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# From “Destroying Angel” to “The Most Dangerous Woman in America”: A Study of Mary Mallon’s Depiction in Popular Culture

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From “Destroying Angel” to “The Most Dangerous Woman in America”:

A Study of Mary Mallon’s Depiction in Popular Culture

A Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

Undergraduate History Program of the University of Washington Tacoma

by

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Advisor: Dr. Libi Sundermann

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“Typhoid” Mary Mallon: “A special guest of the City of New York”<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction:**

If you say the name Mary Mallon to someone today, there is a good chance they will not know who you are talking about. Mention “Typhoid Mary”, though, and most people have at least heard of the name, and its association with carrying a contagious disease. Surprisingly, many Americans today do not know that “Typhoid Mary” was actually an Irish immigrant and cook who lived in early twentieth-century New York City. The nickname “Typhoid Mary” did not enter the popular vocabulary until June 20, 1909, when William Randolph Hearst’s magazine *New York American* published an article entitled “‘TYPHOID MARY’ - MOST HARMLESS AND YET THE MOST DANGEROUS WOMAN IN AMERICA.”<sup>2</sup> The article went on to describe her as a half-human creature, who was also a “fever factory” and a “human vehicle,” who had to be guarded constantly in order not to run away, and who was the most mysterious case in the hospital’s history.<sup>3</sup> As Judith Walzer Leavitt puts it in her book *Typhoid Mary: Captive to the Public’s Health*, Mallon “had the distinction, at age of thirty-seven, of being the first person in North America to be identified, charted, and reported in the literature as a healthy typhoid carrier.”<sup>4</sup> This paper will discuss Mallon’s historical legacy through her identities as a healthy carrier, an Irish immigrant, and a working woman, and attempt to answer the question of why she has been remembered in popular culture as “Typhoid Mary.”

Mary Mallon was born September 23, 1869, in Cookstown, County Tyrone, Ireland. Not much is known of her early life, and most of what history has recorded of Mallon’s life begins

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary: Captive to the Public’s Health* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1996), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Alan M. Kraut, *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the “Immigrant Menace”* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 100.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Campbell Bartoletti, *Terrible Typhoid Mary: A True Story of the Deadliest Cook in America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015), 87.

<sup>4</sup> Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary*, 14.

when she emigrated to New York City in 1883. Living with an aunt and uncle for a time, she found work as a cook and gradually built up her career, eventually finding high-paying jobs for affluent families who enjoyed her cooking.

Unbeknownst to Mallon, she was an asymptomatic carrier of typhoid fever, a bacterial infection caused by the *Salmonella typhi* virus. It is unknown how and when Mallon became infected with typhoid, as she insisted throughout her life that she had never been sick with it. She may have gotten typhoid fever in Ireland or in America, and most likely just experienced mild flu-like symptoms. In a period of six years, between 1900 and 1906, Mallon worked for seven different families, changing jobs when the residents or staff of the household became ill. In 1906, the wealthy Warren family who were renting a home in Oyster Bay, Long Island, were disturbed when three of their family members and three of their servants contracted typhoid fever. Charles Warren, who was a banker, hired a detective from the Department of Health to investigate what was going on. Sanitary engineer George Soper, who described himself as a “thoroughly trained and experienced epidemic fighter,”<sup>5</sup> investigated the outbreak there and in other affluent family homes in the area, and found one commonality: Mary Mallon had worked there as a cook. The Warren family told Soper that on one occasion Mallon had prepared a dish of peaches and whipped cream for the family. As a cook, she did not normally handle cold food - that was the serving girls’ job - but apparently Mallon had been filling in for her that particular day.<sup>6</sup> It is believed that her lack of hygiene, coupled with the preparation of cold food (normally, cooking with heat eliminated any typhoid germs) led to her spreading the disease.

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<sup>5</sup> George Soper, “The Discovery of Typhoid Mary,” *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 4070 (1939): 37-38, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2208648/?page=1>.

<sup>6</sup> Julie Fenster, *Mavericks, Miracles, and Medicine: The Pioneers Who Risked Their Lives to Bring Medicine into the Modern Age* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003), 112.

George Soper obtained permission to confront Mallon from the medical officer of New York City, Herman Biggs. He convinced Biggs that if Mallon's blood, feces, and urine were tested, it would prove what his investigation had suggested: that she was a healthy carrier of typhoid. With permission granted, Soper twice confronted Mallon, asking for samples, and telling her she had to have her gallbladder removed to make her well. Both times Mary threw him out of the house she was cooking in.

Mallon was eventually captured by the New York City Department of Health with the help of Josephine Baker, a prominent female physician. After Soper confronted Mallon again, this time with the help of Dr. Baker, Mallon actually disappeared and had to be hunted down. She was found hours later, where it was obvious her fellow servants had helped her hide (there were ash cans in front of the door of the shed where Mallon ended up, and none of the servants would admit to having seen her), and Dr. Baker writes in her autobiography that she had to actually sit on Mallon while she was being driven to the hospital. Mallon was first taken to the Willard Parker Hospital, a hospital for those suffering from contagious diseases, and her feces and urine were tested daily. Of this testing, Soper said "daily examinations made for over two weeks have failed only twice to reveal the presence of the *Bacillus typosus*, and on these occasions the sample taken was perhaps too small to reveal them... The cook appeared to be in perfect health."<sup>7</sup>

In 1907, Mary was sent to North Brother Island, off the east coast of Manhattan, to Riverside Hospital. Eventually, a separate cabin was built for her to live in, and she was forced to submit samples every week to be tested for typhoid. Like before, the samples sometimes came

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<sup>7</sup> George Soper, "The Work of a Chronic Typhoid Germ Distributor," *Journal of the American Medical Association* XLVIII, 24 (1907): 2019-2022, accessed January 17, 2016, <http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=463876>.

back positive, while at other times they came back negative, which showed that Mary was indeed a carrier of typhoid, although an intermittent one.<sup>8</sup> Mallon reported to the *New York World* newspaper how she had been told by a nurse that if she would “promise to leave the State and live under another name ... I could have my freedom. But this I will not do. I will either be cleared or die where I now am.”<sup>9</sup> It was around this time that she found out an article had been written about her and presented to a medical conference, where the director of the U.S. Public Health Service Hygienic Laboratory called her a “typhoid Mary.” Unfortunately, this nickname caught on and after appearing in the *New York American*, permanently stuck.<sup>10</sup>

While in quarantine for three years, she began secretly sending stool samples to Ferguson Laboratories, a private lab, all of which came back negative for typhoid.<sup>11</sup> She used this information to file a writ of habeas corpus against the Department of Health, stating that she was an “innocent human being” who was being treated like an outcast, and that it was inexcusable “that in a Christian community a defenseless woman can be treated in this matter.”<sup>12</sup> She was denied release once, and then a year later, thanks to the new Health Commissioner Dr. Ernst J. Lederle, was released on February 19, 1910, after promising to never work with food again. The Health Commissioner told an *American* reporter that although they could not guarantee Mary had less typhoid germs, they were confident that she now knew how to prevent the spreading of the disease,<sup>13</sup> and that “the people of this city ought to do something for her.”<sup>14</sup> She was given a

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<sup>8</sup> Bartoletti, *Terrible Typhoid Mary*, 97.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>10</sup> Gail Jarrow, *Fatal Fever: Tracking Down Typhoid Mary* (Honesdale: Calkins Creek, 2015), 95.

