

NELLIE BLY



Elizabeth Cochran Seaman (born Elizabeth Jane Cochran) lived from May 5, 1864 to January 27, 1922. Better known by her pen name - Nellie Bly - she was an American journalist, industrialist, inventor and charity worker who was widely known for her record breaking trip around the world in 72 days, in emulation of Jules Verne's fictional character Phileas Fogg, and an expose in which she worked undercover to report on a mental institution from within. She was a pioneer in her field and launched a new kind of investigative journalism.

## **Early life**

Elizabeth Jane Cochran was born on May 5, 1864 in "Cochran's Mills", part of a Pittsburgh suburb. Her father, Michael Cochran, who was born about 1810, started out as a labourer and mill worker before buying the local mill and most of the land surrounding his family farmhouse. He later became a merchant, postmaster, and judge at Cochran's Mills (which was named after him) in Pennsylvania.

Michael married twice. He had 10 children with his first wife, Catherine Murphy, and 5 more children, including Elizabeth Cochran, with his second wife, Mary Jane Kennedy. Michael Cochran's father had emigrated from County Londonderry in the 1790s. He died in 1871, when Elizabeth was 6.

As a young girl, Elizabeth often was called "Pinky" because she so frequently wore that colour. As she became a teenager, she wanted to portray herself as more sophisticated and so dropped the nickname and changed her surname to Cochrane – with an e.

In 1879, she enrolled at Indiana Normal School (now the Indiana University of Pennsylvania) for one term but was forced to drop out due to lack of funds.

In 1880, Cochrane's mother moved her family to Allegheny City, which was later annexed by the City of Pittsburgh.

A newspaper column entitled "What Girls Are Good For" in the Pittsburgh Dispatch which reported that girls were principally for birthing children and keeping house prompted Elizabeth to write a response under the pseudonym "Lonely Orphan Girl".

The editor, George Madden, was impressed with her passion and ran an advertisement asking the author to identify herself. When Cochrane introduced herself to the editor, he offered her the opportunity to write a piece for the newspaper, again under the pseudonym "Lonely Orphan Girl". Her first article for the Dispatch, entitled "The Girl Puzzle", was about how divorce affected women. In it, she argued for reform of divorce laws. Madden was impressed again and offered her a full-time job. It was customary for women who were newspaper writers at that time to use pen names. The editor chose "Nellie Bly", after the African-American title character in the popular song "Nelly Bly" by Stephen C Foster.

## **Career**

### **Pittsburgh Dispatch**

As a writer, Nellie Bly focused her early work for the Pittsburgh Dispatch on the lives of working women, writing a series of investigative articles on women factory workers. However, the newspaper soon received complaints from factory owners about her writing, and she was reassigned to the women's pages to cover fashion, society, and gardening, the usual role for women journalists, and she became dissatisfied. Still only 21, she was determined "to do something no girl has done before". She then travelled to Mexico to

serve as a foreign correspondent, spending nearly half a year reporting on the lives and customs of the Mexican people; her dispatches were later published in book form as *Six Months in Mexico*.

In one report, she protested at the imprisonment of a local journalist for criticising the Mexican government, then a dictatorship under Porfirio Díaz (he was a Mexican general who was president of Mexico 7 times, basically a dictator). When the Mexican authorities learned of Bly's report, they threatened her with arrest, prompting her to flee the country. Safely home, she accused Díaz of being a tyrannical czar suppressing the Mexican people and controlling the press.

## **Asylum Exposé**

Burdened again with theatre and arts reporting, Bly left the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* in 1887 for New York City. She faced rejection after rejection as news editors would not consider hiring a woman. Penniless after four months, she talked her way into the offices of Joseph Pulitzer's newspaper – the *New York World* - and took an undercover assignment for which she agreed to feign insanity to investigate reports of brutality and neglect at the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island (now named Roosevelt Island).

It was not an easy task for Bly to be admitted to the Asylum: she first decided to check herself into a boarding house called *Temporary Homes for Females*. She stayed up all night to give herself the wide-eyed look of a disturbed woman and began making accusations that the other boarders were insane. She refused to go to bed and eventually scared so many of the other boarders that the police were called to take her to the nearby courthouse. Once examined by a police officer, a judge, and a doctor, Bly was taken to Blackwell's Island.

