

# The Unsinkable Molly Brown

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A Living Legend and Catalyst for Change in the  
Tourism Industries

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This paper explores the life of Margaret Brown, famously known as "Unsinkable" Molly Brown, and her role in the aftermath of the Titanic disaster. The paper discusses her experiences as a first-class passenger on the Titanic, her involvement in the survivor's recovery efforts, and her subsequent rise to prominence as a public figure and advocate for the Titanic survivors. It delves into the luxurious features, strict class segregation aboard the Titanic, and the events leading up to the ship's tragic sinking on April 14, 1912. The paper also highlights Brown's philanthropic work, her passion for travel, and her impact on popular culture. It presents a comprehensive account of Margaret Brown's life and significant contributions during and after the Titanic disaster.

## THE UNSINKABLE MOLLY BROWN:

### *A Living Legend and Catalyst for Change in the Tourism Industries*

Stepping onto the decks of the *RMS Titanic* for the first time at the Cherbourg Port in Normandy, France, on April 10, 1912, Mrs. J.J. Brown looked up to the ship's four great smokestacks obscuring the sky, awed by the *Titanic's* size and power. Her companion, Mrs. Emma Bucknell from Philadelphia, however, had a rather ominous feeling about the huge ocean liner: "I have a premonition about this ship." In a *Newport Herald* article published in May of 1912, Brown was quoted as saying at the time: "[Bucknell] said she feared boarding the ship; she had evil forebodings that something might happen. We laughed at her premonitions, and shortly afterwards sought our quarters." Among the over 2,000 passengers and crew of the ship, no one believed that anything could happen to the great ocean liner. The *Titanic* was unsinkable. Even God Himself could not sink her (Tibballs).

However, on April 14, 1912, one of the greatest traveling accidents in history occurred: On its maiden voyage, the *Titanic* struck an iceberg and sunk to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, claiming the lives of over 1,500 men, women, and children, highlighting the mortality of men in the Industrial Age. In the wake of this immense tragedy, some figures fell from grace, like J.B. Ismay, the disgraced financier and chairman of the White Star Line, who chose to save himself rather than go down with his ship, and some rose to prominence, like Margret Brown, or, as history would come to claim her, the "Unsinkable" Molly Brown.

While the *Carpathia*, the first ship to answer the ailing *Titanic's* distress signal, traveled at high-knot speeds through the dangerous Atlantic ice that had already claimed the *Titanic* to deliver the 700 survivors to New York City harbor, Brown was busy at work. In the four days it took the *Carpathia*

to make port in New York, Brown spent her time utilizing her language skills<sup>1</sup> to communicate between the survivors and crew, and caring for the wounded and impoverished survivors, mostly second-and third-class passengers, by collecting blankets and furs (“About Molly Brown”). She established the Survivor’s Committee, was elected chairwoman, and raised almost \$10,000 for destitute survivors before ever reaching the United States. Furthermore, she remained on the *Carpathia* until all the *Titanic* survivors had met with friends and family or had arrangements to receive further medical care (Gowan). In the months following the tragedy, Brown asserted herself as a dominating force in the survivors’ recovery and gradually became the public and political face of the remaining *Titanic* survivors.

As chair of the Survivor’s Committee, Margaret presented a silver loving cup to Captain Rostron of the *Carpathia*. . . . In later years, Margaret helped erect the *Titanic* memorial that stands in Washington, D.C.; visited the cemetery in Halifax, Nova Scotia, to place wreaths on the graves of victims; and continued to serve on the Survivor’s Committee. She was particularly upset that, as a woman, she was not allowed to testify at the *Titanic* hearings. In response she wrote her own version of the event which was published in newspapers in Denver, New York, and Paris. (Gowan)

By Brown’s death in 1932, her name had become synonymous with the *Titanic*, and, due to her humanitarian efforts, she had exploded into the realm of popular culture by means of gossip magazines, films and even a Broadway musical, her title of “unsinkable”<sup>2</sup> as prominent as her legend. However, Brown’s personal experience as a first-class passenger on the *Titanic* was a very different

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<sup>1</sup> Brown was fluent in French, German and Russian. In an article published in the *New York Times* on April 20, 1912, she is said to have helped a young Russian widow, who had lost her husband and her life’s savings in the wreck, contact the Russian Consul, and paid for the woman’s passage back to Russia, and to her family (Baber).

