

# Centennial Biographies

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Biography

## The Two Frontiers of Mary Ronan

by Annick Smith

**I**n the famous portrait of Mary Ronan, she is young. Her hair falls in waves to her knees. The photographer has placed a budding rose in her right hand. This conventional romantic pose is the only photographic image we are given of Mary Ronan in *Frontier Woman*, the book of reminiscences that her schoolteacher daughter Margaret transcribed from interviews and published in 1932. But the face looking out from the blanket of hair belies both convention and romance. The eyes are candid, steadfast, and open.

In 1932, Mary Sheehan Ronan turned eighty. A widow with eight living children, she had come to Missoula in 1898. Thirty-four unremarkable years later she was still living in the small house on Pine Street where she had raised her four boys and four girls and survived alone. "I'm so tired of being a pioneer," Mary Ronan said at the prospect of recording her life; and when the job was done, I imagine the old woman sighed with the relief of shedding a public burden.

The frontier we call historic was Mary's first frontier, and she conquered it with buoyant gentility and wit. Her second frontier was forty years of stay-at-home struggle as a widowed single parent. Although it has lately become acceptable to study domestic life as evidence of a social history perhaps more revealing than the history of great events, Mary was writing for an audience that had scant interest in an ordinary woman's private life in a settled middle-class town.

Like their audience, Mary and daughter Margaret seem held captive by the romance of the pioneer

myth, which may explain why the story they told ends in the middle. Mary was only forty-one when her husband, Indian agent Peter Ronan, died in 1893. It was the end of the frontier, the end of a century, and it seems Mary thought it was the end of her days as an individual. She disposed with half her life in three terse paragraphs, concluding:

Vicariously I have lived wherever the fortunes of my children have led them and thus lived more deeply than ever I did as an individual. In the joy and in the success of my children, I have risen to rapture unknown before; in their suffering, failure and sorrow I have felt unutterable anguish and could not have endured but for the faith that: Through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God.

What did she mean by this double-edged statement? Perhaps at eighty Mary Ronan had come to see herself as what feminists today call a non-person. Women over forty were expected to become invisible. But maybe I am projecting my own political assumptions here. Mary might simply be telling us to mind our own business, that being a *pioneer* is a public occupation while being a *woman* is not.

By all accounts, Mary Ronan had always been a lively woman endowed with grace and intelligence, courage and sympathy. A pious Roman Catholic and Irish to the core, she had been first a loving and dutiful daughter, then a loving and dutiful wife, and finally a loving and dutiful mother. Today, she is mostly remembered as the namesake for a lake in the northwestern corner of Montana, which is fa-

mous for trout and a resort called Camp Tuffit. Only history buffs have read her book, which was republished in 1973 but is now long out of print. In this hundredth year of Montana statehood, why should we honor the story of a woman so seemingly self-effacing?

The answer is character, and through character, recognition—not hers but our own. That is what we look for in all enduring literature, and that is what Mary Ronan’s story offers. Under her mask of gentility, little Mary was tough as stainless steel and equally as shiny. The world she gave us in her reminiscences is precise and alive, distinct as your mother’s cooking. Spicy.

**M**ary (Mollie) Sheehan was born in 1852 in Louisville, Kentucky. Her father, James, was a freighter, an emigrant from Cork; her mother, Ellen Fitzgibbon, was born in Limerick. They moved in a covered wagon from Kentucky to Indiana where Sheehan worked on the construction of a western-heading railroad. There Mollie lost her newborn sister; her parents’ shanty burned down; her mother took sick and died. Mary remembered being carried “from the burning house into the cool darkness.”

For the rest of her growing-up years, Mary was dominated by her strict and loving father. They traveled by wagon to Illinois and to Iowa, where she was impressed by “the wide bed in which I slept with my father.” In the evenings, widower and five-year-old daughter went to Irish dances. “I wore white pantalets which I was told were made from the fine linen sheets which my mother had brought with her from Ireland.”

They continued westward to a kinsman’s plantation in St. Joseph, Missouri, where her father was married again to a young Irish woman named Anne Cleary. The newlyweds took off for the Colorado goldfields, leaving Mollie behind to weep in the arms of a “Mammy.”

In 1861, Sheehan returned to carry his daughter off to a new home in Colorado. It was weeks across the plains driving a six-mule team with a jerkline. Mollie was nine years old. “I remember no hardships, only joy at being with my father again in the covered wagon on the road, with the world, as it seemed, all before us.”