<sup>11</sup> Bartoletti, *Terrible Typhoid Mary*, 101.

<sup>12</sup> Kraut, *Silent Travelers*, 100.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Fenster, *Mavericks*, 117.

job as a laundress and told to report to the Health Department every three months. They lost track of her a year later.

Five years later, in 1915, twenty-five cases of typhoid fever were reported at the Sloane Hospital for Women, a maternity hospital. Mallon was discovered working as a cook there, under the pseudonym of 'Mary Brown'. She was recaptured and sent back to North Brother Island. Mallon spent most of the rest of her life living in her cabin on the island, though she was eventually allowed to visit friends in Queens and Manhattan. She was given a job working in the laboratory on site, and spent her free time knitting, reading, and preparing meals for herself using food the Department of Health provided for her. Mallon had a stroke in 1932 and spent the rest of her life bedridden at Riverside Hospital, eventually dying of pneumonia on November 11, 1938.<sup>15</sup> Nine people attended her funeral at St. Luke's Church, though they refused to name themselves to newspapers.<sup>16</sup>

While there is no way of knowing with certainty, it is generally accepted that Mallon infected around fifty people with typhoid, and three of that fifty died because of it.

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<sup>15</sup> Kraut, *Silent Travelers*, 102.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Bourdain, *Typhoid Mary: An Urban Historical* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2001), 137.



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH - 1938  
BOROUGH OF BROWN

Form 15 H 35-2009-35-30

STATE OF NEW YORK  
Department of Health of The City of New York  
BUREAU OF RECORDS  
STANDARD CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

1 PLACE OF DEATH  
NOV 12 1938  
BROOKLYN

Name of Institution RIVERSIDE HOSPITAL  
Address of Institution FT. E. 134<sup>th</sup> ST.

2 PRINT FULL NAME MARY MALLON

3 SEX FEMALE 4 COLOR OR RACE WHITE 5 SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED, OR DIVORCED SINGLE  
(Write the word)

6 DATE OF BIRTH OF DECEASED SEPTEMBER 23, 1869  
(Month) (Day) (Year)

7 AGE 69 yrs. 1 mo. 18 da. or min.

8 OCCUPATION  
(a) Trade, profession or particular kind of work HOSPITAL HELPER  
(b) General nature of industry, business or establishment in which employed (or employer) HOSPITAL  
(c) No. of years so occupied 16 yrs.

9 BIRTHPLACE (State or country) IRELAND

(A) How long in U. S. (if of foreign birth) 55 yrs. (B) How long resident in City of New York 55 yrs.

10 NAME OF FATHER OF DECEASED JOHN MALLON

11 BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER (State or country) IRELAND

12 MAIDEN NAME OF MOTHER OF DECEASED CATHERINE IGO

13 BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER (State or country) IRELAND

14 Special INFORMATION required in deaths in hospitals and institutions and in deaths of non-residents and recent residents.  
Usual residence RIVERSIDE HOSPITAL  
INFORMANT: DECEDENT  
Where was disease contracted, if not at place of death?

15 DATE OF DEATH NOVEMBER 11, 1938  
(Month) (Day) (Year)

16 I hereby certify that the foregoing particulars (Nos. 1 to 15 inclusive) are correct as near as the same can be ascertained, and I further certify that deceased was admitted to this institution on DECEMBER 4, 1932, that I last saw her alive on the 11 day of NOVEMBER 1938, that she died on the 11 day of NOVEMBER 1938, about 1 o'clock A. M. or P. M., and that I am unable to state definitely the cause of death; the diagnosis during her last illness was:  
Tuberculous Bronchopneumonia - 7 days  
Chronic Nephritis & Chronic Myocarditis  
duration 19 yrs. mos. ds.  
Contributory Typhoid Carrier  
duration 24 yrs. mos. ds.

Operation? \_\_\_\_\_ State kind \_\_\_\_\_  
Witness my hand this 11 day of November 1938  
Signature David Cohen M. D.  
House \_\_\_\_\_

17 I hereby certify that I have this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ 19\_\_\_\_, performed an autopsy upon the body of said deceased, and that the cause of her death was as follows:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature \_\_\_\_\_ M. D.  
Pathologist \_\_\_\_\_ Hospital \_\_\_\_\_

FILED \_\_\_\_\_ 18 PLACE OF BURIAL St. James and St. Ann DATE OF BURIAL Nov 12 1938  
FUNERAL \_\_\_\_\_ ADDRESS 617 E. 138<sup>th</sup> St.

Figure 1. Mary Mallon's death certificate, 1938. Source: New York Department of Records, digital image.

Available from: NYTimes.com,

[http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/07/02/health/20130702\\_deathcertificates.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/07/02/health/20130702_deathcertificates.html?_r=0) (accessed March 1, 2016).

## Thesis and Question

Mallon's story, at first glance, is the story of a woman who knowingly spread germs, and deliberately infected those around her because of her pride, ignorance, and the status cooking gave her. It is important to remember that Mallon was more than just an asymptomatic carrier-- she was also a female, Irish Catholic immigrant, unmarried, but with a male partner. Mallon worked and lived in a city and society that had only very recently learned about bacteria and germs causing illness, saw women's jobs as homemakers and wives, and believed immigrants, especially the Irish, had no place in America. Looking at her story in its historical context is essential if we want to know why Mallon was captured in the first place, released, and then found to be cooking again. Her life was controlled by a society that already had prejudices about

her race, sex, and class, and these ideas and beliefs put her into quarantine, and influence the stories we tell about her today.

While these facts, and historical discussions, are relatively easy to uncover, the question this paper asks is why has Mallon been vilified in popular culture as “Typhoid Mary,” and why does this infamy overshadow her historical legacy. The answers are related to her identity as a healthy carrier, an Irish immigrant, and a woman. Her unbalanced portrayal in history, weighted in popular culture, has been derived from that identity and the ideas and attitudes that surrounded them.

### **Literature Review**

There have been many scholarly books on the three topics most closely tied to Mallon’s case - disease, immigration, and women at work - but few on Mallon herself. Of these three topics, there have been several scholarly works that have taken an unbiased view of Mary Mallon.