<sup>2</sup> Brown received the nickname “Unsinkable Molly” from the mass of reporters waiting on the docks for survivor’s stories when she finally left the *Carpathia*. When asked how she survived, she was quoted as saying: “Typical Brown luck, we’re unsinkable.” While she lived, no one called her “Molly” (“About Molly Brown”).

one from the experience of the second-and third-class passengers she crusaded so passionately for after the ship's sinking.



Figure 1: On May 29, 1912, Brown presents a loving cup to Captain Arthur Rostron of the *Carpathia* for aiding the survivors of the *Titanic* sinking. In addition to the cup from the Survivor's Committee, each crew member received a Medal of Honor for their heroic contributions (Randy Bryan Bigham Collection).

### THE TALE OF THE *TITANIC*

The *Titanic* was commissioned in conjunction with her sister ships *Olympic* (1911) and *Gigantica* (1914), later renamed *Britannica*, in 1907 by the White Star Line steamship company to crush their major competitor, the Cunard Line (Tibball). The brainpower behind the ocean liner trinity was Lord William James Pirrie and Joseph Bruce Ismay, titans in the shipbuilding industry. They wanted to “revolutionize transatlantic travel. The emphasis would be on elegance, and, above all, safety, an achievement of which White Star was justifiably proud. Between 1902 and 1912, the line carried 2,179,594 passengers, of whom only two were killed,” (Tibballs, 19).

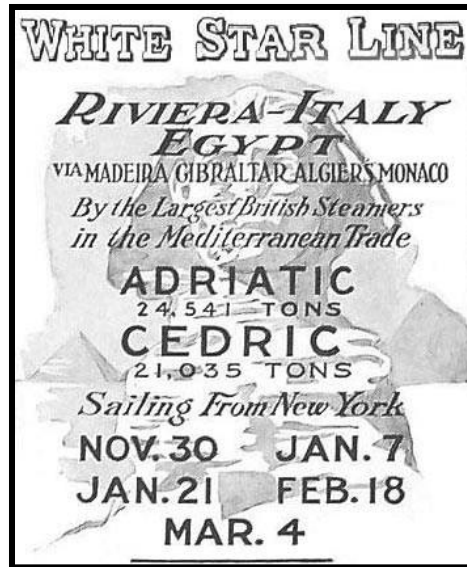


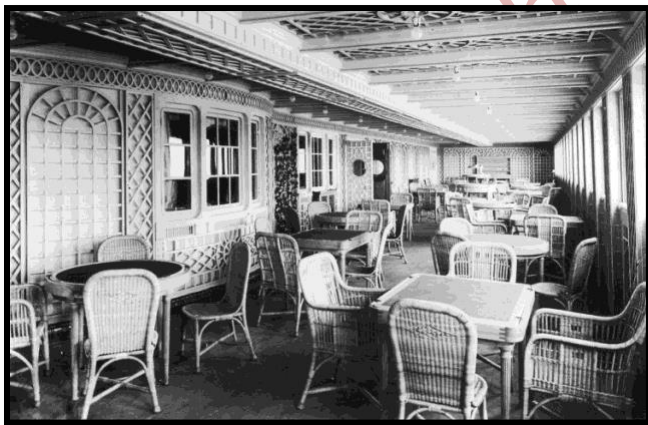
Figure 2: An advertisement for a voyage the Titanic would, tragically, never get to make (Molony).

The White Star company spent \$10 million on engineer Alexander Carlisle's design, which was nearly identical to her sister ship, the *Olympic*, and invested in the best features modern technology and style had to offer. The ship reached 882 feet, nine inches long; weighed 66,000 tons; housed three engines and twenty-nine boilers; and could achieve a maximum speed of twenty-five knots (Tibballs).

