



## Molly Brown: Unraveling the Myth

*Kristen Iversen, Muffet Brown (Foreword by)*

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When Margaret Tobin Brown arrived in New York City shortly after her perilous night in Titanic's Lifeboat Six, a legend was born. Through magazines, books, a Broadway musical, and a Hollywood movie, she became "The Unsinkable Molly Brown," but in the process her life story was distorted beyond recognition. Even her name was changed--she was never known as Molly during her lifetime. *Molly Brown: Unraveling the Myth* is the first full-length biography of this American icon, and the story it tells is of a passionate and outspoken crusader for the rights of women, children, mine workers, and others struggling for their voice in the early twentieth century.

## **Molly Brown: Unraveling the Myth Details**

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## **From Reader Review Molly Brown: Unraveling the Myth for online ebook**

### **Janet says**

Molly Brown has always been one of my personal icons. My daughter has moved to Denver, so one of the places I wanted to visit was the Molly Brown house. The movie, with Debbie Reynolds and Harve Presnell, has long been one of my favorites. I can sing most of the score. Well, folks, most of the story is myth. Margaret Brown, while a flamboyant character, was never called Molly. She never worked as singer in a bar, wasn't a boozier, and didn't know Mark Twain. She was, however, married to J.J. Brown. They made lots of money in gold. She was very outspoken, a champion of women's rights, a fundraiser of unbelievable ability, a constant traveler even after the Titanic tragedy. Yes, she was on the Titanic, and she was very instrumental in helping steerage passengers after their arrival in New York City. So Margaret Brown is still remarkable. She was larger than life, a force of energy that must have been exhausting to family and friends. Glad to know the facts.

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### **Lisa says**

(We own the hardcover first edition which doesn't appear on Goodreads for some reason.)

Kirsten Iversen certainly did extensive research for this book. I know because I had a very small part in some of it and learned how meticulous Kirsten is. Which is very important if you want to write an accurate biography. It was a joy getting to know Kirsten while providing her with some information we had in our family scrapbooks, memorabilia, letters, etc. In return, she provided us with unknown information on some family members. This book provides the reader with an extensive history of the "Molly" Brown we never knew, separating the Hollywood myth from the fascinating facts.

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### **Lori says**

I do know from reading & watching documentaries on Molly Brown that a lot of her "exploits" from the Titanic and also throughout her life were grossly exaggerated but this book really shows how exaggerated many beliefs about her were inaccurate. She was still a very strong minded woman but not as belligerent as the movies make her seem. A really wonderfully written story.

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### **Neil Pierson says**

"Unsinkable" Molly Brown did indeed survive the *Titanic* disaster. But most of what we think we know about her is false. In fact, she was never referred to as "Molly" in her lifetime. Put that in your corset and snap it!

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She was anything but the coarse bumpkin portrayed in the 1960 movie. In fact, much of the lore about Molly Brown is so preposterous, it would make Paul Bunyan blush. (Suckled by a nanny goat, anyone?) But she

certainly didn't lead an ordinary life.

Margaret Tobin grew up as the daughter of poor, Irish parents in Hannibal, Missouri. She married a poor Irishman, J.J. Brown. They moved to Colorado so that he could work in the mines, and he became wealthy as a mine manager and owner.

Margaret was outspoken, progressive, and a feminist. But neither these qualities nor her heritage prevented her from rising to a high position in Colorado society. She even established herself in the rarefied air of Newport, Rhode Island.

She was a generous donor, crack organizer, and prodigious fund raiser for all kinds of causes, including charities that served the poor, promoted education and culture, advanced juvenile justice, and advocated for women's suffrage. She alternated between living in Paris and New York and traveled around the world, visiting India and Egypt among many places. She was a fashion leader.

Later in her life, she pursued higher education--"Why should a woman be mildewed at forty?" she asked. She also considered a run for the U.S. Senate, took acting lessons and performed in shows, and actively supported France during World War I. She was awarded the French Legion of Honor. Oh, and she learned to yodel.

Margaret and J.J. drifted apart and formally separated. She mostly raised her two children on her own, along with three nieces that she took in after their mother died.