In Judith Walzer Leavitt’s *Typhoid Mary: Captive to the Public’s Health*, the author seeks to tell Mary Mallon’s story and look at it in the context of public health and illness management, keeping in mind the question of “Is sickness or carrying disease one of the situations in which most Americans can accept depriving people of their liberty?”<sup>17</sup> She uses primary and secondary sources to support her research, such as George Soper’s investigatory papers that were published in 1904 in *Engineering News*, *Engineering Magazine*, and *Journal of the New England Water Works Association*. Leavitt compares Mallon’s ordeal to those who suffer from AIDS, tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases in modern-day America, and seeks to find answers to our “pressing public health problems” by investigating Mallon’s life.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Because of her interest in American public health, Leavitt focuses her book on Mallon's story; she concludes her book by stating the importance and necessity of public health programs that both protect the ones with the disease and the ones without. There is also a PBS documentary about Mallon, based off of Leavitt's book, entitled *Typhoid Mary: The Most Dangerous Woman in America*, which gives an overview of her case.

*Fatal Fever: Tracking Down Typhoid Mary* by Gail Jarrow is a middle-school textbook, and reads as such, giving an overview as opposed to a detailed account of Mallon's case. The book attempts to tell Mary Mallon's story in the context of the newly-discovered field of bacteriology, emphasizing the newness of the idea of asymptomatic carriers and the prevalent belief that diseases were spread by smell or dust. Jarrow examines the beginnings of typhoid in New York leading up to the discovery of Mallon as a carrier, and uses many historical documents throughout the book: photographs of Mallon's cabin where she spent most of her years of isolation, files from her court cases, and various photographs of the sanitary conditions and increasingly prevalent medical labs in New York state. The author acknowledges the lack of autobiographical information Mallon left, but tries to write an unbiased picture of her and the culture of the city she lived in, concluding by inviting readers to ask questions and seek answers about Mallon's decisions and the way she was treated by the Department of Health.

In J.N. Hays' book *Epidemics and Pandemics: Their Impacts on Human History*, the author argues that issues of public health and individual's rights are nuanced and historically complex, and that Mallon's case raised unsettling questions. He looks at the issues that led Mallon in particular to be quarantined, and states that categories like "gender, ethnicity, and class are still given importance to this day."<sup>19</sup> Most importantly, he asks why Mallon went back to

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<sup>19</sup> J.N. Hays, *Epidemics and Pandemics: Their Impacts on Human History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc, 2005), 364.

cooking, even after her promise not to do so, giving several ideas as to why: perhaps she was willfully ignorant, “actively malicious” or she simply had no way of surviving after her livelihood was taken away from her.<sup>20</sup> The fact that other asymptomatic carriers were retrained for different careers is an interesting one, while Mallon was given no such opportunity.

Alan Kraut’s chapter on Mallon in *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the “Immigrant Menace”* looks at her status as an Irish immigrant and a woman in light of the nativism sweeping the nation at the time, as well as how she was depicted in newspapers of the time as being an Irish rebel and “the most dangerous woman alive.” Kraut emphasizes that because typhoid frequently finds its “victims amongst the poor and uneducated...[and] those who live under conditions that promote infection,” it has been seen as a “poor” disease.<sup>21</sup> The fact that Mary Mallon was a cook for a wealthy family in Oyster Bay and subsequently infected the household is probably the only reason that she was captured and put into quarantine.

Donna Gabaccia’s book *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the U.S., 1820-1990* explores the lives of foreign-born women who emigrated to the United States, and the unique struggles they encountered in their interactions with native-born women and men alike. Her book gives many examples of female immigrants from all walks of life and situations, and the Irish women she focuses on began their working life as domestic servants, just as Mallon did. The author’s statement that “after the famine, Irish women defined themselves in strikingly economic terms ... they assumed they ought to earn money whenever possible” could be looked at as an explanation of Mallon’s stubbornness and reluctance to work as a laundress.<sup>22</sup> Her statement that “Irish girls saw work in a middle-class urban kitchen as a step up” gives context to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 368.

<sup>21</sup> Kraut, *Silent Travelers*, 97.

<sup>22</sup> Donna Gabaccia, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the U.S., 1820-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 19.

the attitude and pride Mallon had in her cooking, since she had managed to cook for upper-middle-class or even wealthy families instead.<sup>23</sup>

Much of the scholarly literature associated with Mallon is focused on her capture and takes into account the context of the time period she lived in, distinguishing itself from popular culture literature that primarily focuses on the stereotypes that have evolved. These works suggest that there is more research to be done regarding Mary Mallon's life and historical legacy, and emphasize that an analysis of her story through popular culture is necessary and useful.

### **Disease Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century**

What is typhoid fever? Living in a developed country where children are required to be vaccinated as infants, we hear little about the illness, and indeed, it mostly infects those who travel outside of the United States. Nowadays, it is estimated that less than six thousand Americans are infected with typhoid per year, with the global total being around twenty-one million cases and a total of two hundred thousand deaths annually<sup>24</sup>.

In the early 1900s, typhoid was the "eighth-greatest cause of death in the U.S."<sup>25</sup> Typhoid fever causes fever, headache, a rash on the body, and in extreme cases, bleeding of the nose or intestines. The average mortality rate among its sufferers is around 10 percent, and around 2 to 5 percent become carriers.<sup>26</sup> Like most illnesses, those most susceptible are the young, elderly, and those with weakened immune systems.

The germ theory of disease, which stated that disease was spread by microorganisms, was fairly new to the scientific community at this time. Prior to the 1900s, the prevailing belief was

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> "Typhoid Fever," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases, last modified May 14, 2013, [http://www.cdc.gov/nczved/divisions/dfbmd/diseases/typhoid\\_fever/](http://www.cdc.gov/nczved/divisions/dfbmd/diseases/typhoid_fever/).

<sup>25</sup> Fenster, *Mavericks*, 107.

<sup>26</sup> Kraut, *Silent Travelers*, 97.

in ‘miasma’ - the theory that dirt caused disease, and then the bad smells coming from the dirt could spread the diseases more easily. By the late 1880s, the typhoid bacillus was identified by Robert Koch, Germany’s most famous germ theorist, and along with the work of Louis Pasteur, the bacteriology and germ theory movement was elevated in importance.<sup>27</sup> Drs. Koch and Pasteur made germ theory the credible and widespread belief it is today, and helped lead America into its new era of public health.

In 1903, a French doctor named Frosch was the first to suggest that typhoid could continue to inhabit a body, even after the person seemed well, and in 1904 this theory was proved by a pair of German scientists, von Drigalski and Conradi.<sup>28</sup> As of 1906, when Mallon was first identified as an asymptomatic carrier of typhoid, there were over three thousand cases of it reported in New York City alone.<sup>29</sup> Someone with typhoid was not surprising in general, but the concept of a healthy person carrying and spreading the disease was still unfathomable to the everyday populace. The public believed, and rightly so, without a knowledge of germ theory, that only sick people could spread disease.

