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Mary Channing Wister: An Unknown Legend

By: Eric M. Augenstein

Most articles and stories about Mary Channing Wister start out like this: "Mary Channing Wister, the wife of the novelist Owen Wister, author of *The Virginian*. . . ." For some people, being affiliated with a famous spouse or other family member is a great honor. There is much more to Mary Channing Wister, though, than just having a famous husband. It is even arguable that in the first decades of the twentieth century her name was just as well known as her husband's, especially in Philadelphia. Owen, familiarly known as Dan, was known as a writer of one of the first "Western" novels, but he was not known for much else. Mary, called Molly by her family and friends, was known as a member of the Philadelphia Board of Education, one of the founders of the Civic Club of Philadelphia, and one of the hardest-working civil servants on the East coast, as well as being a loving mother, wife and daughter. While her husband's legacy lives on in the words of his books, Molly's influence was felt by the thousands who were affected by her civic work both while she was alive and even today. Unfortunately, one of the most interesting and influential women of early twentieth century America often is only a footnote to her husband's accomplishments.

Born March 30, 1870, in Germantown, Pennsylvania, Molly was the first child of William Rotch and Mary Eustis Wister. Through her mother, she was descended from William Ellery, a signer of the Declaration of Independence for Rhode Island, and William Ellery Channing, the founder of Unitarianism and an ardent abolitionist (F. Wister 127). Her father was one of six sons of William and Sarah Logan Fisher Wister and was raised at the Belfield estate in Germantown, once the residence of American portrait painter Charles Willson Peale. Molly was not the only success story in her family. One sister, Frances Anne Wister, was one of the founders of the Philadelphia Orchestra; her other sister, Ella Eustis Wister Haines, was a writer of such widely-read works as "Reminiscences of a Victorian Child" and *Little Girl of Spruce Street*; and her brother, John Caspar Wister, was one of the foremost American horticulturists of the twentieth century and was known as the "Dean of American Horticulture" (Belman 3).

The traditional religion of the Wister family had been Quaker, but since her mother was a Unitarian, Molly also grew up as a Unitarian and demonstrated her leadership abilities early in life by teaching Sunday School at the Unitarian church in Germantown (Payne 169). She received her initial education at home but then proceeded to attend Miss Irwin's school, from where she graduated in 1889 as the president of her class (Payne 169). The majority of Molly's childhood and adolescence, beyond learning, was concentrated around music. She played the piano and, along with her sister Frances who played the violin, entertained her parents, family, and friends in the parlor of Wister, her parents' house just off the Belfield estate of her grandparents. She also frequently participated in eight-handed piano quartets with her father's second cousin, Owen Wister, and two other friends. Her grandest and most unusual musical accomplishments, however, came in the form of operas which she produced and directed to be presented by local school children in the parlor at Wister. Family, friends, and neighbors gave rave reviews of these operas produced by a teenage girl (Haines 52).

On April 21, 1898, Molly extended a relationship she had begun over the piano when she married her father's second cousin, Owen Wister, the son of Owen Jones and Sarah Butler Wister of Butler Place. At the time of their marriage, Molly was already involved in many of her

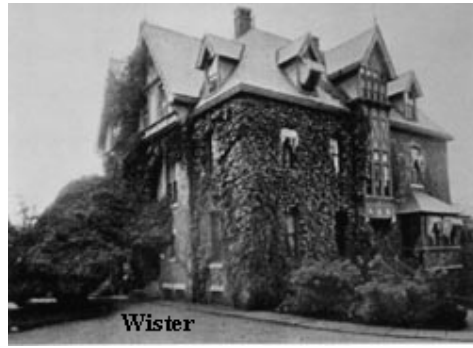
civic causes. Dan, however, thought that his wife's place should be in the house, taking care of household affairs and raising children, and he didn't like Molly being involved in so many of these civic causes (Payne 171). At one point, he even considered moving to New York to get Molly away from her civic activities in Philadelphia, but after hearing her speak to a group of school parents in Washington he began to be proud of his wife's involvements and decided to stay in Philadelphia (Payne 174-175). Dan was not the only person who was aware of Molly's many activities. Upon their engagement, someone wrote to Dan that "Molly is such a stirrer up, and reformer of all things wrong, that I am sure she will lead you through pleasant paths, onward and upward toward the light we all hope for" (Payne 171). Molly's civic activities were so important to her that meetings she had in Philadelphia determined when the new couple's honeymoon in the west would have to end (F. Wister 23).

