

Monday, October 13, 2008

## Ellis Island's first immigrant honoured

LUCY KENNEDY in New York

FOR 84 years, the body of Annie Moore lay in an unmarked grave in the New York borough of Queens.

On Saturday, that indignity came to an end when a monument was erected at Calvary Cemetery commemorating the first person - Irish or otherwise - to be registered at New York's Ellis Island immigration centre.

Three generations of Moore's descendants gathered at their ancestor's graveside to unveil the memorial cross celebrating her significance to the annals of American history.

Moore, who was aged just 17 when she arrived on Ellis Island on January 1st, 1892, had long been thought to have moved to America's west coast, and was reputed to have married a descendent of Daniel O'Connell.

But in 2006 genealogist Megan Smolenyak discovered that Moore married a German-American baker and lived on Manhattan's Lower East side.

Irish tenor Ronan Tynan's voice resounded through the cemetery as he sang Brendan Graham's song about Moore, *Isle of Hope, Isle of Tears*. The family members all wore red and white flowers representing the colours of Cork from where the SS *Nevada* set sail carrying Moore to the US in December 1891.

A statue of Moore and her two small brothers, who travelled with her, can be found in Cobh; another statue showing them arriving in the US is located at Ellis Island.

It was an emotional day for the Smiths and the Donovans, the two descendent families of Moore who have worked for the last two years to make the monument at her grave a reality.

Sheleen Peterson *née* Donovan, a schoolteacher in New Jersey, remembered a school project she did when she was 11. Her teacher was sceptical when she wrote of her link to the first person registered on Ellis Island. Now, Mrs Peterson said: "No matter what a child tells me I'll listen to them, because I remember how bad it felt to be disbelieved."

Ms Smolenyak read a letter from Barack Obama who said: "The idea of honouring those who came before you by sacrificing on behalf of those who follow is at the heart of the American experience. Irish Americans like your ancestors, and mine from Co Offaly, understood this well."

Niall Burgess, Council General of Ireland in New York, referred to Moore as the "human face of a tremendous story". For Mr Burgess this was also a very personal event because all the men in his mother's family emigrated to the US or Coventry. Since moving to New York, Mr Burgess has reconnected with his American-born cousins.

"I don't think that there's an Irish family that doesn't have connections to this country somewhere," said Mr Burgess.