Committed to the asylum, Bly experienced the deplorable conditions first hand. After ten days, the asylum released Bly at *The New York World's* behest. Her report, later published in book form as *Ten Days in a Mad House*, caused a sensation, prompted the asylum to implement reforms, and brought her lasting fame.

She had a significant impact on American culture and shed light on the experiences of marginalised women beyond the bounds of the asylum as she ushered in the era of stunt girl journalism - a clear precursor to today's investigative journalism

In 1893, Bly used the celebrity status she had gained from her asylum reporting skills to schedule an exclusive interview with the allegedly insane serial killer Lizzie Halliday.

Lizzie Halliday was an Irish American serial killer responsible for the deaths of four people in upstate New York during the 1890s. In 1894, in another, somewhat grim first, she became the first woman to be sentenced to death by the electric chair. Her sentence was commuted and she spent the rest of her life in a mental institution. She killed a nurse while institutionalised and is speculated to have killed her first two husbands. During her interview with Nellie the black widow confessed to many other killings,

As an aside, during Halliday's time in jail the authorities began to wonder if she had an even longer track record of crime - as Jack the Ripper!

A local sheriff claimed that investigations had shown that Mrs. Halliday was in all probability "connected with the famous Whitechapel murders."

He based his assessment on circumstantial evidence. Halliday had been in London around the time of the Ripper murders. She mutilated her victims and kept bringing up the Ripper whilst in prison.

"Mrs. Halliday is constantly speaking of those murders," the sheriff reported.

## **Around the World**

In 1888, Bly suggested to her editor at the New York World that she take a trip around the world, attempting to turn the fictional *Around the World in Eighty Days* into fact for the first time.

The male senior staff at the paper were unconvinced of the woman's ability to succeed, preferring to send a man instead. Bly had her answer at the ready: "Very well. Start the man and I'll start the same day for some other newspaper and beat him." The editors conceded.

A year later, at 9:40a.m. on November 14, 1889, and with two days' notice, she boarded the *Augusta Victoria*, a steamer of the Hamburg America Line and began her 25,000 mile journey.

She took with her the dress she was wearing, a sturdy overcoat, several changes of underwear, and a small travel bag carrying her toiletry essentials. She carried most of her money (£200 in English bank notes and gold, as well as some American currency) in a bag tied around her neck.

Bly's journey got off to a rough start, as she—a first-time traveller—found herself violently seasick on the transatlantic crossing to London. The sight of food made her nauseated, and her fellow passengers were rather judgmental of the queasy woman proposing to travel around the entire world. In attempting to sleep off her nausea, Bly awoke 22 hours later to a knock on her cabin door; the Captain feared she had died. The long sleep seemed to do the trick, however, and Nellie managed the rest of the journey in good health and with good appetite, making fast friends with her shipmates. She made the acquaintance of other female travellers, including a pair of Scottish women travelling around the world as well, but over the course of two years—a much more leisurely pace.

The New York newspaper *Cosmopolitan* sponsored its own reporter, Elizabeth Bisland, to beat the time of both Phileas Fogg and Nellie. Bisland would travel the opposite way around the world, starting on the same day as Bly took off. Nellie didn't learn of Bisland's journey until reaching Hong Kong. She dismissed the competition. "I would not race," she said. "If someone else wants to do the trip in less time, that is their concern."

To sustain interest in the story, the World organised a "Nellie Bly Guessing Match" in which readers were asked to estimate Bly's arrival time to the second, with the Grand Prize consisting at first of a trip to Europe and, later on, spending money for the trip.

During her travels around the world, Bly went through France where she met Jules Verne in Amiens. In the year of the meeting, Jules Verne, then 61, was world-famous for his science-fiction books, including *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* and *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Three years earlier he had been shot in the leg by a deranged nephew, and he now walked with a limp and was in virtual retirement.

The meeting between Nellie Bly and Jules Verne had been prearranged. She had asked for it. She thought it would be a great stunt to meet the author of the fictional character whose record she was trying to break. She went 180 miles out of her way to see Verne,

and she had less than three hours to talk to him. But she knew it was a good story. And it was.

Jules Verne and his wife and an interpreter greeted Nellie Bly at the Amiens railroad station. Verne was astonished at her youth. "Is it possible that this child is travelling around the world alone? Why, she is a mere baby." he said. Verne took her in his carriage to his home and settled her in the sitting room.