[The Titanic's grand] size was more than matched by her interior, which boasted the finest quality furnishings, carpet and artwork. No expense was spared to make the Titanic the most luxurious vessel ever to have taken to the seas. By treating first-class ticket-holders as royalty, by creating second-class accommodation that could not fail to impress the most fastidious of passengers and by providing third-class amenities that would surpass those in other liners' second-class, White Star calculated that the public would not be able to resist the lure of the Titanic. (Tibballs, 35)

As a means to provide passengers, especially those in first class, with a luxurious experience, White Star strictly segregated the ten decks between the classes and catered directly to the classes,

discouraging the three groups from mingling. While the ship could hold over 3,000 passengers, the *Titanic's* maiden voyage transported “2,603 passengers – 905 in first-class, 564 in second-class, and 1,134 in third-class – plus 944 crew members, for a total of 3,547. Of the crew, more than half tended to the whims of the passengers, 325 looked after the engines, and the remaining 66, including the captain and his seven deck officers, sailed the ship” (Tibballs, 44). Exclusively in first class, passengers were treated to extraordinarily lavish amenities, including authentically replicated period furniture, including Louis Seize (XVI) and Louis Quatorze (XIV), in each stateroom that was “equal to the finest hotels on shore” (Tibballs, 38); private decks, restaurants, reading rooms, and health equipment, including a squash court, pool, and Turkish baths; and a special dining room for maids and valets (Tibballs). Accessed through the A, B, and C decks, “virtually all the liner’s most impressive facilities were solely for the use of first-class passengers” (Tibballs, 36). The White Star Line created an experience on the *Titanic* that had otherwise been unexplored for its time and set the standard for future luxury ocean liner travel.



**Figure 3: The Café Parisien (Left), one of the exclusive first-class restaurants; it was designed to look like a Parisian café, complete with wicker furniture and real ivy growing on trellis along its walls. It quickly became a popular hang-out for the younger passengers (Tibballs). The Grand Staircase (Right) located on the A deck; it was first room first-class passengers would see when entering the ship, and at meal times in the dining salon (Michael W. Pocock).**



**Figure 4: A replica of the Grand Staircase's stained-glass dome. It filtered natural light into the room during the day and was electronically lit at night. Smithsonian National Museum of American History, On the Water: Stories from Maritime America Exhibit (Allison Morris).**

#### **MARGARET BROWN: A DAUGHTER OF ADVENTURE**

After Brown's husband, James Joseph "J.J." Brown, a mining engineer, made a large discovery of gold in the Little Johnny Mine in Leadville, Colorado, in 1893, the Browns were awarded several shares of stock in the company, making them multi-millionaires practically overnight. Although the Browns enjoyed their sudden wealth, Margaret Brown never forgot her humble beginnings as a daughter of poor Irish immigrants in her hometown of Hannibal, Missouri. She threw herself into philanthropic projects around the Denver area, including establishing the Denver Woman's Club, and expanded her charitable work to the national sphere, most notably in 1901 as the first woman to run for the Senate and as a mediator between disgruntled miners in Colorado and John Rockefeller's CF&I subsidiary in 1914.

Aside from her philanthropic passions, Brown was especially fond of traveling, participating in the “grand tour” and resurgence of the trends of the ancient culture at the turn of the century.<sup>3</sup>

Made possible by their wealth, the Browns enjoyed another new pursuit, travel. In 1902 Margaret and J.J. embarked on a world tour that took them through Ireland, France, Russia, India, and Japan, among other places. Both Browns enjoyed the trip immensely, with J.J. seriously considering retiring to Ireland and Margaret writing travel articles detailing her observations of India’s cast system for the Denver papers. (“About Molly Brown”)

Upon their return, the Browns donated artifacts from their travels to local museum collections as a means of sharing their knowledge of the world, subconsciously educating the underprivileged individuals of Colorado, and largely the continental United States, of societies and cultures outside of the country.



**Figure 5: *Millionaire Molly Brown* (1927).** Brown particularly enjoyed traveling and often brought priceless artifacts back to the United States, so much so that the museums she supported often had to turn away her contributions for sheer lack of space. She became infamous for her eclectic style, often sporting articles of clothing from all over the globe in one outfit (Bettmann Collection).

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<sup>3</sup> Bertram Gordon, “Men, Women and Travel.” Mills College. Fall, 2009.

## BROWN'S VOYAGE TO THE ILL-FATED *TITANIC*

In the spring of 1912, after officially and amicably separating from her husband, Brown and her daughter Helen, a student at the Sorbonne University in Paris, embarked on their own grand tour,<sup>4</sup> visiting the ancient sites around Egypt (a personal favorite of hers), Paris, and Rome (Gowan). In February, while on the Egyptian leg of her travels, she met with John Jacob Astor and his new wife Madeline – who were also traveling with Emma Bucknell – and the three would later accompany Brown on her return trip on the *Titanic*. During her tour, Brown was buying and collecting artifacts for the Denver Museum, all of which were lost in the *Titanic's* hold (Molony).