The rise in industrialization caused great population growth in cities, which then increased dirt, animal refuse, and garbage on the city streets and in the waterways, and led to more epidemics than ever before. These crises encouraged cities to establish permanent health departments, which led to wide-scale national sanitation and water purification measures being put into effect. The establishment of Departments of Health throughout the country was positive for the overall population. The setup of vaccination programs, isolation hospitals, and

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<sup>27</sup> Philip Alcabes, *Dread: How Fear and Fantasy Have Fueled Epidemics from the Black Death to Avian Flu* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), 98-9.

<sup>28</sup> “Mary Mallon (Typhoid Mary).” *American Journal of Public Health and the Nations Health* 29, No. 1 (1939): 66-68. Accessed January 28, 2016. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.29.1.66.

<sup>29</sup> Kraut, *Silent Travelers*, 97.

dispensaries to bring healthcare to urban populations was effective and much-needed, but unfortunately, the implementation of some of these policies got Mallon in trouble in the first place.<sup>30</sup> Since there was no precedent to follow in Mallon's case, when she was discovered to be a healthy carrier, the government and Department of Health had to decide what to do with her, and quickly.

The Department of Health quarantined Mallon using sections from the Greater New York Charter. Provision 1169 stated that "The board of health shall use all reasonable means for ascertaining the existence and cause of disease or peril to life or health, and for averting the same, throughout the city"<sup>31</sup> while Provision 1170 stated that "said board may remove... any person sick with any contagious, pestilential or infectious disease."<sup>32</sup> Dr. Baker stated that "there is very little that Board of Health cannot do ... for the protection of public health,"<sup>33</sup> affirming the fact that Mallon was at the mercy of an organization that didn't exactly know what to do with her, but were going to try anything in order to protect the public.

In 1908, the director of the bacteriological laboratory at the New York City Department of Health, Dr. William H. Park, asked his fellow medical associates whether the city of New York had the right to quarantine Mallon and "deprive her of her liberty for perhaps her whole life?" concluding that "The alternative is to turn loose on the public a woman who is known to have infected at least twenty-eight persons."<sup>34</sup> It is important to remember that at this time, there were other known healthy carriers, who had been 'turned loose' by the government themselves. By 1909, the year of Mallon's court case, there had been five healthy carriers identified in New

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<sup>30</sup> Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary*, 22.

<sup>31</sup> Bartoletti, *Terrible Typhoid Mary*, 64.

<sup>32</sup> Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary*, 71.

<sup>33</sup> Jarrow, *Fatal Fever*, 87.

<sup>34</sup> Fenster, *Mavericks*, 115.

York City, and at least fifty nationwide.<sup>35</sup> In 1910 a man dubbed “Typhoid John”, who was an ‘Adirondack woodsman’ and Yellowstone guide in Wyoming, was found to be a carrier of typhoid and declared, like Mallon, to be a public menace. He infected 36 tourists, of which two later died. In contrast to Mallon’s case, “Commissioner Porter responded that there was no State law by which a human carrier of typhoid could be kept from spreading contagion and disease” and ‘John’ was submitted to testing and was provided accommodations while he was undergoing treatments.<sup>36</sup> In a two-year period in the 1920s, two male restaurant workers in New York were discovered to be typhoid carriers, resulting in five total deaths, and neither one was quarantined for more than two weeks before being released to the public again. The judge told the court that he could not “legally sentence this man to jail on account of his health.”<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, Mallon was the only female who was publicly identified as being a healthy carrier of typhoid.

The idea of quarantine and removal for the ‘public good’ was in line with emerging social ideas of responsibility, in a time of “growing individualism.”<sup>38</sup> As germ theory and bacteriology emerged and became the accepted theory, American culture was becoming more centered on the individual and their role in creating a responsible society, and the belief that disease was separate from people's bodies created the idea that people are responsible for not only their health, but the health of those around them.<sup>39</sup> This concept of the self being separate from disease was newly developing, and not all accepted it, certainly not Mallon, who refused to have her gallbladder removed by the doctors as a preventative measure. Though the typhoid

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<sup>35</sup> Bartoletti, *Terrible Typhoid Mary*, 114.

<sup>36</sup> Editorial, “Guide a Walking Typhoid Factory,” *The New York Times*, December 2, 1910, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9E02EEDE1638E333A25751C0A9649D946196D6CF>.

<sup>37</sup> Bartoletti, *Terrible Typhoid Mary*, 138-9.

<sup>38</sup> Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 70.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.



bacilli are mainly housed in the host's gallbladder, they can also be found in the ileum (small intestine), spleen, and bone marrow.<sup>40</sup> Mallon stated in a letter to the *New York American* that she was afraid of the doctors who were holding her, because "When I came to the Department, they said they [germs] were in my intestinal tract. Later another said they were in the muscles of my bowels, and latterly, they thought of the gallbladder."<sup>41</sup> The doctors later admitted that they did not know whether removing her gallbladder would have helped her or not, and it can be seen as fortunate that they did not, since antibiotics had not yet been invented, and the reality of her dying of an infection from the surgery was very real. Yet Mallon's refusal to allow a part of her body to be removed was seen as opposing the new American idea of personal responsibility "in an age of interdependence."<sup>42</sup> In 1922, Henry J. Nichols of the U.S. Army Medical Corps wrote that "a typhoid gall bladder ... represents a diabolical mechanism for the perpetuation of some of man's real enemies" and went on to state that since the individual person is "a part of higher units," that "medically as well as biologically, the interests of the whole ... are greater than those of the individual party."<sup>43</sup> His words reflected the 'greater good' attitude of America's health culture. While these words were being stated, Mallon had already been in quarantine for a total of ten years, seemingly for the good of everyone else.

Historically, typhoid has been seen as a 'poor' disease. Although it can, and did, affect everyone from the top of society to the very bottom of it, the poor and uneducated generally live in conditions that aided the spread of disease - lacking clean water, working with animals, and not being able to access proper health care are just a few of these factors. In the early 1900s, typhoid was the 'hot topic', and due to its pervasiveness, was called "a disease of defective

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<sup>40</sup> Bartoletti, *Terrible Typhoid Mary*, 104.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>42</sup> Wald, *Contagious*, 78.

<sup>43</sup> Kraut, *Silent Travelers*, 75-6.

civilization,” a “disease of dirt, poverty, and national carelessness,” and “a national disgrace.”<sup>44</sup> Because it is spread by the feces of an infected person, typhoid goes hand-in-hand with feelings of fear and disgust, and this fear was easily attached onto the immigrant - and poor - population.<sup>45</sup> It is ironic that in America, the land of immigrants, “foreign status equaled germiness.”<sup>46</sup> Immigrants were much more likely to be blamed for disease, poverty, and other social ills. *Harper’s* magazine encouraged the attitude of fear by writing in 1912 that “It is our fellow man ... and the disease-spreading vermin, that we should learn to fear.”<sup>47</sup> Healthy carriers were demonized in publications, because anyone could be a carrier, and potentially infect others. It was believed that “Neither personal vigilance nor laboratory science was sufficient to safeguard against healthy carriers,”<sup>48</sup> implying that healthy people could do nothing to prevent being infected. Thus, the Department of Health was frantic to make some sort of impact on the spreading of disease by healthy carriers.

