

Welcome Home Annie: Rethinking Ellis Island and Annie Moore in the Classroom

Mia Mercurio

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore;
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

—Emma Lazarus (1883)¹

The story of the United States and the people who have made it their home would not be complete without considering the experience of Irish immigrants—particularly the experience of Annie Moore, the first immigrant to be processed on Ellis Island. However, the story of Annie Moore, and how it has been recounted and taught to date, is inaccurate. This article focuses on the past inaccuracy and offers guidance on how Annie Moore’s story should be taught, given the new information that has surfaced about her life.

Problems Faced by Social Studies Teachers

How social studies teachers decide what to teach involves reflecting on and resolving several pedagogical problems, two of which will be emphasized in this article. Social studies teachers must endeavor to:

- “Get it right” by assessing official and unofficial versions of history for accuracy; and
- Recognize that students will need help to sort fiction from reality.

Let’s consider these problems in relation to teaching about Irish immigration in New York and the Irish immigrant Annie Moore.

Irish Immigration in New York

From 1820 to 1920 more than four million people left Ireland bound for the port of New York and the chance

for a new life. Many stories of immigration, such as the story of Annie Moore, have been romanticized over the years and in the process some have become untrue. The immigrants of that time came as America was undergoing a major transformation—from a rural to an urban society—with unprecedented prosperity for some, due to a huge growth in industry. The need for millions of laborers provided an economic draw for those in less prosperous European countries.² During this time, New York itself was growing, cow pastures were quickly being turned into brick and stone multi-floored structures; apartment buildings were growing across the skyline to create homes for the new immigrants.

In schools today, students are often taught the story of these immigrants through the passageway of Ellis Island. The decision to open a federally-reg-

ulated receiving station arose from abuses immigrants encountered when they landed in Manhattan: swindlers accosted immigrants with offers of food, housing, trinkets, and railway tickets, or initiating exchanges by taking money but delivering no (or inferior) goods.³

Ellis Island

In 1890, New York City commissioners were notified that the federal government would assume responsibility for immigration. The property known as Ellis Island was chosen as the new location. Over the course of 20 months, it was enlarged, the channel dredged, docks built, and wooden buildings constructed. It formally opened on New Year’s Day, 1892.⁴

Annie Moore’s American Story Begins

When Ellis Island officially opened its doors on January 1, 1892, the first person registered at the immigration station was a young Irish girl named Annie Moore. She must have seemed like an ideal poster child for America’s welcome of immigrants: young, but not too young to travel without adults, and

lovely to look at (no apparent deformity or illness). Fourteen-year-old Annie and her two brothers, Anthony, 11, and Phillip, 7, departed from Cobh, Ireland, formerly Queenstown (County Cork) on December 20, 1891, aboard the S.S. *Nevada*, three of the 148 steerage passengers. The trip took a total of 12 days including Christmas Day. The *Nevada* arrived in New York on Thursday evening, December 31st. The Moore children were coming to America to reunite with their parents, Matthew and Julia, who had come first. Matthew was a longshoreman.⁵

On American Soil

On the morning of New Year's Day, 1892, (which was also Annie's fifteenth birthday) first- and second-class passengers disembarked in Manhattan before the *Nevada* moved toward Ellis Island. The 148 steerage passengers were placed on an immigrant transfer launch that was able to manage shallow water—the *John E. Moore*. It was decorated with bunting and pulled alongside the wharf with bells clanging and whistles blowing.