And yes, she survived the *Titanic*. She was placed in a lifeboat that was nominally commanded by a male member of the *Titanic*'s crew. However, he was clearly traumatized and in shock, so besides taking her turn at the oars, Margaret organized the rowing, supervised the allotment of blankets and warm clothing, and maintained morale until the survivors were rescued.

After they were picked up by the *Carpathia*, Margaret continued to support the survivors, many of whom were poor or spoke no English. (She spoke several languages.) She followed through, sometimes at her own expense, to be sure that the survivors were placed after they arrived in New York.

With a life like this, it's hard to understand why anyone thought they had to make up tall tales about Margaret Brown. Unfortunately, though, this book devotes too much space to the daily details of life, to who attended which society function, to what the newspapers thought about them, to what they wore or ate, to whom they married... .

Even loaded down with this unnecessary baggage, Margaret Brown remains unsinkable. But she rides low in the water.

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### **Maria says**

The true story of this remarkable woman's life and accomplishments are far more interesting than the myths. She is a woman to be admired. Do yourself a favor and read this book.

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## **Roxie says**

Be careful when you pick this up to read. You will be immediately transported to a frozen seat on a frozen lifeboat being rowed by frozen men and women as the Titanic sinks, and you will be hooked on the real life adventures of Margaret Tobin Brown. She was more than all the legends, books, and movies portray.

\* She was a steady, Missouri girl who came to Leadville with her brothers.

\*She was a sales clerk, married a smart mining man at a time when gold and silver and other metals were being found in abundance. She never forgot the Leadville miners and their families, and collected warm clothing and food to send them every Christmas; even the Christmas after she died.

\*She was a strong Catholic who organized events to help fund the construction of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in the heart of Denver.

\*She was a strong mother, raised her son and daughter to be educated and world wise, and provided her nieces a home, education and place in her heart after her sister's death.

\*She traveled the world, ate with kings and diplomats, opened her Newport, RI, home to ailing soldiers during WWI.

\*People and events were hosted at her country home nine miles outside Denver which sat on two hundred acres, but which now sits on the corner of busy Sheridan Blvd on barely a full lot surrounded by high wall, shielding it from traffic.

\*She worked hard to change and enact laws governing juvenile offenders vs. adult law breakers.

\*She worked for women's suffrage.

\*And, of course, she survived the sinking of the Titanic, took care of those who survived, honored those who were lost, and all in all rode the wave of her time with style, flare, and courage.

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I never realized, until I read this, how much of the history of Denver, where I have lived these past fifty three years, was shaped by Margaret Brown, her family, friends, acquaintances. How cool it would have been to see her driving by, or walking briskly down the street, or sitting on her porch at her house of lions on a cool, summer's evening.

Read this! Take your time. You'll not be disappointed.

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## **Cj Tremlett says**

I didn't know very much about Molly Brown before reading this - just a few references to her and of course the James Cameron movie. I knew from somewhere that she was an activist, ahead of her time, and that there was a lot of difference between the legendary "Unsinkable Molly Brown" and the real woman, but that was all I knew.

This book does a lot to contextualize the legendary Molly Brown and contrast that image with the real Margaret Brown. The author makes a few pointed snipes at other historians who rely on the legend rather than going to primary sources. At the same time, she shows where some of the legend comes from, based on reality.

The real Margaret Brown was a fascinating woman, very much ahead of her time. She also was something of a larger than life character, with a taste for extravagance and a generous heart. Her experience on the Titanic immortalized her, but her life before and after the Titanic is worthy of interest and discussion. It's more than

a bit ironic how many of the causes she fought for are still being fought for today.

The book is framed by Margaret's experience of the Titanic disaster and its immediate aftermath. The rest of the book tells you who she was, and why she was the sort of person who did what she did during and after the sinking. It's a well-written history and I recommend it!