Yet the association of disease with poverty and ignorance made Mallon an easier target for the Department of Health’s inquiries, and as an Irish Catholic working woman, she was seen as a perversion of American values and attitudes, in a time of growing nativism.

### **Immigration**

Ireland at the time of Mallon’s birth was a country reeling from the aftereffects of the most serious and devastating Potato Famine, “The Great Famine” of 1845. In County Tyrone alone, the population lost at least 10 percent of its inhabitants during the Great Famine.<sup>49</sup>

Mallon’s decision to come to America from Ireland was not on a whim, nor was it at the

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<sup>44</sup> Wald, *Contagious*, 79.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>46</sup> Alcabes, *Dread*, 106.

<sup>47</sup> Wald, *Contagious*, 75.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Bartoletti, *Terrible Typhoid Mary*, 15.

beginning of an immigration movement among the Irish. The Irish had been coming to America for many years, during and following the various famines. For example, between 1870 and 1890, 1.4 million people left Ireland, and interestingly, no other immigrant group sent more women than the Irish.<sup>50</sup>

The Great Famine changed the basic structure of life in Ireland. Previously, potato farming was the main occupation and means of survival. Parents married off their children young, who then in turn had many children that could take care of their then-subdivided family farm. After the Famine, due to losing at least a million inhabitants over four years, the country was full of struggling families intent on saving their farm and making sure that only one son or one daughter married and inherited the land.<sup>51</sup> This restructuring of land distribution and Irish culture, along with a weak industrial system overall, with industries focusing in Manchester, London, and ‘across the pond’ in America, led to an explosion of single men and women with no marriage prospects and no real motivation to stay where they were.

New York City was the “premier port of entry” for Irish immigrants, mostly because it was the closest big American city from Ireland, and therefore the easiest (and cheapest) to get to.<sup>52</sup> A majority of the Irish immigrants that came to New York were from rural areas, and found themselves in America’s largest city with few skills that could translate from country to city life.<sup>53</sup> In Mallon’s case, she was lucky enough to have an aunt and uncle to stay with when she first arrived, and was able to work as a domestic servant (most likely a housemaid, as opposed to a cook) until she saved up enough money and “got on her feet.”

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<sup>50</sup> Elliott Robert Barken, ed., *Immigrants in American History*, vol. 1, *Arrival, Adaptation, and Integration* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 418.

<sup>51</sup> Ronald Bayor and Timothy Meagher, eds., *The New York Irish* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1996), 90.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

Regardless, the difficulty of the Irish to get what was seen as “good” jobs in America left them at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy, and the Irish’s tendency to live in poorer areas (due to their occupations, or lack thereof), grouped with their countrymen, contributed to their reputation as poor, diseased, and lazy. In addition to the crime of simply being Irish, as many as nine-tenths of the Irish immigrants to America were Catholic, and they came to a country that was becoming “more strictly anti-Catholic.”<sup>54</sup> Educated Americans were no exception in their belief in the Irish stereotypes: Dr. Josephine Baker, who later helped capture and quarantine Mallon, called the Irish “incredibly shiftless” and “wholly lacking in any ambition and dirty to an unbelievable degree.”<sup>55</sup>

Why did Ireland send more female immigrants than any other county? In addition to the changes in the country’s industries - particularly the dairy industry, of which women were a large part of until after the Great Famine - many women left Ireland because there was simply nothing left for them there.<sup>56</sup> America was a land of opportunity, a chance for women to be independent, choose their own partners, and make their own money.

### **Women at Work**

If poor women went looking for work to support themselves or their family, they generally had two options: factory work or domestic service. As a single, poor, Irish-born woman, Mallon did not have the luxury of not working when she came to America. She got a job as soon as she arrived and worked for as long as she was able to.

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<sup>54</sup> J.J. Lee and Marion Casey, eds., *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 213.

<sup>55</sup> Bartoletti, *Terrible Typhoid Mary*, 68.

<sup>56</sup> Margaret Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840-1930* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 27-28.

In the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, domestic work was the most popular way for women to earn wages, both in Ireland and America. Though domestic work was often seen as a distasteful form of earning money among other immigrant groups, such as the Italians and Jews, Irish girls and women in America flocked to it.<sup>57</sup> Nothing in Mallon's culture opposed the idea of a woman performing domestic services for money, especially if she had a room in the place she was working. "Irish women had been raised in an environment characterized by rigid sex segregation and late and infrequent marriage"<sup>58</sup> and being able to make their own money, have a place to live, and work with other Irish females was seen as a plus in many Irish domestic's eyes. Another advantage to American domestic work was that it was indoor only. In Ireland, domestic servants worked for rural households and oftentimes had jobs that required them to be outside, such as farm work and animal husbandry.<sup>59</sup> Working a city job inside was seen as infinitely better than having to tend gardens or flocks.

The literature about Irish-American women is full of references to the 'Bridget', a derogatory term for a clumsy, inept "servant girl, who darted from one American kitchen to another ... Characterized in the Protestant, native-born mind as not very bright and fanatically bound to her priests..."<sup>60</sup> There were probably many servants that did fit the stereotype, since it is true that Irish girls started working quite early, and many were indeed Catholic - although whether 'fanatically' is a matter of opinion. Contrary to popular belief, many Irish immigrants - including Mallon - were educated, and could read, write, and do mathematics. The literacy rate in Ireland during this time was 73 percent, only 10 percent lower than in America.<sup>61</sup> This idea of

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<sup>57</sup> Hasia Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 84.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>59</sup> Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 29.

<sup>60</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, xiii.

<sup>61</sup> Bartoletti, *Terrible Typhoid Mary*, 15.

a ‘Bridget’, who no woman would want to hire and who there was so much vocal disdain for, is disproved by the fact that in 1906, more than 80 percent of Irish-born women in America worked as domestic servants.<sup>62</sup> Obviously there was a need to be filled by a certain type of person, and Irish women, like Mallon, fit the bill.

Though the idea of the ‘Bridget’ as flighty, going from one job to the next, is actually somewhat true in Mallon’s case - she worked a little more than one job a year, by Soper’s calculations - it was not because she was a poor cook. Rather, Mallon was such a good cook that she was hired by different wealthy families to cook for them in their summer homes, and sometimes she found a job that paid her more and left one for the other. It has been estimated that Mallon made about forty-five dollars a month (around \$1,180 today), which is substantially more than she would have made cooking for a middle-class family.<sup>63</sup> In the hierarchy of domestic servitude, the cook was at the top of the ladder. Mallon enjoyed an important status as a cook and in upper-class households would have had servants who reported to her. For a woman who came from a poor county in Ireland as a teenager, this profession must have been a source of great pride to Mallon. In contrast, working as a laundress was among the lower rungs of the service ladder. Laundresses often worked the hardest for the least amount of money - working in steaming rooms with little ventilation, handling heavy tubs of boiling water, and mixing dangerous chemicals to make bleach, detergents, and starches. When Mary was forbidden to work at the profession she had worked so hard to build up, only to be given a job that was the exact opposite in terms of importance, salary, and comfort, it made sense that she would be more than a little upset.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 5.

