorrect and out of date terms as "Chinamen," and "Japs."

Nellie Bly was now a full-fledge American hero. There were Nellie Bly post cards and trading cards. A New York restaurant featured "Nellie Bly Egg ala mode." A new song about Nellie's griddling of the world's crust was all the rage in vaudeville shows throughout the land. Her cartoon exploits were standard fare. She made a fortune by going on a lecture tour. Unfortunately, the rest of her life was a mere aftermath to her legendary journey, and she combated depression from the let down. Soon every newspaper in New York City hired "stunt girls" of their own to compete with Nellie Bly and her style of newspaper reporting soon lost credibility and, then, fell, out of fashion.

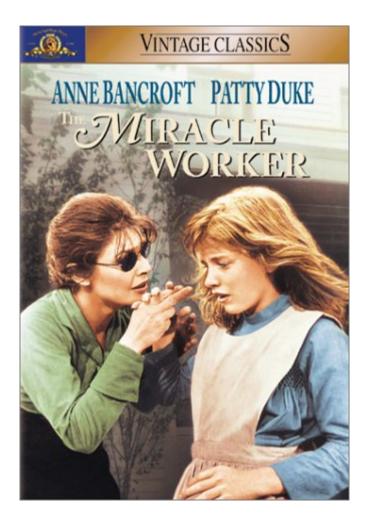
Linda Purl played the part of Nellie Bly in a made for-television movie, *The Adventures of Nellie Bly* (1980). Although the movie has its critical merits as a period piece, it doesn't do full justice to the life of this incredible lady. The film also wildly inaccurate when it portrayed Nellie Bly as being helpful to aspiring would be young female reporter; for Nellie Bly had a reputation of ignoring or treating with disdain other women who dare thread upon her hard-won turf.



Linda Purl as Nellie Bly

Nellie Bly later went on to become one of America's first female industrialists. She was the president of Iron Clad Manufacturing Company, a producer of milk cans, which she had inherited upon the death of her millionaire husband, Robert Seaman. Her endeavors in the world of business ended a long series of costly lawsuits. She later returned to journalism and promoted women's rights and suffrage. Nellie Bly found herself in deep trouble with President Woodrow Wilson and the State Department over the question of her patriotism for spending the entire

world war living and working over in Vienna, Austria. Nellie Bly salary as a reporter had been cut in half to \$100 by the time she passed away in 1922, age 57. She was considered a relic of the Gay Nineties by the time the Roaring Twenties started. However, her byline she drew in readers, and she even interview boxers Jack Dempsey and Jess Willard before their 1919 heavyweight championship bout.



Movie Poster for the Miracle Worker

If you have ever seen *The Miracle Worker* (1962), you would be familiar with the story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan. The beautiful Anne Bancroft played the part of the beautiful but intense and always peevish Anne Sullivan

and Patty Duke played the role of Helen Keller. The story was remade in 2000 as a television movie starring Alison Elliot and Hattie Kate Eisenberg as Anne and Helen.

Anne Sullivan was born into a desperately poor Irish immigrant family in April of 1866. Her family fragmented into tiny pieces when her mother died and her unruly father was deemed unfit to rear his own children due to chronic alcoholism. Charles Dickens had nothing on Anne's life. She was confined

to a poorhouse with her brother Jimmy. It was a nightmare she never escaped from. Later on in her life she wrote about how her brother died during the night and was removed to the "death room." Her description of going in and pulling off the sheet to reveal his corpse is extremely horrific. It was an episode that haunted her up until her dying day. To make matters worse she began to lose her eyesight.

Several operations restored some of her sight but by the time she died she was living in total blindness once again. Her encounters with state authorities earned her admission into the Perkins School for the blind. It was a Bostonian school for the children of rich Protestants. Anne Sullivan was a pauper and a Catholic. Her thick bog trotting Irish brogue won her no friends.

The principle of the school quickly nicknamed her "Miss Spitfire" because of her aggressive behavior towards her teachers and her classmates.

When a teacher asked her, "don't you ever think." Annie responded. "Yes. After I leave your class."

"I will if I want to and I won't if I don't." She vowed to get even by learning more than her

classmates. In some subjects

she excelled, others she struggled. She later passed on her educational strengths and weaknesses to Helen Keller.

In 1885, when she was 19, Annie finished her course of study. Her first paying job was to work with Helen, the deaf and blind daughter of Captain Arthur Keller and his wife. The position paid \$35 a month and included room and board. The

Keller family

were an upper crust southern aristocratic family in Alabama and they immediately thought Annie was too much of a Yankee for their tastes.

Anne Sullivan's method of communicating with Helen Keller was by the use of touch through the fingers and over the mouth. This innovative MOUTH-OBJECT-TOUCH style, coupled with the use of Braille, assisted Anne in making incredible advances in teaching Helen how to speak, read and

write. It wasn't easy as Helen was a spoiled southern belle who had had no discipline instilled in her brief life. Sullivan had no time for the Scarlett O'Hara routine. In order for Annie to work with the pampered Helen the two had to move to another house for any system to be set in place and enforced. It was an explosive but ultimately battle of stubborn and rebellious Irish and Southern willfulness. Physical blows were exchanged between the two contestants. The first word Helen was "water."



Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan

A bond was formed between Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller that lasted until the end of Anne's life. At one point the Keller family signed over legal guardianship of Helen to Anne. Their relationship was not sexual but over the years it was alleged that Anne had been cruel towards Helen. Did Anne physically abuse Helen? No evidence can be found to prove the charges. I tend to think it existed. Due to her experiences at the poorhouse where she was possibly sexually assaulted by some homeless prostitutes Annie hated women and it is quite feasible that she projected her outrage upon a helpless victim like Helen. Anne was also married for a time. In her autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, Helen described how bad she felt about not having a 'beau" and a "Prince Charming" to attend a class reunion with her.

Another crowning moment for Anne Sullivan was when she helped Helen receive a B.A degree from Radcliffe University in the standard four years course of study. Both women agreed to take a pass on the Dean's offer of an easier path to a 'special' degree. Annie attended class with Helen and the professors' lecturers had to be transmitted through lightening fast touches with fingers upon fingers. It was a tedious process that strained the nerves of both young ladies to the limit. Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller were victorious once again.

The Perkins School for the Blind used Anne and Helen as their poster stars in order to promote the program's innovative methodology. The two women also provided needed publicity for the school. Annie and Helen quickly became media celebrities of the day. Their public appearances became often and popular. Helen went on to meet every president from Theodore Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson. They were wined and dined by such international superstars as Charlie Chaplin, Mark Twain and Alexander Graham Bell.

Unfortunately, Anne Sullivan was the unhappiest one of my four handpicked Irish-American Hellcats. The astonishing accomplishments of her adult life could never manage to actually sponge away the memories of her nightmarish childhood. Scholars believe she may have had a dual personality. She quarreled with those who tried to share in the glory of her achievements with Helen. Like Nellie Bly, Anne Sullivan had difficulty sharing the limelight with other people.

Anne was also infamous for having a blazing hot temper and she treasured carrying a grudge for years. One person who knew both Anne and Helen once stated for the record: "Helen was sweet, bright, and open while Annie was dark, bitter, and violent. Both Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller were granted Honorary Doctors of Letters degrees from Temple University.

One of the last letters on file that a very sick Anne Sullivan wrote to a Helen is very revealing about their collective characters. Anne wrote: "It pains me deeply, Helen, not to be able to believe as you do. It hurts me not to share the religious part of your life. She added: "to me, as you know well, this life is the more important."

What we do NOW and HERE matters the most because it affects other human beings."

Anne Sullivan died in October of 1936. Until the day Helen Keller died in 1968, she always tenderly referred to Anne as "Teacher." It is sad to have to state that Anne Sullivan lived her final days in complete darkness; her feeble eyes finally losing out to total blindness.



Give them Hell, Mother!

Mary Harris (aka "Mother Jones") was born in Cork, Ireland sometime in the 1830's. Her birth occurred a mere decade before the Potato Famine (aka "the Great Hunger") during the "Terrible Forties" that struck Ireland and devastated the Irish nation. Her family was god-fearing and hard-working. The Harris clan fled to Canada to work on the railroads.

Young Mary was trained as a teacher and she taught in Michigan before she relocated to Memphis,

Tennessee, a city in ruins after the Civil War. Mary Harris, like her contemporaries Molly Brown, Nellie

Bly and Anne Sullivan, had a sound educational background compared to many females of their

generation. The Irish, German and Jewish immigrants that had flocked to North America at the latter part

of the 19th century were keen on their children to have as much book learning as possible as a means of

climbing up the economical social ladder. Open and free access to a public school education opened up

the road to middle-class life styles. Self-improvement through training, certifications, qualifications and

degrees were not so readily available for the working-classes over in Europe.

Mary Harris married George Jones, a union official, and the couple eventually had four children. The wife and mother tragically lost her entire family to an outbreak of yellow fever that raced through the weakened south. Putting her faith in a fresh start, she relocated to Chicago where she had a sewing business that burned down in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

Later on, newspapers claimed that she had run a whore house. Mary Harris never troubled herself with denying the charges. A true blue Irish-American Hellcat could care less about what the self-righteous and hypocritical said about them. Molly, Nellie, Anne and Mothers all liked any color added to their autobiographies no matter of how loud it might be. It is true that little is known about Mary Jones real life. In her life story, published when she was an old woman, she only devoted six pages to her early life. Famine, disease and fire had forged Mary Harris Jones into Mother Jones. Mary Harris had died in the anguish and the flames of the past. She was reborn as a fiercely independent and ferociously combative old woman.

The Chicago Haymarket Massacre of 1886 enabled Mary Harris to recreate herself once and for all as "Mother Jones." Mrs. Mary Jones, mother and homemaker, became Mother Jones, the hellcat of organized labor and the champion of the American underdogs.