In early April, Brown received a telegram while in Cairo: her first grandchild Lawrence Palmer Brown, Jr. was gravely ill. Cutting her holiday short, Brown traveled to Paris and booked the first trans-Atlantic ship leaving port: the *Titanic*. Because of the sudden nature of her trip, and as she traveled without her daughter Helen, most of Brown's friends and relatives were unaware that she was on the *Titanic* at all until after the tragedy had occurred and her name and photograph was in the newspapers. "Molly was one of the last passengers to book [passage]. Her ticket, PC 17610, was bought on the afternoon of Tuesday, April 9, at a cost of £27 14s 5d," (Klistornor). In comparison to Brown's other first-class passengers – and considering how late she purchased her ticket – she received a bargain of room, including meals and access to the first-class amenities, on E deck, most likely cabin twenty-three<sup>5</sup> (Klistornor).

The cost of a first-class suite on the *Titanic* ranged from £400 to £870 for a one-way ticket.... The cheapest first-class passage was £23 without meals. At the other end of the

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Brown traveled to Europe from the United States via *Titanic's* sister ship, *Olympic* in March of 1912.

<sup>5</sup> For many years, it was assumed that, based on testimony transcribed by Colonel Archibald Gracie in his book, *The Truth About Titanic* (1913), that Brown had stayed in a cabin on the B deck, but further analysis suggests that she in fact stayed in a cabin on the E deck. If that is the case, Brown would have had to have traveled a far longer distance to reach the lifeboat evacuations on A deck, and if she had not been alerted by James McGough and Edward Calderhead, buyers for Gimbel Bros. who also stayed on the E deck, and left her cabin in time, would have almost certainly perished in the wreck (Klistornor).

scale, some third-class passengers shared up to ten in a cabin, and as many as 164 slept in dormitories way down on G deck. The cheapest third-class fare was £7 15s, including meals. (Tibballs, 42)

Once aboard the *Titanic*, Brown, with her fellow passengers, enjoyed herself on the trip and reveled in the ship's splendor. Brown and the rest of the individuals onboard the *Titanic* would only enjoy three days on the sea before the greatest tragedy in travel history would befall them.

#### **APRIL 14, 1912: TRAGEDY STRIKES THE *TITANIC***

Anxious to finish a book, I stretched on the brass bed at the side of which was a lamp. So completely absorbed in my reading, I gave little thought to the crash that struck at my window overhead and threw me to the floor ... thinking nothing serious had occurred ... the book was again picked up. (Klistornor)

While Brown's own account of the moment when the *Titanic* devastatingly struck an iceberg is most likely an exaggeration – the ship would not have collided with the iceberg and provided enough force to “throw” her to the floor – it clearly demonstrates the ambivalent attitude most onboard the ship had towards the accident, resulting in many mistakes and errors of judgment that could have otherwise saved lives (Tibballs). As it was late at night, and they were aboard the “unsinkable ship,” most passengers stayed comfortably in their rooms and disregarded the jolt and scraping metal sound the survivors documented experiencing at the time. However, by 12:05 A.M., only forty-five minutes after the *Titanic's* hull had struck an iceberg, Captain Edward John Smith officially ordered the lifeboats to be uncovered, and the crew and passengers rounded up for evacuation (Tibballs). In Brown's account of what happened next, she claims to have seen six stewards and one officer manually covering the port holes in the floor connecting the F and E decks in an attempt to maintain the “watertight” seal, the *Titanic's* main safety feature in the event the hull had been

compromised and was then urged by the gentleman in a neighboring cabin, presumably McGough, to abandon her room and evacuate to the A deck:

[A man whose] face was blanched, his eyes protruding, wearing the look of a haunted creature. He was gasping for breath and in an undertone ...gasp[ed], "Get your life-saver"... I immediately reached above and dragged all out, as I thought some others might need them.