A similarity between Irish and American cultures during this time was the emphasis and importance of marriage. Unmarried women had a lower status in society than their married counterparts, no matter if they were rich or poor.<sup>64</sup> The “middle-class ideal” stated that a ‘proper’ woman should be married, have children, take care of husband, and not work outside the home.<sup>65</sup> Mallon did not do any of these things, so in addition to being an Irish Catholic, she was also seen as “living in sin.” She was never married, but there is evidence that she had and lived with a male partner, August Breihof, for many years - adding yet another ‘strike’ to her character. Soper wrote about confronting Mallon in a rooming house where she “spent evenings with a disreputable-looking man” who lived in a room that “was a place of dirt and disorder.”<sup>66</sup> It seemed important for Soper to mention that Breihof spent a lot of time in a nearby saloon, and that he owned a dog, which Mallon was fond of. It seems he is adding details to his story of Mallon, which have nothing to do with her having typhoid, to show she was untrustworthy, dirty, and did not fall into what society expects of women. An unattached (or unmarried) woman, like Mallon, defied society’s expectations and can be seen as breaking down social codes, which can then lead to a breakdown of American culture and society.<sup>67</sup> Thus, her infamy as “Typhoid Mary” was linked to her social status.

It is interesting that much of the writing about Mallon describes her in a way that makes her seem unfeminine - Soper and Baker both used adjectives such as “heavy”, “tall”, “determined”, and one reporter even used the word “Amazon” to describe her, though in one of

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<sup>64</sup> Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 34.

<sup>65</sup> Bartoletti, *Terrible Typhoid Mary*, 46.

<sup>66</sup> Wald, *Contagious*, 84.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

the only available photos of her, when she was in her mid-30's, it shows her as a conventionally pretty woman, and not at all as 'manly' as she had been described.<sup>68</sup>



Figure 2. *Mary Mallon (first in photo)*, black and white photographic print.

Source: New York American, June 20, 1909, courtesy New York Public Library. Available from pbs.org, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/typhoid-mary-villain-or-victim.html> (accessed January 30, 2016).

Soper reported that Mallon's body, her walk, and even her handwriting had a "distinctly masculine character" as well, as if her very being was, as author Leavitt puts it, "a deviance from acceptable female norms."<sup>69</sup> If not for being a typhoid carrier, Mallon most likely would have been seen as another nurturing woman, cooking for others. Perhaps Mallon's appearance was described this way to try to justify society's treatment of her - she was a perversion of womanhood, so of course she had typhoid and had to be quarantined. After her quarantine, society's patriarchal ideas of women became even more pronounced - it could be believed that all female food handlers (which society generally expected of all women) were potential carriers. Being a carrier became an issue of gender, partly due to society's sexism, and partly because of a

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<sup>68</sup> Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary*, 105.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.



newspaper interview in which Soper told middle-class women that they were the most dangerous of all potential carriers.<sup>70</sup>

### Depiction in Popular Culture

#### *When she was alive:*

Newspapers, known for exaggerating and sensationalizing stories, were intrigued by Mallon's story from the start. From Tacoma, Washington to New York City, and everywhere in between, newspaper journalists told and elaborated on Mallon's story and described her as a everything from a "witch with strange powers,"<sup>71</sup> "the most dangerous woman in the world", to a "human 'culture tube.'"<sup>72</sup> The *Richmond-Times Dispatch* described her as "dropping ... death into the cooking vessels" in 1915, and there are several images from newspapers and magazines that show a caricature of Mallon at a stove or serving food, with skeletons or skulls coming from her cooking or her hands. The media both shaped and reflected the public's opinions about Mary and aided in the creation of her being seen as a social pariah today.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 98-99.

<sup>71</sup> K.W. Payne, "Witch in N.Y.," *The Tacoma Times*, April 6, 1915, accessed December 5, 2015, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88085187/1915-04-06/ed-1/seq-1/>.

<sup>72</sup> Editorial, "Woman 'Typhoid Factory' Held As Prisoner," *The Evening World* (New York, N.Y.), April 1, 1907, accessed January 30, 2016, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/1907-04-01/ed-1/seq-3/>.

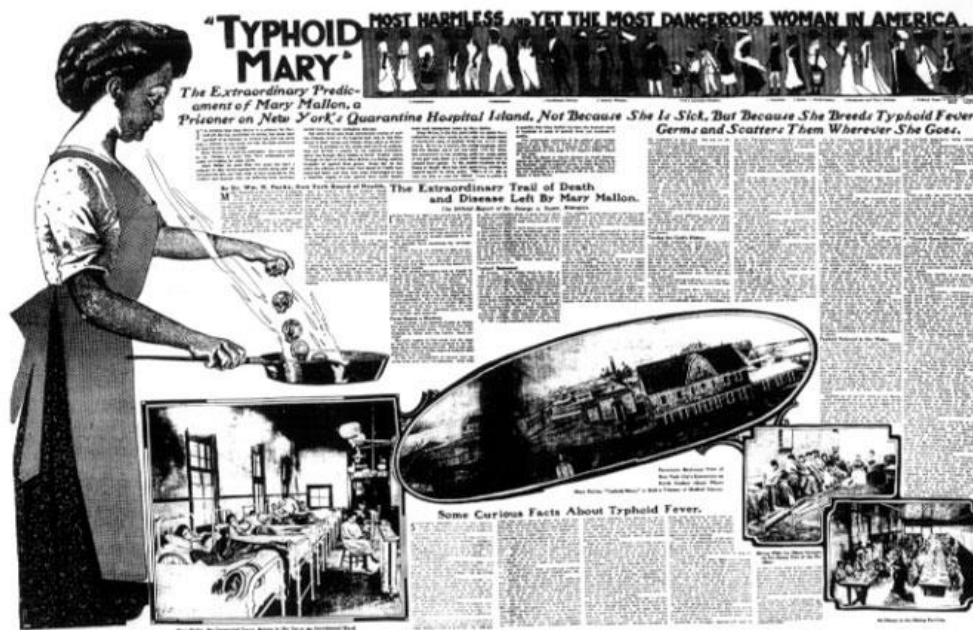


Figure 3. *Most Dangerous Woman In America*, black and white photographic print. Source: New York American, June 20, 1909, courtesy New York Public Library. Available from pbs.org, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/typhoid-mary-villain-or-victim.html> (accessed January 30, 2016).