**B**y eleven, Mary was an old hand on the frontier. From Colorado, her family (which now included a baby half-sister) followed the gold to Banack, Montana Territory, and then settled in booming Virginia City. They were there in 1863, the year of the Vigilantes. “Our surroundings I took quite for



Mollie Sheehan, in about 1873

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

granted,” said Mary, “as the way of all places in which little girls lived.”

She saw it all. “Coming from school one winter day, January 14, 1864, I cut across the bottom of the gulch, climbed the steep hill and passed close behind a large cabin which was being built. People gathered in front on Wallace Street. The air was charged with excitement. I looked. The bodies of five men with ropes around their necks hung limp from a roof beam. I trembled so that I could scarcely run toward home.”

But that is not all she saw. “There were tall buttercups and blue flags in the valley. Up Alder Gulch snow and timber lilies bloomed, wild roses and syringa grew in sweet profusion and flowering currant bushes invited canaries to alight and twitter.” Mary and her girlfriends roamed the hills, picking wild berries and herbs to sell in town until her father stopped them because he thought it was unfit for young ladies to engage in crass trade.

Life was a joy and a great, curious story. In Helena, where they moved in 1865, Mollie read the Bible, Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Byron, and Moore. She recited poems and memorized the tragic speech of Chief Black Hawk. And she loved to ride horses, sidesaddle and fast.

What Mary reveals is the pristine vision of a woman/child and later a child/woman. Where, we wonder, are the kinks? How can anyone be so consistently civilized, with the emphasis on *civil*? Our lady grew up surrounded by greed, violence, and

hardship but remained uncorrupted. She was sympathetic to road agents, miners, Indians, Mexicans, and even fancy ladies, yet she seems untouched by their experiences. Perhaps it was her Roman Catholic faith, which formed character at the same time that it denied individuality. Even in love and heartbreak, we sense Mary's power of survival, her good sense and will, her distance.

**M**ary's romance with her husband-to-be, Peter Ronan, is the stuff of popular, sentimental historical novels. "I think of my mother's picturesqueness, of the aura of romance surrounding her," daughter Margaret wrote in her introduction to *Frontier Woman*. But Margaret was referring to more than a love story.

While the real Mary struggled to live according to the values of her time and religion and made no fuss about it, her daughter preferred to see her as a romantic icon. In the myth of the West, women were ladies or whores, civilizers or servants. Heroines did not have dirty hands. "Truly," Margaret wrote, "there were thousands of women of another sort . . . gaunt, grim, shrill, weatherbeaten women, with rough skin and unkempt hair and coarse hands. . . . Women such as these scarcely enter my mother's story."

I think of Mary's forthright Irish face and wonder if she would have scorned the sense of class superiority implicit in her daughter's words. She was, after all, the daughter of an emigrant mule skinner, and blessed with the luck of being born into the mining frontier instead of the later homestead boom.

"I loved Helena," she said, "high in the hills of the mighty Prickly Pear." She loved its schools, church life, theater, dances and hayrides, oyster suppers, and sled races down the main street. Since proper young ladies were scarce, pretty Mary in her early teens attracted full-fledged men. The only one she fell in love with was a handsome and educated Irishman, a newspaper editor and entrepreneur fourteen years her senior.

Peter Ronan had been a gold miner in Virginia City. By 1865, he was in Helena and was editor and co-owner of the *Weekly Rocky Mountain Gazette*. When Mary was fifteen, her father away on one of his year-long work trips in Utah, Ronan came courting. "I have never seen since, not even in the son and daughter who most resemble him, such flashing dark eyes, so expressive, so glowing." They exchanged gold rings and made plans to marry. And then, "When my father returned from Utah in March, 1869, what a storm of wrath broke! His little girl marry? Indeed not!"

Sheehan commanded Mary to break off the engagement, return the ring and all of Ronan's gifts.

She complied with sweet passivity. "I never questioned my father's authority; I never argued; I always obeyed." But when Ronan attempted to return the ring she had given him, she asserted her will, however tentatively. "Keep it," I barely whispered, 'til I ask for it, and goodbye.'" Goodbye, because her father was moving his family again, this time to the golden south of California.

Lovesick, that is how Mary remembered the darkness of their covered-wagon journey: ". . . how the world-old mystery of night and loneliness and the unknown pressed down on me." Yet, when her family arrived in the Mexican pueblo of San Juan Capistrano and settled near the ruins of the ancient mission, "within sight of the ocean and its rolling fogs and within sound of the roar of its waves," she was swept into a fine green world of delights.