A *New York Times* article (January 2, 1892) reported that there were three steamships in the harbor waiting to land their steerage passengers at the new station and much anxiety and anticipation among the immigrants. The *Nevada* arrived late on New Year's Eve, forcing steerage passengers to stay on board until morning. To complete this celebratory moment, the first to embark must have been carefully, though quickly, selected. "The honor was reserved for a rosy-cheeked Irish girl..." the *Times* reported." As soon as the gangplank was run ashore, Annie "was hustled ahead of a burley German by her two younger brothers and an Irish longshoreman who shouted 'Ladies first!'"⁶

Annie was the first immigrant (of 445,987 immigrants that year) to be processed at the registry desk. Charles Hendley, the former private secretary of Treasury Secretary William Windom, asked for the honor of processing the first immigrant. Colonel Webber, the superintendent of immigration, granted



11164-U. S. Inspectors examining eyes of immigrants, Ellis Island, New York Harbor. Copyright Underwood & Underwood. U-97929

Hendley's request and personally presented Annie with a \$10 gold coin. It was the first United States coin she had ever seen and reportedly the largest amount of money she had ever possessed. The *Times* reported: "She says she will never part with it, but will always keep it as a pleasant memento of the occasion."⁷

The Ellis Island Experience for Immigrants

Though hours of congestion, medical examinations, and interviewing awaited most immigrants, the *New York Herald* reported that Annie was hurried along to the waiting room to meet her parents in less than half an hour from the time she landed (January 2, 1892, p. 2). This was quite unusual and was most likely due to Annie's newfound celebrity. For most immigrants the process was much more tedious and time consuming, often traumatic.⁸

Approximately 2 percent of immigrants were sent home each year—perceived as a potential liability for the nation. It was feared that America would become either the hospital or the prison for the world.⁹ One in five spent long, anxious days in detention or quarantine, some merely waiting until they could be processed, others until officials were satisfied that they had met all requirements for admission.

Ships that came in after the island had been packed to capacity were forced to keep steerage passengers on board until the crowds eased, a process that sometimes took days. First- and second-class passengers did not have to go through Ellis Island. They were given a cursory examination on board and allowed to pass directly into New York City, while third class (steerage) passengers waited on board. Ships officers were brusque, if not rude, in readying remaining pas-

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sengers for arrival. They pushed and shoved, shouted demands, herded passengers into groups “as though they were animals.”¹⁰

Doctors, clerks, translators, baggage handlers, ticket agents, and food suppliers on the island were overworked and frequently abrupt, often untrained for their assigned job. Work on the island was difficult and strenuous. Inspectors worked seven days a week during heavy immigration times; it was a constant grind from the moment they caught the ferry for the island and got into their uniforms until they left by ferry at night.¹¹ As a result, the processing of immigrants was not often carried out with courteousness.

After disembarking, passengers were separated down a maze of aisles leading to the seated registry clerks. Congestion was awful, conditions unsanitary, and airspace insufficient. Fortunate immigrants might only wait 2–3 hours, but longer waits were usual—sometimes longer than 24 hours.¹² They carried identification papers that had been prepared for them in Europe and wore manifest tags referring to their ship. They left their baggage in storage while they went through the intensive inspection process. As the lines moved, doctors observed individuals for lameness and other obvious deformities that might disqualify an immigrant. Doctors first carried out an overall assessment, before completing the more detailed review of feet, legs, body, arms, face, eyes, and head. Even crooked fingers were noted.¹³

Immigrants who seemed healthy passed on to the next phase; if there was suspicion that something might be

wrong, a chalk mark was made on that individual’s lapel. The chalk marks were coded: B for back; C for conjunctivitis; Ct for trachoma; E for eyes; F for face; Ft for feet; G for goiter; H for heart; K for hernia; L for lameness; N for neck; P for physical and lungs; Pg for pregnancy; Sc for scalp; S for senility; X for mental retardation; and a circled K for insanity. The medical examination was the most dreaded part of the process for immigrants.¹⁴ Immigrants, many of whom had never before been to a doctor, were forced to partially disrobe in groups for examinations that they did not understand and found humiliating: males were told to expose their penises; women were told to open their blouses.¹⁵

Most dreaded was the eye examination (rumored as a primary reason for deportation). Doctors would flip up the eyelids of each immigrant with a buttonhook, hairpin, or their fingers, searching for signs of trachoma, the common eye disease of the time, which was contagious and could lead to blindness if not treated. Favus, a contagious scalp disease that was difficult to cure, was also cause for deportation.¹⁶ Those who failed these initial examinations were placed in a chicken-wire screened enclosure—a terrifying situation for many. Ill children might be separated from well parents. Parents feared that a child was being taken away forever.¹⁷ Some individuals became hysterical when separated from family members for medical reasons.