The emphasis on Mallon's body type was seen in both newspaper articles and the literature written on her. She was described as big, as a "robust ... cook,"<sup>73</sup> and there was frequent mention of her supposed weight in articles. Soper even mentioned her weight while reporting her case, saying that she was "a little too heavy."<sup>74</sup> Despite the sometimes sympathetic newspaper reports, there had been an image built up of Mallon as a large, diseased, half-human creature, and when people actually met her or saw pictures of her, they were taken aback that she was a normal, healthy-looking woman. Reporters who attended her trial seemed to be surprised at her neat appearance, saying she looked as "rosy as you please", and that she had a "clear, healthy complexion, regular features, [and] bright eyes."<sup>75</sup> The fact that she was Irish was

<sup>73</sup> Editorial, "Thrives on Typhoid," *The Washington Herald* (Washington, D.C.), April 7, 1907, accessed January 14, 2016, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045433/1907-04-07/ed-1/seq-12/>.

<sup>74</sup> Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary*, 105.

<sup>75</sup> Bartoletti, *Terrible Typhoid Mary*, 111.

mentioned in newspapers, though usually just to describe her appearance: “a tall Irish woman of about forty.”<sup>76</sup> It seems that the newspapers did not attempt to link her Irishness with disease; the previous stereotypes that existed about the Irish were exacerbated by her case as a carrier.

Some newspapers and magazines were fairly sympathetic to Mallon’s story, acknowledging that she was a woman “whose life was ruined through no fault of her own,”<sup>77</sup> though others held back from that opinion until her court case had been decided and she had been sent back to North Brother Island. The general theme of these newspaper articles were that yes, Mallon’s situation was unfortunate, but it could not be helped. The *San Francisco Call* wrote in 1909 that Mallon was a “competent domestic and blameless woman” but acknowledged that there may be a “legal warrant” for her quarantine and confinement.<sup>78</sup> When Mallon was first released, the *Marion Daily Mirror* in Ohio reported her nickname of “Typhoid Mary” was “flippant and she didn’t deserve it.”<sup>79</sup>

Prominent physicians of the time had varying opinions about Mallon’s case. Dr. Charles Chapin, the superintendent for public health in Rhode Island, stated that there was a “good deal of sympathy for her ... because she happens to be the type of class now known to be numerous and well distributed.”<sup>80</sup> Dr. Josephine Baker, one of the doctors who helped to capture Mary the first time she went into quarantine, describes Mallon in her book as “maniacal in her integrity”<sup>81</sup> and acting as “a destroying angel.”<sup>82</sup> Dr. Baker emphasizes that she was impressed by the

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<sup>76</sup> Editorial, “Has New York Many Walking Pesthouses?,” *New-York Tribune*, July 4, 1909, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1909-07-04/ed-1/seq-47/>.

<sup>77</sup> Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary*, 141.

<sup>78</sup> Editorial, “Typhoid Mary’s’ Unhappy Plight,” *The San Francisco Call*, July 19, 1909, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85066387/1909-07-19/ed-1/seq-4/>.

<sup>79</sup> Editorial, “Typhoid Mary Is Released,” *The Marion Daily Mirror* (Marion, Ohio), February 2, 1910, accessed February 15, 2016, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88077573/1910-02-21/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>80</sup> Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary*, 96.

<sup>81</sup> S. Josephine Baker, *Fighting for Life* (1939; repr., New York: Arno Press Inc., 1974), 75.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

solidarity among the servants that worked together to hide Mallon from the authorities, and stated that she admired Mallon's strength and personality - describing her as "clean, neat, obviously self-respecting Irish-woman" that nonetheless had a "blind, panicky distrust of doctors" that comes with being uneducated<sup>83</sup> - another instance of her disgust at the Irish people. Dr. Baker's supervisor, Walter Benschel, stated in 1907 that Mallon was "a great menace to health" and that she "sprinkled...germs in various households."<sup>84</sup> One newspaper incorrectly reported that doctors had determined that Mallon was "in complete possession of a million or more germs", and that she "exhales a cloud of dreaded bacilli at every breath."<sup>85</sup> Dr. Baker's idea of Mallon as an "angel" goes hand-in-hand with the frequent mentions of her as a "devil" or something non-human, and contributes to the pervasive idea of Mallon as something that is "other."

Due to Mallon's extensive publicity, her story was well-known and became not only newspaper and magazine material, but was mentioned in textbooks and fiction stories. One textbook published in 1935, titled *Science In Our Social Life*, asked "What other people besides cooks might be dangerous as carriers of typhoid?" The chapter on healthy carriers featured a character named Mary, who was a cook and warped the 'Mary, Mary, quite contrary' nursery rhyme to read "Everywhere that Mary worked, typhoid was sure to follow." The only change they made to Mallon's story was to say she was "under supervision at Welfare Island."<sup>86</sup> A short story written by Arthur Reeve called *The Bacteriological Detective*, published in 1910, was a popular and thinly-veiled version of Mallon's story, where the protagonist was called "Typhoid

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>84</sup> Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary*, 129.

<sup>85</sup> Editorial, "Woman 'Typhoid Factory' Held As Prisoner," *The Evening World* (New York, N.Y.), April 1, 1907, accessed February 15, 2016, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/1907-04-01/ed-1/seq-3/>.

<sup>86</sup> George Hunter and Walter George Whitman, *Science In Our Social Life* (New York: American Book Co., 1935).

Bridget” and was an abusive drunk.<sup>87</sup> It seemed that at this point, Mallon was becoming the spokeswoman for the bacteriological movement, whether she liked it or not.

Mallon’s story crossed the pond and was made into a satiric poem in 1909, entitled “The Germ-Carrier.” It was published in the British humor magazine *Punch*, where a portion of it reads:

“Beneath her outside’s healthy gloze  
Masses of microbes seethe and wallow  
And everywhere that MARY goes  
Infernal epidemics follow.”<sup>88</sup>

After her second capture, newspapers were back again full force to report it, and they were less than sympathetic. “It is impossible to feel much commiseration with her” said the *New York Tribune* in 1915. Both Dr. Baker and Soper said that Mallon would have been freed, if only she had cooperated. The *Liberal Democrat* in Kansas predicted that due to her breaking her parole, she would pass “the rest of her days” on North Brother Island.<sup>89</sup> The *New York Tribune* reported in 1918 that Mallon was “back to her old tricks.”<sup>90</sup> The editor of the *New York Sun* implied that Mallon had “homicidal tendencies,”<sup>91</sup> while *Scientific American* published an article stating that she had competed with the “Wandering Jew in scattering destruction in her path.”<sup>92</sup> This last statement brought up the public’s deeply rooted ideas about certain ethnic and religious groups, and the idea that Mallon had “competed” with the Wandering Jew implies that they

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<sup>87</sup> Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary*, 147.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Editorial, “Find 35 Typhoid ‘Carriers,’” *The Liberal democrat* (Liberal, Kan.), September 8, 1916, accessed February 18, 2016, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85029856/1916-09-08/ed-1/seq-3/>.