The symbols Mother Jones used to permeate her image were her white hair, shawl, knitting needle and rocking chair. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt borrowed this Mother Jones looks during the Great

Depression when she appeared along side of her husband, Franklin, during his fireside chat.

From the 1890's to her death in 1930, Mother Jones lived out of her suitcase. She was professional speaker for various labor unions, as well as the Socialist Party. She wandered from the coal fields of West Virginia to the silver mines of Colorado. She believed that the average person and women were the salvation of the American race.

"Neither bosses, ministers nor politicians will change things...we the people have got to do it!" she exclaimed at rallies.

"Women are fighters. You will never solve the problem until you let in the women. No nation is greater than women."

When she was asked about women's suffrage (the right to for women to vote), Mother Jones responded, "I don't need the right to vote to raise hell!"

No movie has ever been made about Mother Jones but there is a popular radical magazine published out in New York City that carries her name. Mary Harris' likeness is spread over the cover of the journal, causing a rise of blood pressure in such conservative pundits as Ann Coulter (a modern Irish-American Hellcat who should be ashamed of herself for being a mere shill for the bosses, landlords and fat cats), Rush Limbaugh and Glen Beck. A few weeks of working in a sweatshop for a dime per hour would take the hot air out of any self-righteous, hypocritical windbag who is anti-union or anti-reform.

In Thomas Pynchon's 2007 novel, *Against the Day*, the character of Mother Jones comes off as a mean-spirited and vicious old Irish harpy; one whose image is a creation of the labor union to win sympathy.

In this essay, I have taken a brief look at the lives of four incredible ladies who all shared the same time period from the late 19th century and into early 20th century. These women also shared an Irish-American background that helped to mold them into the imaginative and individualistic human beings that put them into the spotlight of

American popular culture. All four of these women were media superstars during the peak of their

collective careers.

It is to be hoped by this author that this essay will generate discuss upon the topic of the influences of women in American history, popular culture and media studies. These ladies truly rock the house. Some American readers may

pose the question of why it was left to four Irish-American to cause a big bang in American society during the years between 1880 and 1920. Obviously there were other American women from various ethnic groups who were doing amazing things. However, this author would contend that there were the issues of genes and heritage involved in the exploits of Molly, Nellie, Anne and Mother.

The Irish are a race that had a long tradition of fighting for they believe is rightfully theirs. They had taken on the Vikings, Normans, Roundhead and the English over the centuries back in the Emerald Isle. Oftentimes the fight was temporarily lost but it was never abandoned. The immigrant Irish carried this fighting spirit over to the United States where the new foes became the power elites, the landlords, the bosses and the fat cats. Although the struggle was intense, the soil of the new world was rich and enabled the Irish a chance at success. The Irish had the immigrants' chip on the shoulder but they also had the immigrants' fire inside of their bellies for the chance to prove they had value. The Irish had the marked advantage of being able to speak the English language of the land. They also had the benefit of not being restricted by the values and mores of Victorian society which would have handcuffed most women of the older more established Anglo-Saxon American stock. The Irish and the Irish-Catholics are nature's democrats and they are no respecters of unjustified authority and privilege.

This author also contends that the Irish, along with their combative bloodline, also had a culture that warmly embraced the rebel, the troublemaker and the daredevil. Irish folk culture was filled with the wonderful yarns of Finn McCool, Cuchulain and Queen Maeve. The ancient legends were passed down by word of mouth from one generation to another over strong drink and the blazing peat fire; snug inside of the humblest of cottages from Donegal to Waterford. The golden days of yore were still very much alive when the Irish people began their journey to new homes in the United States, Canada,

Australia, and New Zealand.

The thousand years of recorded Irish history is filled (or littered) with many heroes like the great Hugh O'Neill, Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmett; champions of the Irish race who fought nobly and bravery in ultimate defeat. The women I have covered in this essay can be considered direct links to Princess Grace O'Malley, the 16th century pirate princess who charmed Queen Elizabeth with her roguery and escapees off the coast of Mayo. An intense and deep reading of Irish literature bares out the fact that the Irish have always had a soft spot for eccentrics, outcasts and witches. Wasn't it an outlandish Dubliner, Dean Jonathan Swift, who created the most gigantic outcast in all fiction: Captain Lemuel Gulliver of *Gulliver's Travels*.

During the course of my research, I was never able to unearth any evidence that any of my Hellcats had ever met one another during the courses of their lives. It would have been interesting to see these four fabulous women interact with one another. My guess is that it would have been the reporter Nellie Bly who would have had had the opportunity at some point to interview one or all three of the others. Would they have comfortable sharing the same stage together? Perhaps the dynamic Celtic-Yankee personalities they all possessed would have made communication amongst them difficult.

It is my final assertion that Molly, Nellie, Anne and Mother were who they were because of their shared Irish-American background.

The End