Passengers who got past the medical examination continued down the line to the woman whose job it was to look for

prostitutes. They were then divided into groups based on information recorded on the ship’s manifest. Interpreters were provided, but often the barrage of questions caused much confusion and misunderstanding. Inspectors had to decipher names from the handwritten ship’s manifest; as a result, many names were changed or simplified on Ellis Island. It was not unusual for immigrants to leave home with one name and arrive in America with another. Many were detained unfairly—especially those classified as mentally deficient—many wrongly diagnosed due to communication problems between doctor and patient. Annie Moore and her brothers missed the worst of this process.¹⁸

Annie’s Story Goes Awry—What We Thought We Knew

The common account about Annie Moore, who is cited in story and song as the first of 12 million immigrants to arrive at Ellis Island, and who is memorialized in bronze statues at Ellis Island and in Cobh, Cork, Ireland, is that she left her new home in New York City as a young adult. She was believed to have moved west, depending on the story, to Nebraska, Illinois, Indiana, New Mexico, and eventually Texas; she married, had many children, and was killed in a tragic streetcar accident in Texas in 1924.¹⁹ However, while there was an Annie Moore in the West, it was not the Ellis Island Annie Moore. Yet the story of the immigrant girl who went west became so commonly accepted that even descendants of the Annie Moore who died in Texas came to believe it.²⁰ In fact, over the years several of her

Texan relatives have been invited to participate in ceremonies on Ellis Island and in Ireland.

To complicate the story further, fictitious Ellis Island Annie Moores began to surface in children's books published in Ireland and the United States. Three books written by Eithne Loughrey include elements of fact, but are almost completely based on the author's imagination. In *First In Line for America*, she invents Annie adventures, friends, work in a laundry, and even fabricates letters supposedly written by Annie's mother and Annie.²¹ In *The Golden Dollar Girl*, Annie works as a servant for a wealthy family in Manhattan, misses the fictional Mike Tierney whom she supposedly met on board the *Nevada*, and finds her life saved by another fictional character, Carl Lindgren.²² She leaves the wealthy family in disgrace and goes to Nebraska where she has a (fictional) female friend. In *Annie Moore: New York City Girl*,

Annie returns after two years in the "Wild West," and reconnects with Mike Tierney, the young man she loves, and marries, offering to share her \$10 gold piece which, according to the story, had remained unspent.²³

Loughrey includes an epilogue in her last book stating that readers of her fictional books might like to know what happened to the real Annie Moore after she arrives in New York. The author notes that there is not a lot of information about the real Annie Moore. But Loughrey does not explain the differences between her fictional Annie and the so-called facts. She writes that the family moved to Indiana after a time in New York where Annie met Patrick O'Connell whom she married in Texas in 1898 when she was 21. Annie and Patrick moved to Waco, Texas, to farm. Her lungs were discovered to be weak, and they moved to Fort Worth, then to Clovis, New Mexico, where they owned a hotel and restaurant beside the

railroad. O'Connell died of influenza in 1919. This Annie and her children managed the successful property until she was knocked down and killed by one of the first rapid transit trains while visiting her young brother, Pat, in Fort Worth. Her children were young and were raised by their aunt and uncle.