Even though Molly spent much of her time trying to improve the city of Philadelphia, she also had time to be a loving mother to five children, and a sixth child who never knew her mother's love. The eldest, Mary Channing Wister, Jr., was known to the family as Baba and later as Marina (F. Wister 21). Twins were born next, Owen Jones Wister, known as Bunny, and Frances Kemble Wister, known as Sister. They were not expecting twins, and when someone asked Molly's sister Frances what the names of the children were, she replied, "Owen Jones and Unexpected" (F. Wister 129). The twins were followed by William Rotch Wister, II, known as Weenty, and then Charles Kemble Butler Wister, known as Karl (F. Wister 21). The sixth child, following whose birth Molly died of childbirth complications, Sarah Butler Wister, was born an invalid and died at 22 (Haines 54). Fanny, one of the twins, notes the impact Molly had on her children: "We worshipped our mother. We never saw enough of her; our time spent with her was precious" (F. Wister 156). Molly had nurses to tend to the daily activities of the children, but since she was such a staunch Unitarian she never had Irish or French nurses because she was afraid that the children " might secretly be turned by them into Catholics and be taken surreptitiously to Mass" (F. Wister 155). Molly worked for civic betterment and rights for women, but she was not without her prejudices.

Molly's and Dan's marriage was also not without its own problems. Dan was often away from his wife and children, on the road with his books, traveling with the play version of *The Virginian*, vacationing in the west, or visiting friends or family. Molly sometimes accompanied him on his trips, but usually she stayed in Philadelphia to take care of the children. In addition, Dan was often sick, and in 1909 suffered from an illness which lasted for an entire year. Fanny, one of the twins, noticed the strained relationship between her parents:

He [Dan] could not sustain his roles of author, husband, and father for any length of time, while she [Molly] fulfilled her roles of wife and mother magnificently and her mandatory duties in her chosen career for civic betterment. But it was without doubt a happy marriage. They believed in the sanctity of marriage, they understood each other down to the core, and there was a great respect and love for each other. (F. Wister 179)

Molly's "chosen career for civic betterment" is what stands out most in her life. At the turn of the twentieth century women were just beginning to gain their rights and have a life outside the home. Molly was at the forefront of this revolution in women's rights. At the age of 27, she was appointed to the Philadelphia Central Board of Education, the youngest person and one of the first women to sit on that board. During her tenure, she was responsible for introducing music into the public schools (O. Wister, *Roosevelt* 57). In 1901, Molly was asked to serve as the Commissioner from Pennsylvania for the Women's Department of the South Carolina Exposition Company (Alston).



In 1893, Molly called a meeting in the parlor at Wister to discuss forming an organization of women in Philadelphia to address social problems (F. Wister 128). On January 1, 1894, Molly became one of the founders of the Civic Club of Philadelphia, a group of women formed to "address both social and political reform issues" (Johnson 352) and to "promote by education and active cooperation a higher public spirit and a better social order" (Frothingham 2).

Throughout her twenty years of service to the Civic Club, Molly served as its president twice (1900-1902 and 1912-1913), treasurer, secretary, vice president, and chairperson of several committees (Civic Club of Philadelphia 2). Among the notable contributions of the Civic Club during Molly's lifetime were the building of several playgrounds for the children of Philadelphia, the establishment of parks, and campaigns to clean up the streets of Philadelphia. At one city meeting Molly attended, the possibility of building a surface railway along Broad Street was proposed. Molly adamantly opposed this idea because it would clutter up the street. Instead, she proposed that a subway line be built under Broad Street (Oakley). The Broad Street Subway Line is thus a reality largely due to the ideas of Mary Channing Wister.

Throughout all of her personal and public activities, Molly was known for her "sympathy, authority, and constructive power," and while she did have lofty goals, she knew her limits and "never tried for the impossible" (O. Wister, *Roosevelt* 57). Her hobbies included a "passion for animals" which she inherited from her father (Civic Club of Philadelphia 4) and a love of travel. She enjoyed going to the west with Dan and especially liked camping, riding, and hiking, activities which seem unusual for an Eastern, upper-class woman at the turn of the century (Haines 54). However, Molly never let society's view of the role of women influence her life.

