

Mary Roberts Rinehart (1876 - 1958)

NOTE: Research notes created in April 2022. Pardon the ephemeral nature of links that are beyond our control. Info in italics are direct quotes from the source listed.

Photographs of MRR: [At desk](#), [driving](#), [at typewriter](#), [deep sea fishing](#), [portraits](#),

Extremely well-paid writer. Saturday Evening Post paid her \$60,000 for [The Door](#). That's the equivalent of over a million dollars in 2022.

Why did I choose *The Wall*?

She considered it her best novel, and she wrote over 40 books.

*Mary considered it one of her best novels she had ever done, and the [Saturday Evening Post](#) seemed to agree - they paid her \$65,000 [over \$1.3 million now] for the serial rights. -Julie Savage, "[Mistress of the Mystery](#)," *Acadia Weekly*, July 6-12, 2003*

The Saturday Evening Post paid her A LOT to publish it as a serial. [Most of it is viewable [here](#).]

Where I Researched

University of Pittsburgh has her papers:

<https://digital.library.pitt.edu/collection/mary-roberts-rinehart-papers>

Digital Archives & History Trust: Fun Facts and Good Articles

- [She was a member of the Bar Harbor Bank & Trust.](#)
- [She wrote a Greetings to New Bar Harbor Visitor in 1935.](#)

Mary's Early Years

*Mary Ella Roberts was born on August 12, 1876 near Pittsburg, Pennsylvania....
At fifteen, she had three short stories published in a local magazine, for one dollar apiece....*

[Went to nursing school.]

Her work at the hospital changed Mary's outlook on life, as did a young doctor by the name of Stanley Marshall Rinehart. Her graduation and their wedding were virtually the only bright spots of her nineteenth year. Ghastly death haunted the Roberts family that year - Mary's grandmother had fallen down the stairs and broken her neck, her young niece was run over by a train, and her father, Tom, committed suicide in a Buffalo hotel room. -Savage

[Had three sons by the time she was 25.]

Begins writing

...when the Rineharts suffered a \$12,000 blow in the stock market, Mary started writing more seriously in an attempt to help out financially.

Their finances soon recovered, in part due to Mary's new monthly column, 'Thoughts,' in Ladies Home Journal, for which she was paid \$2,500 per issue. [\$42,472.46 as of 3/11/22, cumulative inflation rate 1598.9%] - Savage

The Circular Staircase: according to Wikipedia, 3/28/2022

Rinehart published her first mystery novel [The Circular Staircase](#) in 1908, which introduced the "had I but known" narrative style. Rinehart is also considered the source of "the butler did it" plot device in her novel [The Door](#) (1930), although the exact phrase does not appear in her work.

Mary and the Blackfeet tribe

[Photos at University of Pittsburgh](#)

[National Museum of the American Indian](#): *"This collection contains 107 gelatin silver photographs depicting mystery novelist Mary Roberts Rinehart and her family's travels around Glacier National Park in Montana during the summer of 1916. The bulk of the photographs were shot by Mary herself. Rinehart wrote about this trip in her 1917 book, [Through Glacier Park](#) [available in full online]. The photographs in the collection depict candid and staged outdoor portraits of Pikuni (Piegan) [Blackfeet Nation, Browning, Montana] peoples and scenes of community gatherings. Chief Eagle Child and Chief Two Guns White Calf are included in photographs. Other chiefs and leaders that may also be depicted include Medicine Owl; Curly Bear; Big Spring; Bird Plume; Wolf Plume; Bird Rattler; Bill Schute; Stabs-By-Mistake; Mad Plume; and Many Tail-Feathers. Mary Roberts Rinehart was adopted by the Blackfeet tribe and given the name Pi-ta-mak-an (Running Eagle).*

1918: MRR as a WWI correspondent on the Belgian war front, age 42

Email from a Historical Society member:

She wasn't just a fiction writer. Don't forget her fame as a press reporter during WWI. The Saturday Evening Post launched her career as a foreign correspondent with full credentials, letters of introduction and a generous expense account. She used her advance to buy a new fur coat (maybe the one she is wearing in the picture) and sailed on the Franconia in January, 1915. She was among the first American correspondents to reach the front:

"Across the fields, a line of star lights would mark the enemy trenches, and over all would be the incessant roaring of the heavy guns."

"The German lines are very close now. The barbed wire barrier tears my clothes. The wind is howling fiercely...No man's land lies flooded..."

...she resourcefully convinced the Belgian Red Cross to give her the proper credentials. In return, she promised to make the American people aware of the horrible conditions at the Belgian front. Thus she became one of the very few women to report firsthand from WWI battlefields. -Savage

"Work and Fight! An American Woman's War Cry" in the [New York Times](#), 1918
[The Women Behind the Soldiers](#) in McClure's, April 1918

[WWI Reporters Notebook](#)

[Passport](#)

Photos from the front: [1](#), [2](#)

1920s: Postcards between MRR and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Because of her ghostly encounters, MRR was interested in spiritualism, psychics, mediums, seance, etc. She invited one medium, George Valiantine, to her home, but believed he was a fraud after the lights came on during his encounter, and he appeared to be creating sound effects himself, thus fleeing the room when the lights came on.

