

Nellie Bly: The Girl Who Cried “Muckraker”

Tess Stanley
Senior Division
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On Blackwell's Island, now known as Roosevelt's Island in Manhattan, stood multiple dreary and grim structures including the Alms House, Penitentiary, Workhouse and most notably, the Lunatic Asylum. In 1887, for ten days, the asylum was home to Elizabeth Jane Cochrane, widely known by her pen name, Nellie Bly. Bly was admitted as a sane woman with a purpose: to record her experiences and write an exposé detailing the mismanagement and terrible conditions at Blackwell's. To be hospitalized for her pseudo-insanity, she moved into a temporary home for females and set about to convince her housemates of her mental instability, which successfully resulted in her being committed.¹ Her exposé, later published as a book, *Ten Days In A Madhouse*, catapulted her to notoriety as a stunt journalist. Over a century has passed, and the story of Nellie Bly feigning insanity retold numerous times in magazines and newspapers who crown her as a woman who pioneered stunt journalism and credit her as instrumental in significantly improving the treatment of the mentally ill during the 1800s. As her career would grow, Bly would eventually complete more daring and adventurous assignments, such as traveling around the world in 72 days, inspired by Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*, which would earn her the title as an ambitious and innovative journalist.² However, looked at through the lens of the already existing public awareness of Blackwell's conditions, the ineffectiveness of her exposé in reforming the treatment of the insane, and her sensationalist motives as a journalist working for the *New York World*, it is clear that Elizabeth Cochrane, under the pen name Nellie Bly and her exposé on Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum, did not, in fact, have a significant impact on the treatment of the mentally ill during the Victorian Era.

¹ Nellie Bly, *Ten Days in a Madhouse* (New York, 1887)

² "Nellie Bly Biography," A&E Television Networks, Nov. 6, 2019 <https://www.biography.com/activist/nellie-bly>

Elizabeth Jane Cochrane was born on May 5, 1864 in Cochran, Pennsylvania. Due to financial struggles, Cochrane was unable to finish her education and instead helped her mother run a boarding house. While working in the family boarding house, she read an article in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* that negatively portrayed women and their abilities. Angered, Cochrane wrote a letter in response to the author, defending the female sex. The author, surprised by the bold attitude of Cochrane, printed her response and offered her a position as a writer at the Dispatch. This was the beginning of her career in journalism. She took the pen name Nellie Bly. While at *Pittsburgh Dispatch* she quickly realized she was expected to create pieces for and about women. So, in 1886, Bly moved to New York City to work for the *New York World*, where she stormed the office.³ There, editor John Cockrill presented her with Blackwell's Island, a feature that would allow her career to skyrocket, while prohibiting reformative action for inmates in the gruesome Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum.

As population began to grow exponentially in New York City during the early 1800s, there became a need for a lunatic asylum. However, the city's plan was unique in that they aimed to create an institution that would foster a healthy environment, away from the general public.⁴ Luckily, criteria regarding mental illness treatment had recently improved. For example, in 1827, "An Act Concerning Lunatics" forbid the mentally ill from being "confined in any prison, gaol, or house of correction, or confined in the same room with any person charged with, or convicted of any criminal offense."⁵ This, coupled with the proposed "moral treatment" style, inspired by a

³ "Nellie Bly Biography," A&E Television Networks

⁴ Stacy Horn, *Damnation Island: Poor, Sick, Mad and Criminal in 19th-Century New York* (North Carolina: Algonquin Books, 2018) p. xi

⁵ Jacob Alter Goldberg, *History of New York's Policy of Caring for the Insane. Social Aspects of the Treatment of the Insane: Based on a Study of New York Experience*, Volume 97, Issue 2, (New York, Columbia UP, 1921) p. 160.