<sup>90</sup> Editorial, “On The Trail of Typhoid Mary,” *New-York Tribune*, July 28, 1918, accessed February 15, 2016, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1918-07-28/ed-1/seq-39/>.

<sup>91</sup> Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary*, 151.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

believed that her actions were deliberate and intentional. Unfortunately, these ideas are what stuck and are what the public remembers today.

At the time of Mallon's death in 1938, *The American Journal of Public Health*, which had written several articles about Mallon throughout her life, expressed regret that she was gone, saying that she was "entirely innocent of any wrongdoing" and that it "was not strange that she was bitter and defiant."<sup>93</sup> Even George Soper unironically stated that "The world was not very kind to Mary."<sup>94</sup>

In contrast, *The New York World-Telegram* reported that Mallon was "uncooperative" and "not imbued with that sweet reasonableness", and perhaps she might have been able to avoid her fate if she had just been a more compliant woman.<sup>95</sup> The media, spurred by the new idea of the healthy carrier, took advantage of Mallon's sex, her place of birth, her religion, her occupation, and her stubbornness, and presented different versions of her story, each contributing to the overall belief in her "otherness."

### ***After her death:***

In the 21st century, references to "Typhoid Mary" can be seen in practically every medium. Mallon has been the subject of several documentaries and a made-for-TV movie and her capture is featured in three episodes of the American medical drama *The Knick*. The term "Typhoid Mary" has been mentioned in *The X-Files* and *Star Trek*, and is dictionary-defined as "one that is by force of circumstances a center from which something undesirable spreads."<sup>96</sup> "Typhoid Mary" is the name of a supervillain in Marvel Comics with dissociative identity

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<sup>93</sup> "Mary Mallon (Typhoid Mary)," *American Journal of Public Health and the Nations Health* 29, No. 1: 66-68, accessed January 28, 2016, doi: 10.2105/AJPH.29.1.66.

<sup>94</sup> Jarrow, *Fatal Fever*, 129.

<sup>95</sup> Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary*, 160.

<sup>96</sup> "Typhoid Mary," Merriam-Webster.com, accessed February 19, 2016, [http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Typhoid\\_Mary](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Typhoid_Mary).

disorder, with one of her three personalities called ‘Bloody Mary’, who is prone to violence and sadism. A horror film called *Paranormal Asylum: The Revenge of Typhoid Mary* depicts Mallon being locked up in an insane asylum, and then coming back as an evil spirit who wants to inhabit and kill people. The ‘Typhoid & Mary’ is the name of an upgraded shotgun in the video game “Call of Duty”. There is even a metal band whose first album was titled “Hail Mary Mallon.”

There are countless books, magazine articles, and internet sources about Mary Mallon. Many of them seem to only tell the reader of just the facts of Mallon’s life, but then the title of the chapter or article shows a bias: one book for young adults calls the chapter on Mallon “A Cook Without A Conscience,”<sup>97</sup> while another book is titled “You Wouldn’t Want to Meet Typhoid Mary!: A Deadly Cook You’d Rather Not Know.” A chapter on Mallon is featured in a children’s book called *Shuttered Horror Hospitals*.

The 2006 play *A Plague of Angels*, by Mark St. Germain, is loosely based on Mallon’s life, and depicts her in no uncertain terms as a defiant, proud Irish woman. In one scene, when she is being instructed on how to properly wash her hands, she throws the bar of soap through a window. In another scene, angry about her case being denied, she smashes crockery and a chair. She instructs a visiting priest to never forget that his grandparents came from Dublin, because “no one else will.”<sup>98</sup>

In Julie Chibbaro’s young-adult novel *Deadly*, a teenager named Prudence is hired as an assistant to George Soper. Prudence goes with Soper to the house Mallon is working in, and is surprised to see that she is not “a pox-ridden hag ... crawling with worms” but a “stately” woman, whose appearance and kitchen were sparkling clean.<sup>99</sup> Mallon lunges at Soper with a

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<sup>97</sup> Jane Yolen and Heidi E.Y. Stemple, *Bad Girls: Sirens, Jezebels, Murderesses, Thieves & Other Female Villains* (Watertown: Charlesbridge, 2013), 109.

<sup>98</sup> Mark St. Germain, *A Plague of Angels*, act 2.

<sup>99</sup> Julie Chibbaro, *Deadly* (New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2011), 108.

knife, after he asks for a sample of her blood. Prudence then goes on to say that she thinks of Mallon as someone who “isn’t quite human”, because she doesn’t respond to the “sickening cells” inside of her - showing the misunderstanding at the time that surrounded healthy carriers.

<sup>100</sup> They meet with August Breihof, who is “unshaven” and “rummy”, in a pub that is described as filthy, loud, and full of drunkards, a common way to describe Irish immigrants (and a stereotype that persists today).<sup>101</sup>

Julie Fenster, in the chapter on Mary Mallon entitled “Trailing Death”, calls Mallon’s initial reaction to Soper’s confrontation the result of the “survival instincts of the working class and the desperation of an immigrant”<sup>102</sup> and describes her reaction to Soper’s request as a “pathetically childlike tantrum.”<sup>103</sup> She later describes Mallon as a “walking test tube of deadly germs”<sup>104</sup>, echoing the dramatic newspaper headlines that described Mallon when she was still alive. Clearly, these stereotypes about Mallon as a “perversion of womanhood” and a defiant, uneducated Irishwoman still persist today. Mallon’s name has become synonymous with disease, ignorance, and evil, and the depictions of her that are shown in popular culture still reflect those old, negative attitudes.

### **Conclusion:**

When looking at Mary Mallon’s legacy, it is essential to see her life in its historical context. Mallon’s popular culture identity has historically been based on prejudice, and the convergence of her three statuses - that of a healthy carrier, an Irish immigrant, and a woman who defied society’s expectations of her - has resulted in a biased and unclear view of who

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>102</sup> Fenster, *Mavericks*, 113.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 116.



Mallon really was. Her personhood was put into question and was warped by the media to sell newspapers and to advance the status of both George Soper and New York Department of Health. Mallon's story has been remembered because of society's fear of the unknown, and she, due to something as simple as her identity, became the 'healthy carrier' of a disease within society: one that dehumanizes and demonizes those who are different. The factors that forged her identity are just as important to study as popular culture's ideas of her, and from there we can form our own opinions. Ultimately, it is important that we see Mary Mallon first and foremost as a person - not just a poster woman for disease.



Figure 4. *Emma Sherman and Mary Mallon 1930s*, black and white photographic print.  
Source: New York Office of Records, courtesy of Ed and Bubbles Yadow. Available from pbs.org, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/typhoid-mary-villain-or-victim.html> (accessed January 30, 2016).

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