"The Mexicans liked me," she wrote. "I was Catholic. I sang in the mission-chapel choir. . . . I met the villagers and the rancheros and their wives and children at church . . . I learned their language. I learned their games and their dances, the *contra* dance and *la jota*. They called me *La Mary*."

Southern California infected Mary with the heady possibilities of freedom, and in her descriptions of that time and place we sense an abandon that she never realized before or after. Like a bride, Mary dressed in the fine white linen of her childhood. In a newspaper column that found its way into Peter Ronan's hands in Helena, she is called "the acknowledged belle of Capistrano."

All the while, Mary was acting out what I can only call an Oedipal drama. It was no secret that Mary reminded her father of her mother. "I knew that my father loved me above all else," she wrote. Mary worked with him in the fields, helped build their house, and kept his accounts. "When he sat down to rest and to smoke, it was my pleasure to make haste to bring him the old abalone shell in which he kept his tobacco and to light his pipe."

Such devotion had deep emotional consequences. "I was sorry, deeply sorry, for the kind, sweet, sensitive little stepmother for she, as I knew and had always known (for he talked to me sometimes when we were alone) was never loved by my father as he had loved my mother," and by implication *herself*. Mary was in what psychologists call a double bind, although we do not know if she was aware of it. She soon left Capistrano to go to school in the convent of St. Vincent de Paul in Los Angeles to study to be a teacher. There, on one February day, she renewed her love affair with Peter Ronan by sending him a valentine.

Love letters passed from California to Montana and back again (we regret that H. G. Merriam's delicacy led him to delete those letters from the pub-



F. J. Haynes, photographer; Haynes Foundation Collection, MHS Photograph Archives

**Mary Ronan and her family in front of their house at St. Ignatius in 1884**

lished manuscript). Mary, now almost twenty, pledged her troth once and for all. Her father wept bitterly on her wedding day, but given the choice of marrying his daughter to Peter Ronan or sending her as the bride of Jesus to the nuns in the convent (a choice Mary considered quite seriously), he had finally given permission. In January 1873, four years after their parting, Peter and Mary were married in the Capistrano church.

A year later, one of a series of fires that devastated Helena wiped out Ronan's newspaper, the *Gazette*. In the aftermath, Peter concluded: "I had had enough of journalism or it had had enough of me." He decided to go back to mining, this time in a town called Blackfoot City, thirty miles west of Helena.

"I have little to relate concerning my first years of marriage," said Mary. Her child-raising life during

her earliest years, as in her forty years of widowhood, remain purely private. From 1873 to 1877, the Ronans were busy creating a family. Three of their eight surviving children were born during those years. Days and seasons passed "like incidents in a happy pastoral." Secluded in matrimonial isolation, Mary's social life was limited to a few visits from friends in Helena. "Except for these visitors," she reported, "I seldom saw a woman."

When someone robbed their company's sluice boxes in Blackfoot of pay dirt, Peter and Mary returned to Helena. With her husband out of a job and thinking about returning to newspaper work, Mary must have been pleased at Peter's surprise appointment in May 1877 to fill out an unexpired term as agent on the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana. "You will be delighted," Peter



F.J. Haynes, photographer, Haynes Foundation Collection, MHS Photograph Archives

The newly constructed sawmill on the Flathead Indian Reservation in 1884

wrote from the old agency in the Jocko Valley. "True enough," she remembered, "I was delighted with the beauty of the place. There I spent twenty years, the most interesting and difficult of my life. Something stirring, exciting, dangerous was always pending, threatening, happening."

**M**ary could not have known that her years in Capistrano were preparing her to be the "first lady" of the Flathead Indian Reservation. In California, she had been immersed in a foreign culture, and for the first time she had been close to people whose roots were Native American. Mary learned she could be helpful and sympathetic yet stand apart in her white gowns, secure in her intimate world.

As in so many accounts of the old West that center on Indian life (such as those written by George

Catlin, Andrew Garcia, or James Willard Schultz) the memoir of Mary Ronan's years in Indian country reads like a vision of paradise defiled. The grown-up Mary retires into the background of her own reminiscence, often quoting the words of her husband and other male observers, as if political action must be described by men, as if her own perceptions were inadequate outside the sphere of domestic life.