Since many of Verne's books had American settings. Bly wondered if he had actually ever visited the U.S. "Yes, once for a few days," he answered, "during which I saw Niagara Falls. Magnificent!" He added that his health prevented him from travelling much anymore, but that at one time he had owned a yacht and had used it to seek out new backgrounds for his books.

He was curious about Nellie Bly's route around the world. Where was she going? She replied, "London, Calais, Brindisi, Port Said, Ismailia, Suez, Aden, Colombo, Penang, Singapore, Hong Kong, Yokohama, San Francisco, and back in New York in just 75 days."

Verne showed Nellie Bly his study, and on a map of the world he pointed out the trip his imaginary Phileas Fogg had taken. Before Nellie Bly departed, Verne said to her, "If you do it in 79 days, I shall applaud with both hands. But 75 days-- mon Dieu – that would be a miracle." He wished her well, but in his judgment felt she would not better Phileas Fogg's record of 80 days.

The development of efficient submarine cable networks and the electric telegraph allowed Bly to send short progress reports, although longer dispatches had to travel by regular post and these were often delayed by several weeks.

Bly travelled using steamships and the existing railroad systems, which caused occasional setbacks, particularly on the Asian leg of her race. During these stops, she visited a leper colony in Canton China on Christmas day and ate her lunch in the Temple of Death. In Singapore, she bought a monkey she named McGinty to be her travelling companion for the remainder of the journey. When Nellie returned home McGinty went to live in a zoo.

As a result of rough weather on her Pacific crossing, she arrived in San Francisco on the White Star Line ship RMS Oceanic on January 21, two days behind schedule. However, after World owner Pulitzer chartered a private train to bring her home, she arrived back in New Jersey on January 25, 1890, at 3:51pm.

When Bly stepped onto the platform among the crowd of 15,000 to greet her were three official timekeepers from local athletics clubs clicking their stopwatches to confirm her finishing time.

The Nellie Bly Guessing Game set up by Pulitzer had maintained a fervent interest in her journey - more than a million people entered.

So, just over seventy-two days after her departure from Hoboken, Nellie was back in New York. She had circumnavigated the globe, travelling alone for almost the entire journey. Her journey was a world record.

The other journalist – Elizabeth Bisland - was, at the time, still crossing the Atlantic, only to arrive in New York four and a half days later. She also had missed a connection and had to board a slow, old ship in the place of a faster one.

## **Novelist**

After the fanfare of her trip around the world, Bly quit reporting and took a lucrative job writing serial novels for publisher Norman Munro's weekly New York Family Story Paper. The first chapters of *Eva The Adventuress*, based on the real-life trial of Eva Hamilton, appeared in print before Bly returned to New York. Between 1889 and 1895 she wrote eleven novels. As few copies of the paper survived, these novels were thought lost until 2021, when the author David Blixt announced their discovery, found in Munro's British weekly *The London Story Paper*. In 1893, though still writing novels, she returned to reporting for the *New York World*.

## **Later work**

In 1895, Bly married millionaire manufacturer Robert Seaman. Bly was 31 and Seaman was 73 when they married. Due to her husband's failing health, she left journalism and succeeded her husband as head of the Iron Clad Manufacturing Co., which made steel containers such as milk cans and boilers. In 1904, Seaman died.

In 1904, Iron Clad began manufacturing the steel barrel that was the model for the 55-gallon oil drum still in widespread use in the United States. There have been claims that Bly invented the barrel. Whether she did or not, Nellie was, however, an inventor in her own right, receiving a US Patent for a novel milk can and another for a stacking garbage can, both under her married name of Elizabeth Cochrane Seaman.

According to her biographer, Nellie ran her company as a model of social welfare, with health benefits and recreational facilities. For a time she was one of the leading women industrialists in the United States but she was hopeless at understanding the financial aspects of her business and ultimately lost everything. Unscrupulous employees defrauded the firm of hundreds of thousands of dollars, troubles compounded by a protracted and costly bankruptcy litigation.

Back in reporting, she wrote stories on Europe's Eastern Front during World War 1. She was the first woman and one of the first foreigners to visit the war zone between Serbia and Austria. She was arrested when she was mistaken for a British spy.

Bly covered the Woman Suffrage Procession of 1913 for the *New York Evening Journal*. Her article's headline was "Suffragists Are Men's Superiors" and in its text she accurately predicted that it would be 1920 before women in the United States would be given the right to vote.