She told Sir Arthur Conan Doyle this as they [corresponded about spiritualism](#). He recommended books for her, and she mentioned her issue with Valiantine. Even though she thought it was a private matter, Doyle bit into it and ran with it for years, stirring up controversy. He wanted Valiantine's name cleared.

Mid 1920s MRR on a camel

In a [review](#) of *Nomad's Land*, Howard Devree writes:

'Here the best-loved writer in America goes adventuring, with romance in her saddle-bags, over trails that lead from the mountains of Wyoming to Bagdad [sic] and the deserts of the East,' announces the publishers jacket, which further beguiles the reader by a picture of the author, veiled like an Eastern woman, with a procession of camels in the background, darkly silhouetted against the bright blue sky. And as Mrs. Rinehart opens her portals of the Orient for her readers to pass through, she conducts them into a dining tent in the desert, where the adventuring pilgrim has food served on silver, wines in real glasses, candies and comfits, and the cook weeps because the service is cut down from seven courses at dinner to a scant five.

[Photographs](#) of Mary's trip to the Middle East with husband Stanley

Sons become publishers:

1929: *Stanley, Jr. and Ted, along with their friend John Farrar, started their own publishing company in 1929, and of course, Mary Roberts Rinehart was one of their first authors. She granted them rights to all her future hardcover books, which probably made her the savior of the fledgling publishers when the stock exchange crashed a few months later. -Savage*

Farrar Strauss and Giroux was created when Farrar and Rinehart parted ways.

Bar Harbor residency: [Archives materials](#) related to Bar Harbor; [additional materials](#)

1935: Rented a cottage attached to a Bar Harbor hotel

1936: Rented a house

1937: Bought Farview on Eden Street, renamed it Eaglesgate

Almost murdered by her chef - and saved by her chauffeur!

1946-47: Tough years

...she was forced to hire a male butler. This she did for the summer of 1947, and her Filipino cook, Reyes, who considered himself the domestic czar, was none too happy about

it. ...One day...As she tells it in My Story, she was reading in the library before lunch when Reyes, usually meticulous, came in, strangely without his white chef's coat.

"Why, Reyes," Mary said, "Where is your coat?"

"Here it is," He said, and pulled a gun from his pants pocket and pulled the trigger within point blank range of her face. The gun misfired, the shells were old. As he tried again, Mary leapt to her feet and ran. He was hot on her heels and, as she entered the kitchen, Peggy and Theodore Falkenstrom, her chauffeur, saw what was happening. Ted tackled the cook and grabbed the gun. For a moment, it was quiet. Peggy ran to get a nitroglycerine table for breathless Mary, and Ted went and threw the gun over a garden wall. The butler had run down the street to get help, thinking that he was the intended victim. As Mary went through the hall on her way to phone the police, she saw a young man hovering outside the door. Politely, the boy explained he was looking for a job as gardener's assistant.

"Young man," Mary said calmly, "You'll have to come back later. There is a man here trying to kill me." Needless to say, the boy didn't return.

As Mary stood at the phone, once again in the library, she heard Peggy scream. She turned to find Reyes right behind her, a long carving knife in each hand. Fortunately, Ted and the gardener came running in at that moment, and again knocked him down. Peggy sat on his chest, and the chauffeur held his arms, getting cut by the wildly flailing knives in the process. Finally, the police arrived and took the cook away.

Mary's son, Alan, flew up that night to be with his mother, and gave her the news the next morning. Reyes had hung himself in his jail cell. As he had plainly been of 'unsound mind,' the Catholic priest allowed the heretofore faithful cook to be buried in hallowed ground. Mary, who harbored no anger against him, paid for his funeral. -Savage

MRR on the 1947 fire and burning of her estate, Eaglesgate

- [Bar Harbor Burns](#): Article in the Jesup collection with photos
- MRR manuscript "[Bar Harbor: Before and After](#)" for Town & Country: "Sometimes I think, here in my New York study, that the winter is only a time of waiting until I can go back [to Bar Harbor] again."

1948: [Picture](#) of her congratulating the telephone girls for the work they did during the fire:

1949: Rinehart's play, "The Bat," [performed at Bar Harbor Playhouse](#)

Mary dies, 1958:

[MRR died in 1958](#) (New York Times)

[Bar Harbor Times](#)

Where to find MRR on the island now

- La Rochelle has her china (The teapot is on exhibit.) They also have a numbered print of a [famous oil painting of her](#) and in the frame is a card with a note and her signature. They also have a large collection of commercial editions of her books.

- More MRR-related items on Digital Archives
- Eaglesgate's remnants - Wonder View Inn
- *The Yellow Room* - another book set in Bar Harbor

Discussion Questions:

What was your expectation about the book before you read it?

Some refer to Rinehart as the “American Agatha Christie.” How is she similar? How is she different?

How did Rinehart evoke a sense of place?

What are some examples of classism within the text?

If you could interview M.R.R., what would you ask her?