Unlike Catlin, she was not a Romantic who idealized "natural man." Mary agreed with Peter Ronan's goals of transforming the Indians' way of life through religion, education, and agriculture. Husband and wife dreamed the Jeffersonian dream of a yeoman's garden in the wilderness. It seemed palpable, almost easy, to create a thriving agricultural community among the peaceful and friendly Indians of the lush Jocko and Flathead valleys.

"Flathead Lake is embossed in one of the loveliest and most fertile countries that the imagination

can well picture," wrote Peter Ronan in his first report to the U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs. "Around the foot of the lake and amid the most delightful scenes is grouped another Indian settlement where snug houses, well-fenced fields, grazing herds and waving grain give evidence of the rapid advance of those Indians in the ways of civilization and thrift."

The Ronans' attitude toward the Flatheads, Pend d'Oreilles, and Kootenais of the Confederated Tribes was respectful at best, often condescending, and occasionally repressive. Mary justified Peter's government-mandated suppression of "tribal rites" because the Indians "sometimes danced themselves into a frenzy . . . until they were in a bad and dangerous mood." More often, "they would dance until they were in a state of utter exhaustion and susceptibility to cold, pneumonia and other diseases."

The Ronans treated the Indians under their charge like children in need of civilizing, but they were good parents who loved their children and tried to protect them. Ronan believed in justice. "So concerned was he . . . in getting justice for them and redress for their many and grievous wrongs—and so successful was he in the administration of his office that he spent the remaining sixteen years of his life among them on reappointments through Republican and Democratic administrations."

The life Mary sketched of their first years at the agency is idyllic. The growing family lived in a white frame house, which expanded in time to occupy two stories with eleven rooms. The comfortable home was always full of people and dogs—visiting dignitaries and priests, a succession of mixed-blood nursemaids sent over by the nuns, and the Ronans' eight children. Peter planted an orchard, which flourished, and a vegetable garden. The agency included a blacksmith's shop, gristmills and sawmills, a barn, a granary, a drugstore, and modest houses for Michel (their blind interpreter) and a few other employees.

With abundant wild game to hunt, wild berries to pick and preserve, and trout-loaded streams, the family took care of its basic needs and pleasures. They were never rich and never stole from the Indians as previous agents had. The Ronans lived on Peter's salary—\$125 per month—and whatever they could raise in the government's demonstration farm and garden. Mary managed the household and entertained a constant barrage of visitors—Indian and white—while Peter managed the reservation. As Mary remembered, "I played a role almost necessarily behind the scenes—that of the wife and the mother of children watching, listening, waiting, fearing, hoping, coming front stage in the mask of the smiling hostess." It was the role Mary had been

groomed to play as a lady on the frontier—the smiling public woman *and* the woman behind the mask.

"The coming of the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1883...put an end to the old idyllic days." Unscrupulous white men sold whiskey to the Indians and infringed on the lands set aside for the tribes. In 1893, Peter Ronan's health gave out. He had been planning to retire on a homestead at Lake Mary Ronan, to raise cattle and prospect new claims. Then suddenly, at home, at the age of fifty-three, Peter Ronan died of a heart attack.

**M**ary and the children stayed at the agency for four more years. "I found myself thrust upon a new, a dim and desolate frontier—my life partner gone, four boys and girls to rear and educate, slender means and many legal entanglements." For forty years Mary would live on this everywoman's frontier that has no glamour, no special flavor of history or romance. We would like to hear more, but she will tell us nothing specific about that story except that she had spent time with her married daughters in Salt Lake City, in San Francisco, in Santa Cruz, and in Los Angeles.

*Frontier Woman* ends with a puzzling denial of the storyteller's individuality. "Vicariously I have lived wherever the fortunes of my children have led them," wrote Mary Ronan, "and thus lived more deeply than ever I did as an individual."

Can this be the ultimate recognition? What light does such an admission shed on the story we have just read? I, for one, hope that Mary was telling a lie for the sake of some Victorian ideal of motherhood. I want the long-haired beauty of the famous photograph to inhale the perfume and be stung by the thorns of the rose she holds so casually in her right hand. The woman I have come to admire, the woman I have imagined as her story unfolds, must feel as well as see *in her own right*.

But I could be as blind as the Ronans' old Indian interpreter, captive to a western myth that prizes individuality. Maybe the Mary who existed behind a gentlewoman's mask was truly happy to be invisible. Maybe she has told us that the passion of living vicariously is better than the no-passion of despair, or the selfish passions of youth, or the fear of any passion at all.

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