Quaker asylum in Philadelphia, the original design of the Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum was well underway to be a sanctuary for the mentally ill.⁶ However, the first sign of downfall for the asylum, which was built to accommodate 200 people (later including an additional 50 from the Retreat and Lodge each, totaling 300 by the 1850s), was on the first day of operation, June 10th 1839, where maximum capacity was almost reached - at 197 people.⁷ Just three years later in 1842, Charles Dickens wrote in *American Notes*, "...everything had a lunging listless madhouse air, which was very painful."⁸ Dickens' stay was shocking to the point where he abridged his stay and refused to see the more intense sections of the asylum.⁹ Unfortunately, the conditions at Blackwell's Lunacy Asylum would only grow more dangerous and poor, reaching an 8.5% mortality rate by 1871.¹⁰ Although multiple efforts were made to cultivate a healthy environment for the mentally ill, the grave conditions of the institution would eventually outweigh said efforts, leaving them negligible.

Even before Nellie Bly began her career in stunt journalism, the public was well aware of the atrocities of Blackwell's Island, thus making her purported "exposé" well-shy of the groundbreaking piece it is claimed to be. The first instance of public denouncement was in 1848, when Thomas Story Kirkbride, the founder of the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane (AMSII) visited the lunatic asylum. On May 8th of that year, in front of superintendents from a great number of American asylums, Kirkbride announced how, "...the pauper lunatics of this community should [not] have been allowed to

⁶ Horn, *Damnation Island*, p. 5.

⁷ Ibid, 7-8

⁸ Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1874) p. 106.

⁹ Ibid, 107

¹⁰ Horn, *Damnation Island*, p. 29

lapse into that degradation and neglect...it would be difficult...to find a parallel.”¹¹ Unfortunately, nothing changed, even after the creation of the Department of Public Charities and Correction in New York City in 1860. Once again, it was public knowledge that the asylum alone was constructed to house 200 inmates, however, public records and annual reports of city institutions created by the department’s commissioners (and often published in the New York newspapers) would state otherwise. These records would often list numbers reaching into the thousands when describing permanent residents, like that of an 1877 report which recorded 1,373 permanent female patients at Blackwell’s, not to mention the other hundreds of inmates without permanent residency sent to the Island to seek treatment.¹² The overcrowdedness of the asylum was well-known by the public and the connection between inhumane conditions and overcapacity was clear. Sanitary law violations were a common trend on the island, thus multiplying the media coverage and public awareness of the cruelty on the island. In an 1875 article regarding the Smallpox Hospital, “The people of this city have become so accustomed to the inefficiency and mismanagement of the Health Department...utter disregard of all sanitary laws by the officials of this Board will in no way surprise the public.”¹³ Unfortunately, the early commendation of Blackwell’s Island would quickly turn into notably disgraceful acts under the umbrella term ‘treatment.’

Just as the terrible conditions of Blackwell’s Island were often announced publicly through well-known reformers or through popular newspapers, an avid newspaper reader could be similarly informed on the macabre events that occurred in the depths of the asylum. On March

¹¹ Ibid, 9-10

¹² The New York Herald. "Charities and Correction," *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Feb. 1, 1877, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030313/1877-02-01/ed-1/seq-5/>

¹³ The New York Herald. "Smallpox." Dec. 19, 1875, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030313/1875-12-19/ed-1/seq-13/>

14th, 1871, the soon-to-be-famous Sister Mary Stanislaus, an Irish nun, was committed to Bloomingdale's Asylum, but later transferred to the Island.¹⁴ On the Island she was classified as a tamer, more peaceful patient. However, one morning, as a priest came to visit her, she was found in a "...lightless room with her dress torn and a chunk of her hair missing," after angering a nurse during the night.¹⁵ In response, she took Blackwell's Lunacy Asylum to court on the basis of being wrongfully committed. Two court cases would transpire, only to judge her insane and send her back to the Island. On the other hand, this case created such a media stir that allowed much of the public to further understand the inhumane treatment that occurred on the Island. After seeing the popularity of Sister Mary's trail in media outlets, reporters would continue to unearth gruesome stories of insanity from the Island, decades before Nellie Bly's.