Eve Bunting, another children's author, imagines Annie Moore's experience aboard the *Nevada* in *Dreaming of America, An Ellis Island Story*.²⁴ While the text is imagined, it is based on what travel for immigrants might have been like. The painted illustrations are intermingled with reprints of actual documents; a photo of the *Nevada*; the ship's manifest, which included the Moore children's names and ages (though Annie was incorrectly marked down as 13); a photo of a group of singing immigrants aboard a ship; a photo of the original wooden building on Ellis Island (which would have been the one that Annie and her brothers entered). In this book, Annie and her brothers share a private room in steerage, complete with pitcher and bowl as well as white sheets and blue blankets. The children remain crisp and clean throughout the voyage and enjoy meals at a dining table with white, ironstone crockery. On Christmas Day they open large, wool scarves for each child from their aunt and uncle in Cork. On Annie's birthday, Annie opens another gift: a ring of connected red stone hearts from their aunt and uncle. Not only is this book imagined, but also it portrays life in steerage in an idealized manner. Bunting includes an afterword indicating that several years after Annie and her brothers arrived in New York, the family moved to Indiana where, at 21, Annie married Patrick O'Connell. Bunting states: "This much of Annie's story is true."

Annie's Story Revised

A contest initiated in July 2006, unearthed what may be the truth about Annie. Megan Smolenyak, a professional genealogist, had begun to suspect that

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the woman who died in Texas was not the real Ellis Island Annie Moore, but someone else entirely. She offered a \$1,000 prize to find out the truth about Annie. New York City's commissioner of records, Brian Andersson, together with a great-niece of Annie solved the mystery. "It turns out that the Texas Annie Moore was not an immigrant at all."²⁵ Smolenyak writes: "Their life stories had become interwoven through accident and happenstance, and a failure to fully research the lives of both women."²⁶

Let (What May Be) the Truth Be Taught

Annie and her brothers moved into their parents' tenement apartment at 32 Monroe Street in the Lower East Side of Manhattan (there is also a 32 Monroe Street in Brooklyn, but the Manhattan address is believed to be correct). This building was a five-story brick building, built at the turn of the century to house the influx of immigrants settling in New York City. We do not know what happened to Annie immediately after she got to her new home. There does not appear to be information on whether she was allowed to attend school or was forced to work to help support her family. Smolenyak writes that she "had the typical hardscrabble immigrant life," adding "she sacrificed herself for future generations."²⁷

We know that Annie married a German-born bakery clerk (or the son of a bakery clerk) named Shayer. If her husband was the son of a baker, rather than the baker, he was reported to be an engineer and salesman at the Fulton Fish Market. They had at least 11 children, five of whom survived to adulthood. A famous picture of Annie and their first baby appears in multiple references to her.²⁸ Annie was 47 when she died of heart failure at 99 Cherry Street, in 1924. She lived and died within a few blocks on the Lower East Side. She is buried with six of her children (five

infants and one who survived to 21) in Calvary Cemetery, Queens. A movement is underway to place a headstone on her unmarked grave, lost to history for eight decades.²⁹

Why is Annie Moore Important for Teachers?

The story of Annie Moore exemplifies the two pedagogical problems highlighted at the beginning of this article—that social studies teachers must endeavor to

- "Get it right," by assessing official and unofficial versions of history for accuracy.
- Sometimes historians and writers of historical topics are wrong—either due to honest mistakes, sloppy research, or purposeful deception to affect how a time in history is perceived. Later historians, genealogists, writers may eventually correct these distortions.
- Recognize that students will require help to sort out fiction from reality.

Sometimes children's writers combine fiction and reality (or what may not, in fact, be the reality) in a way that confuses young readers.

The errors in completing the account of Annie Moore's story offer a warning to historians and storytellers to exercise care in research. We must be vigilant for discrepancies and pursue any doubts. We must not hide or neglect the mistakes of history or the mistakes of historians and writers as they present what they think to be accurate. We must, in fact, include them as history, teaching students to assess not only the strengths of professional documenting history, but weaknesses as well. 📖

Notes

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MIA MERCURIO is a professor in the Department of Special Education and Reading at Southern Connecticut State University. Her research interests include the use of historical events in the development and implementation of interdisciplinary units in the middle school environment and the use of children's books to help with difficult life events.

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