

## Topic Page: [Bly, Nellie \(1864 - 1922\)](#)



Image from: [Nellie Bly \(the pen name of Elizabeth Cochrane\)... in Encyclopedia of Deception](#)

Summary Article: **BLY, NELLIE (AKA ELIZABETH COCHRAN)**

from *The Encyclopedia of American Journalism*

Nellie Bly (May 5, 1864-January 27, 1922), the most celebrated woman journalist of the 1880s and 1890s, pioneered the field of “detective” or “stunt” reporting. The crusading spirit and social welfare agenda in her scores of undercover exploits led to the development of full-scale investigative reporting in the decades that followed.

Bly was born Elizabeth Cochran in Cochran's Mill, Armstrong County, Pennsylvania, May 5, 1864. She was the daughter of Michael Cochran, a county judge and the town mill owner, who died when she was six. She was the thirteenth of his fifteen children, ten by his first wife and five by Bly's mother, Mary Jane Cochran. As a young adult, Bly added a final “e” to the Cochran name. Financial reverses made Bly the sole support of her mother and sister and soon after the family relocated to Pittsburgh. Once there, Bly's impassioned letter to a columnist landed her a job at the *Pittsburg Dispatch* in 1885. For the *Dispatch*, she also reported from Mexico for five months shortly before her move to New York.

Bly's writing life spanned the Victorian and Progressive eras and World War I and its aftermath, but she is best remembered for the three years she reported for Joseph Pulitzer's Sunday *New York World* and became, in the process, the incarnation of “The New Journalism” of the 1880s and 1890s. Joining the staff only a few years after the *World's* inception, Bly began splashily in the fall of 1887 with a two-part chronicle of the intolerable conditions at New York's already infamous women's insane asylum on Blackwell's (now Roosevelt) Island. In her distinctive firstperson narrative style, she investigated under cover, feigning insanity to engineer her commitment to the institution and gained release ten days later through another ruse. Her stories brought instant acclaim and helped push through reforms. Soon after came reputation-building exposés of a corrupt statehouse lobbyist, employment agency abuses, the New York baby-buying trade, the lives of chorus girls, jail house life for women, mesmerists and hucksters. Week after week, Bly assumed dozens of guises to bring these reports to the *World's* readers, spawning in the process dozens of imitators at other newspapers across the country and, at last, a place on newspapers for women who wanted to report hard news. In between, as celebrity interviewer, she interviewed presidential wives and merry murderesses. Her last assignment as a full-time member of the staff extended her national celebrity to Europe and beyond: She raced around the world by boat and train to beat the fictional record of Jules Verne's Phileas Fogg with a time of 72 days, 6 hours, 11 minutes and 14 seconds. Nellie Bly board games, caps, lamps, trading cards, and other items proliferated, but she quit in a salary and recognition dispute. In the hiatus, she turned three of her most memorable exploits into books and also tried unsuccessfully to write serial fiction.

In the following years, Bly returned to journalism sporadically. Her most notable assignments in this period were also for the *World*, including her exclusive jailhouse interview with Emma Goldman in 1893; an unsuccessful personal column; her coverage of city, state, and women's movement political conventions; the Midwest drought; and her distinguished coverage of Chicago's Pullman Strike of 1894. Her compassionate portrait of the lives of Pullman workers and their families was Bly at her journalistic

best. In 1895, she accepted a lucrative offer from the *Chicago Times-Herald*, but then quit after little more than a month to marry Robert L. Seaman, a New York industrialist thirty years her senior. In 1896, she went back to the *World* briefly at the invitation of her old friend Arthur Brisbane, and then, in 1899, assumed control of her husband's troubled Brooklyn-based ironworks company. Later, she embarked on the manufacture of steel barrels. She ran her two melded companies as a model of social welfare for its 250 employees, but lacked the necessary business acumen to keep the companies going after her husband's death in 1904.

By 1911, with the firm in deep financial trouble, Bly fled to Europe to avoid prosecution and arrived in Vienna at the outbreak of World War I. She immediately joined the foreign press corps and became the first known woman correspondent to tour the battlefields of the eastern front, writing about it for the *New York Evening Journal* and *International News Service* (INS). Brisbane was by then running the *Journal* for William Randolph Hearst. Bly remained in Vienna for the duration of the war, technically an enemy alien for part of the time, but very well-connected among the Austrian nobility. She never returned to the war front, but during this period sent a series of dispatches back to the *Journal*, urging assistance for Austria's widows and war orphans.

She returned to the United States in 1919, stopping in Paris en route to plead Austria's case to U.S. military officials and to President Woodrow Wilson's staff. Though her name was still known to the military intelligence officers who interviewed her, they received her as relic more than icon, and even considered her a bit “hatty” in her vociferous opposition to Bolshevism and her warnings of Russia's threat to central Europe.

Once back in New York, financially strapped, she returned to newspaper work, thanks to Brisbane once again. At her death, he would describe her in a *Journal* editorial as “the best reporter in America.” He gave her an editorial page column that Bly quickly turned into a virtual clearing house for unwed mothers who wanted to place their children in good homes. Her other major themes were the increasing number of foreign workers in U.S. shipyards and capital punishment, both of which she opposed. She also covered important front page sensational stories in this period, including kidnappings, the Jess Willard-Jack Dempsey fight, and an electrocution.

At her death, Bly's role in opening the profession of journalism to women reporters was undisputed, as was her place as an enduring journalistic and feminist legend.

### Further Reading

- Bly, Nellie Six Months in Mexico. New York: John W. Lovell, 1886.
- Bly, Nellie Ten Days in a Madhouse. New York: Norman L. Munro, 1887.
- Bly, Nellie The Mystery of Central Park. New York: G.W. Dillingham, 1889.
- Bly, Nellie Nellie Bly's Book: Around the World in 72 Days. New York: Pictorial Weekly, 1890.
- Kroeger, Brooke, Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist. New York: Times Books, Random House, 1994. (For all known primary and contemporaneous secondary sources, see Kroeger, 523-614.).

Brooke Kroeger

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Kroeger, B. (2007). Bly, Nellie (Aka Elizabeth Cochran). In S. L. Vaughn (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of American journalism*. London, UK: Routledge. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/bly\\_nellie\\_1864\\_1922](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/bly_nellie_1864_1922)

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## Chicago

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Kroeger, Brooke. "Bly, Nellie (Aka Elizabeth Cochran)." *The Encyclopedia of American Journalism*, edited by Stephen L. Vaughn, Routledge, 1st edition, 2007. *Credo Reference*, [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/bly\\_nellie\\_1864\\_1922](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/bly_nellie_1864_1922). Accessed 27 Jun. 2019.