Molly was an avid public speaker on such topics as "Methods of Developing Character" and "The American Girl in Politics;" drafts of both of these speeches survive. Her sister Ella also claims that Molly was instrumental in her husband's writings, including *The Virginian* (Haines 54). Whether Molly was involved with the writing of *The Virginian* or not, it is clear that she was the inspiration for the character of the schoolteacher in the novel, Molly Stark Wood. Both come from an aristocratic Eastern family and have a distinguished ancestor: William Ellery Channing for Mary Channing Wister, and Captain John Stark for Molly Stark Wood. Both are also hard workers and, at least initially, do not follow the traditional pattern of women and stay in the house. Rather, Molly Wood moves to Wyoming and teaches school, and Molly Wister becomes involved with civic work in Philadelphia. In *The Virginian*, Molly Wood's family loses its wealth because the mills fail. Her response to this situation could be talking about Molly Wister as much as Molly Wood:

Instead of thinking about her first evening dress, Molly found pupils to whom she could give music lessons. She found handkerchiefs that she could embroider with initials. And she found fruit that she could make into preserves. That machine called the typewriter was then in existence, but the day of women typewriters had as yet scarcely begun to dawn, else I think Molly would have preferred this occupation to the handkerchiefs and preserves. (O. Wister, *The Virginian* 57)

Molly's life of service to the community and devotion to family was cut tragically short at the young age of 43. On the afternoon of August 24, 1913, Molly called her five children into her

room at the family's summer house in Saunderstown, Rhode Island, and told them that she was going to have a baby. According to Fanny, none of Molly's children even knew that she was pregnant. "She told us that she wanted us to grow up to be leaders and always set a good example for our brothers and sisters" (F. Wister 221). That evening, Molly died from complications during the delivery of her sixth child, Sarah Butler Wister. Dan had to break the news to his children, most of whom were too young to fully understand what death means. "We all sat down on a big rock, and Dadda said, 'I have a message for you from your mother. It is goodbye.' In one voice, we all said, 'Goodbye?' 'Yes,' he said, 'she is dead. You have a little sister.' Then he burst into sobs. We all howled, with tears streaming down our faces; it was minutes before we could speak" (F. Wister 221).

The tragedy of Molly's sudden death was felt by more than just her immediate family. Not only had Dan lost a wife and the six children a mother, but Philadelphia had lost one of its hardest-working and most influential leaders. Countless people mourned her death and celebrated her life both privately and publicly. At its next meeting, the Philadelphia Board of Education decided to rename an elementary school the Mary Channing Wister School (Civic Club of Philadelphia 33). The next meeting of the Civic Club, of which Molly was serving as president at the time of her death, was devoted to celebrating Molly's life and accomplishments through speeches, stories, and memories (Wistar 12 Nov. 1913). A 55-page bulletin was printed which contained the reminiscences of Molly presented at this meeting and other testimonies of her life.

Mary Channing Wister, "the most prominent woman in civic betterment in this city [Philadelphia]," (*New York Times*) influenced the lives of numerous people through her efforts to improve the society around her as well as her untiring devotion to her family. Although she came from and married into families which were already well known and respected in Philadelphia, Molly's life cannot be characterized by those ties. Rather, she took her own initiative to help found the Civic Club of Philadelphia, serve the city on many other councils and committees, and still find time to raise five children and support her husband's writing career. Molly helped shape the Philadelphia of today, and her influence can be felt by everyone who rides on the Broad Street Subway line, anyone who enjoys one of the many parks and playgrounds she was instrumental in building, and all children who learn the joys of music in Philadelphia public schools. Sallie Wistar, a columnist for the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* and distant relative of Molly's, summarized the feelings of the public upon hearing of Molly's tragic death: "There is no woman in this city more widely known and respected throughout the country in every walk of life than Mrs. Wister. . . . Indeed, I can think of no woman who could less be spared and whose death will leave a greater void, not in one place, but in many" (Wistar 26 Aug. 1913). One is left to imagine how many more good deeds Molly could have accomplished if she had survived the birth of her sixth child.

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