Snatching up furs... I hurriedly mounted the stairs to A deck. (Klistornor)

When Brown finally reached the A deck, the passengers were calm, and crew members were orderly ushering women and children into the lifeboats. While in its original design, the *Titanic* was prepared to accommodate lifeboats for everyone on the vessel, there were only twenty lifeboats onboard for her maiden voyage. No one ever anticipated she would encounter such a disaster, and if an accident did occur, the *Titanic's* new safety features, including the doubly insulated hull and manual watertight seals between decks, would prevent the boat from rapidly sinking, allowing time for rescue ships to find and save everyone onboard.

At approximately 12:55 A.M., after initially refusing to board a lifeboat and helping other women safely evacuate the ship from her port side, McGough and Calderhead, the same gentlemen from deck E, reportedly picked Brown off of her feet and placed her into lifeboat six, which had already been lowered four feet below deck, with the sentiment: "Oh no, you're going too" (Baber). Once inside the lifeboat, in which only 28 of the seats were occupied, Brown realized there would not be enough manpower to row the boat away from the ship, and Major Arthur Peuchen, a yachtsman, volunteered to join the survivors and aide crewmembers Fredrick Fleet, the lookout who first spotted the iceberg, and quartermaster Robert Hichens to row. As lifeboat six reached the water, Hichens refused to row, and Fleet and Peuchen alone did not have enough strength to propel the lifeboat forward. Brown "saw it as her job to rally the troops and stiffen resolve... [she] took off her life jacket, grabbed an oar and began rowing [to keep herself warm]. Her efforts inspired other

women to lend a hand” (Tibballs). Of her experience in the lifeboat with fellow survivors, Brown said:

To me, there was not one tragic, harrowing element near me. We were in a boat, we were safe, and we were at work. I was simply fascinated. In a few moments, the man in the back of the boat began to complain that we had no chance.... For at least three hours, he seemed to break the monotony of it. We stood him patiently, and then after he had told us that we had no chance, told us many times, and after he had explained that we had no food, no water, and no compass, I told him to be still, or he would go overboard. Then he was quiet. I rowed because I would have frozen to death. I made them all row. It saved their lives.

(Baber)

In the middle of the harrowing experience, after watching the *Titanic* sink into the sea and rowing for hours, Brown was amazed and reflective over the sense of serenity on the open water.

Then, knowing that we were safe at last, I looked about me. The most wonderful dawn I have ever seen came upon us. I have just returned from Egypt. I have been all over the world, but I have never seen anything like this. First, the gray and then the flood of light.

Then the sun came up in a ball of red fire. (Baber)

At approximately 7:00 A.M., lifeboat six finally came across the *Carpathia*, which had been hurrying through the night to reach the *Titanic's* last recorded coordinates. Relieved at the sight, Brown encouraged the small band of survivors to row towards the ship rather than wait for the ocean liner to meet them.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, Brown, or “Lady Margaret,” as fellow survivors came to call her, used her newfound notoriety to promote safety and ethical changes in the steamship industry, which eventually expanded into the travel and tourism industries in regard to train, automobile and

aerial travel. While inquiries into the accident resolved that no party was at fault, the severe loss of life prompted lawmakers to require safety arrangements for every individual onboard and mandatory training sessions for evacuation procedures. The *Titanic's* crew was never informed of how to properly evacuate passengers, resulting in most lifeboats being launched into the sea far below capacity and causing chaos when passengers and crew realized there would not be enough seats for everyone to be saved. According to the official “British Report, 62 percent of first-class passengers aboard the *Titanic* were saved; 41 percent of second-class; 38 percent of third-class; and just 24 percent of crew” (Tibballs, 90), suggesting that up until the very end of the ship’s demise, the crew was still catering exclusively to the first-class passengers, rather than attempting to save everyone onboard. Allegedly, passengers in the second-and third-class decks were briefly locked in—thus preventing eligible women and children from evacuating from the ship—but this report has never been verified by any investigative agencies.

After her experiences on the *Titanic*, Brown was determined that her survival was predestined and that it was her responsibility to effectively change the lives of the survivors who, because of their economic classes, for the times, could not speak for themselves. She championed for higher safety standards in travel for all passengers and encouraged future regulations to take effect. So, the legend of the “Unsinkable” Molly Brown, both physically and metaphorically, arose from the tragedy of the *Titanic* and, more importantly, impacted modern travel.

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