## **Death**

On January 27, 1922, Nellie Bly died of pneumonia at St. Mark's Hospital, New York City, aged 57. She was interred at Woodlawn Cemetery in The Bronx, New York City.

## **Legacy**

## **Honours**

In 1998, Bly was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

Bly was one of four journalists honoured with a US postage stamp in a "Women in Journalism" set in 2002.

In 2019, the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation put out an open call for artists to create a Nellie Bly Memorial art installation on Roosevelt Island (remember that's where she was in the lunatic asylum) The winning proposal, *The Girl Puzzle*, by Amanda Matthews, was announced on October 16, 2019.

The New York Press Club confers an annual Nellie Bly Cub Reporter journalism award to acknowledge the best journalistic effort by an individual with three years or less professional experience, in 2020 it was awarded to Claudia Irizarry Aponte, of *THE CITY*.

### **Theatre**

Nellie Bly was the subject of the 1946 Broadway musical *Nellie Bly* which ran for 16 performances.

During the 1990s, playwright Lynn Schrichte wrote and toured *Did You Lie, Nellie Bly?* a one-woman show about Bly.

### **Film and television**

Bly has been portrayed in the films *The Adventures of Nellie Bly*(1981), *10 Days in a Madhouse*(2015),and *Escaping the Madhouse: The Nellie Bly Story*(2019).

A fictionalised version of Bly as a mouse named Nellie Brie appears as a central character in the animated children's film *An American Tail*.

Bly was also a subject of Season 2 Episode 5 of *The West Wing* in which First Lady Abbey Bartlet dedicates a memorial in Pennsylvania in honor of Nellie Bly and convinces the President to mention her and other female historic figures on his weekly radio address.

### **Eponyms and namesakes**

The board game *Round the World with Nellie Bly* created in 1890 is named in recognition of her trip.

The Nellie Bly Amusement Park in Brooklyn, New York City, was named after her, taking as its theme *Around the World in Eighty Days*. The park reopened in 2007 under new management, renamed "Adventurers Amusement Park".

A steam tug named after Bly served as a fireboat in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

### **Books**

Within her lifetime, Nellie Bly published three non-fiction books (essentially compilations of her newspaper reportage) and one novel in book form.

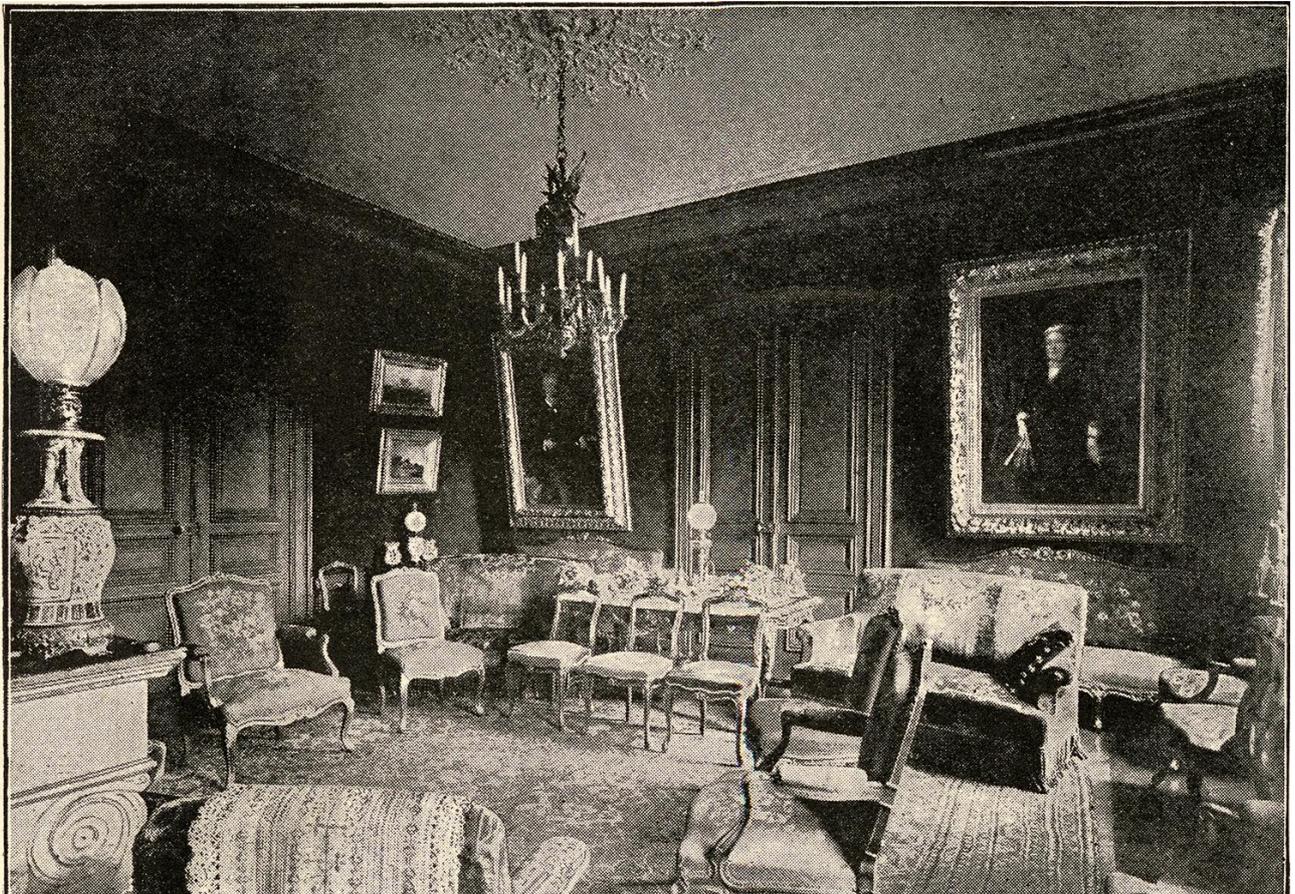
Between 1889 and 1895 Nellie Bly also penned twelve novels for *The New York Family Story Paper*. Thought lost, these novels were not collected in book form until their re-discovery in 2021.