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### **Nancy Groves says**

I enjoyed this biography, which knocks down all the exaggeration and myths about the historical Margaret—never Molly—Brown, made famous to many people via a 1960s Broadway musical and subsequent movie starring a very young Debbie Reynolds, as well more recently by an appearance as a character in *Titanic*. The real Margaret/Molly was colorful, certainly, but not a poorly educated country bumpkin shunned by Denver society despite her and her husband's mining wealth as depicted in decades' worth of stories. Iversen gained access to many family letters, diaries, photos, and other documents and talked to her descendants as well as friends and acquaintances still alive to put together a more accurate account of the life of Mrs. Brown, who was a philanthropist, crusader for social justice, especially for youths, an advocate of women's rights, ran for political office several times, and made up for a somewhat limited formal education during her childhood by educating herself on many subjects and learning multiple languages later in life. I picked up the basics of the real story about Mrs. Brown while touring her former Denver home, now a historic property, and subsequently bought this book in the gift shop. The movie musical is enjoyable, but I'm glad to have made the acquaintance of the remarkable Margaret Tobin Brown through these pages.

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### **Nick Guzan says**

"At a critical time for women's suffrage, the Titanic disaster reignited all of the difficulties of early feminist dialogue with respect to articulating the rights of women," writes Kristen Iversen in her definitive biography of Margaret Brown, simultaneously explaining why "Molly" is so important to history as well as contextualizing the tragedy in yet another important light.

Dr. Iversen's thoughtful study of Mrs. Brown wisely begins with her now-immortal role in the Titanic disaster, separating facts from myths while catching the reader's interest with the story that no doubt most know her for. After this initial chapter, we're intrigued by Margaret - not Molly! - Brown, and what follows is a thoughtful and well-researched exploration of this bold, complex, and devoted woman and her lifetime dedication to activism.

The author particularly appealed to me as someone that demonstrates care and interest both in her subject and humanity as a whole, writing about her subject and the era through a modern progressive feminist lens... the very sort of person that Margaret Tobin Brown would want to have writing about her!

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### **Theresa says**

Margaret Brown was truly "unsinkable". She is the kind of lady you don't want to mess with. And she is more than just a Titanic survivor.

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## Quinn Rollins says

Next month I'm going to be at a teacher workshop in Denver. The topic is how to use biographies to teach Western History. The workshop is hosted by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Molly Brown House, and our first assignment is to read a biography on Mrs. Brown. *Molly Brown: Unraveling the Myth*. Kristen Iversen's 1990 volume won the Colorado Book Award for Biography, and a 2010 updated edition was just published. The 304 page paperback is a quick read, and even if you don't know anything about Molly Brown beyond her "unsinkability," you'll find this an enjoyable book.

Iversen's account of Molly Brown's life starts with the most famous part of her life—her survival the night the Titanic sank. This harrowing story is really the only thing I knew about Mrs. Brown (real name Margaret Tobin Brown, whose alteration Iversen eventually explains) before picking up the book. It serves as a good introduction to both Brown and the world that she lived in—one of riches and excess, but also an overwhelming concern for and connection with the people not of her elevated class.

After the Titanic story, Iversen goes back in time to tell us about where Margaret came from: her parents' roots in Ireland, her own birth and childhood in Hannibal Missouri (her time there did overlap with Samuel Clemens, but it doesn't seem like they knew one another), and her move to Leadville Colorado—a silver boomtown that was growing faster than Denver in the 1880s. When she marries J.J. Brown, Margaret Tobin marries someone 13 years older than her, a hardworking engineer who eventually helps a mine break into a new source not of silver, but of gold. This makes them fabulously wealthy, and catapults them into Denver's social scene.

Throughout the book, Iversen does a good job of differentiating the myths of Molly Brown (no one ever called her "Molly," as far as historians can figure out, although some early friends and family did call her "Maggie") from the reality of her life. The Titanic story is the one that's ended up most true, although she wasn't ever standing in her lifeboat, stripped down to her corset and garters, singing ala Debbie Reynolds. She's often portrayed as a bumpkin who got rich overnight, rejected from Denver high society because she wasn't as refined or educated as The Sacred 36, the most elite of the wealthy families. The truth is that while she wasn't as accepted by some of those families, others embraced her, because for more than a decade, she was Denver high society. Mrs. Brown was educated, both in book learning and in the peculiar mores of the Gilded Age. She played instruments, she sang, she had private tutors for herself and her children, she spent time in Europe and around the world—she wasn't a hick.