Nellie Bly's travelling outfit



The New York City Mental Health Hospital on Blackwell's Island, c. 1893



Jules Verne's Sitting Room

# WHAT TO PACK TO TRAVEL THE WORLD



What Nellie Bly took with her

No. 227,222

E. C. CLARK,  
MILK CAN.

Patented Apr. 25, 1906.

THE FIGURE

Fig. 1.

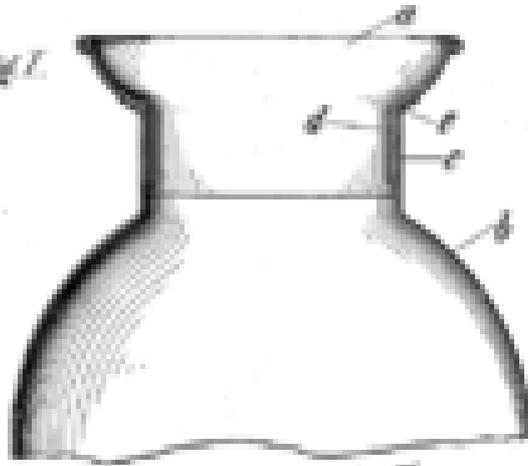
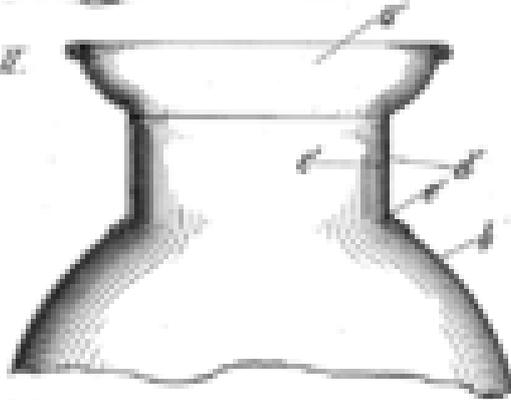


Fig. 2.



Wm. H. & Co.  
Manufacturers  
New York

Wm. H. & Co.  
Manufacturers  
New York

Patent for an improved Milk-Can



Bly speaking to a military officer in Poland



N

Nellie Bly depicted as part of *The Girl Puzzle Monument Honouring Nellie Bly*, by artist Amanda Matthews, located in Lighthouse Park on Roosevelt Island in New York City.



C

Cover of the 1890 board game *Round the World with Nellie Bly*