Her life reminds me somewhat of Eleanor Roosevelt's—she felt like she had more to give than just host tea parties for the other wealthy ladies of the city, and she put herself and her money to work with many charitable organizations. Some of that seems to have stemmed from her own childhood and experience working in a tobacco processing factory in Missouri; some of it from what she saw as a boss's wife in Leadville. Wherever it came from, she always seems to have been busy with one cause or another, which may have helped to erode her own marriage.

Iversen spins a good tale, and her research is well-documented with more than twenty pages of end notes, a bibliography, and an interview with the author at the end of the book. If you're interested in a number of topics from the time period, whether it's the Titanic, Women's Suffrage, the Gilded Age, or the Wild West, you'll enjoy *Molly Brown: Unraveling the Myth*.

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### **Jeanne says**

I picked up this book after touring Margaret Brown's house in Denver. After the excellent tour I was interested to learn more and the tour guide recommended this book which helped to delve into her early life more deeply and helped to give a feel for the culture of the time. The book is very well researched and enjoyable to read particularly the dramatic parts included with the recreation of what happened on the Titanic. On the same day we toured the house we also toured the Colorado State Capitol just down the street. Although the Capitol was very good and interesting the tour guide of the Capitol made the common mistake of mentioning "Molly Brown" as being famous but not really famous enough to warrant recognition in the State Capitol for having done anything for the State of Colorado. Unfortunately we toured the Capitol before the "Molly Brown" house so I did not have the chance to object and recommend this book to correct the misinformation repeated on tours. I did however mention this to the volunteers in the bookshop.

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### **Donna Halloran says**

I didn't love this. I was reading it for a book club. I didn't really have much interest in Molly Brown. I now know more than I ever wanted. I give her credit for writing the "true" story but goodness - how many times are you going to tell me that previous stories were lies, that her son Lawrence was bothered by the lies, etc. The book was incredibly repetitive. I would have enjoyed the story more if it had been about half as long. For example, the introduction tells Molly Brown's entire Titanic story. Then, the last chapter re-tells the end of the Molly Brown's Titanic story adding a few details. UGH.... I would not recommend this to... well anyone I know

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### **Kelly Margolis says**

I didn't know much about the outlandish stories of Molly Brown. My first introduction of her was in the movie Titanic. I then heard my mother tell me a little of her tale and the movie The Unsinkable Molly Brown. I bought the book for my mother. Kristen, the author, was able to get the family to trust her, which wasn't easy, and began unraveling the myths told about Molly. One, no one really called her Molly, it just made the musical easier to write. Margaret was a fascinating woman who was just as interesting as the tales told about her. The story starts with her experience on the Titanic, very vivid and frightening. Margaret was a world traveler when most people barely left their communities. She fought for human rights, especially women and children. The book had several passages that were long and I found myself skimming through them. A truly fascinating subject.

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### **Beverly Diehl says**

In real life, there really wasn't a "Molly" Brown, but when did truth ever get in the way of telling a good story?

Margaret Tobin Brown's real life story is much more fascinating than the myths and legends that sprang up

around her, and this book does a wonderful job 1) telling the real story, 2) explaining how and why we've come to think these things about a woman who lived not so very long ago, and 3) sheds light on what life was like for a (relatively) wealthy American feminist in the days before American women could vote.

Far from being crude or uneducated, Margaret (and JJ) hired tutors not only for their children, but for themselves. She spoke five languages and among other things, took yodeling lessons for two years.

She loved to travel - and she wrote travel articles. She ran for political office. She was a staunch friend of workers' rights, children's welfare, a mother, a mother-surrogate for her widowed brother's daughters.

By her own account, Margaret was in bed reading when Titanic struck the iceberg. That alone makes her a woman after my own heart.

The book is meticulously researched, full of detail but not dry, and also contains many wonderful photographs. Great read for anyone who is interested in Titanic, women's history, and life in Colorado at the turn of the 20th century.

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