Although many went undocumented, thousands of ghastly deaths occurred in the asylum, including suicides, murders and death via the atrocious conditions and, unfortunately for Blackwell's, were often picked up by newspapers and magazines to further dramatize the insane. To those who read *The New York Times*, *The New York Herald* or *Daily Tribune*, the late 1870s and early 1880s were publicly considered the most fatal years on Blackwell's Island. In 1878, within seven months, 4 headlines arose, consisting of two "unexpected" suicides, one "intentional" suicide and a poisoning killing two.¹⁶ In 1879, in Carolina Weil starved to death. One day later, Emma Morrison gave birth in solitary confinement while wearing a straitjacket. Then, 17 days later, a woman named Amelia Doyle was left to starve. She was so hungry she consumed arsenic (mixed with sugar and butter) intended for rats.¹⁷ Meanwhile, as news of the

¹⁴ Horn, *Damnation Island*, p. 22

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 31

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 50

¹⁷"MISCELLANEOUS CITY NEWS: TORMENTING THE INSANE. WHAT THE BOARD OF CONSULTING PHYSICIANS TO BLACKWELL'S ISLAND ASYLUM ARE DOING ABUSES TO BE CORRECTED." *New*

lethality of the conditions in the asylum spread, manager Dr. William W. Strew was forced to step down from his position, who later claimed that it was because there “...had been so much said in the papers about the complains about the institution that they felt “...somebody must be sacrificed to political necessity.”¹⁸

When a Senate investigation was launched on May 25, 1880, after numerous reports detailing the endless scandals on Blackwell’s Island became widespread (one such abuse occurred on May 24, less than 24 hours before the investigation began), many former managers and employees called to testify, revealing even worse cases of abuse and deaths.¹⁹ The very first witness began his testimony by reading about eight gruesome cases, simply reading from “...one of the hospital books that was used to record accidents.” The report was issued around two years later, though it proved largely unimpactful in improving the treatment of the insane on the Island.

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In her book, *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, Nellie Bly writes, “...as a result of my visit to the asylum and the exposures consequent thereon, that the City of New York has appropriated \$1,000,000 more per annum than ever before for the care of the insane.”²¹ Her statement paints a glorious picture of herself as a heroic figure leading the charge for better treatment for asylum inmates. However, this could not be further from the truth, both in Nellie’s exaggerations and ineffectiveness of her efforts. According to *Political History of Journalism* by Geraldine

York Times (1857-1922), Nov 07, 1879.

<https://search-proquest-xaaa.orc.scoolaid.net/docview/93818416?accountid=699>

¹⁸ Horn, *Damnation Island*, p. 52-65

¹⁹ A group of female inmates were permitted to walk the grounds of the asylum, and on the way back to the asylum, the “perfectly harmless” Elizabeth Wagner broke away from the group, and leaped into the East River. She survived, but died three hours later.

"Suicide On Blackwell's Island." *The New York Times (1857-1922)*, May 24, 1880.

<https://search-proquest-xaaa.orc.scoolaid.net/docview/93860164?accountid=699>.

²⁰ Horn, *Damnation Island*, p. 62-75

²¹ Nellie Bly, *Ten Days in a Madhouse* (New York, 1887) p. 5

Muhlmann, "...the reality was once again less simple: a budgetary rethink seems to have been underway even before her reports appeared...."²² For example, in 1878, the *New York Herald* published an article where the Commissioners of Charities and Correction state that the per capita allowance for lunatics should be increased, as it would encourage their recovery.²³

Unfortunately, the budgetary changes of the Commissioners never occurred, but neither did the appropriation of one million dollars. Stacy Horn, author of *Damnation Island* states that ultimately, only \$850,072 was allocated to the Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum. Although \$850,072 in 1887 was a considerable amount of money, it produced little success in improving the treatment of inmates at Blackwell's. For example, the amount of money spent on women per day only increased by eight cents.²⁴ Thus, Nellie Bly's esteemed role in providing one million dollars towards the insane is marginal, as it did not initiate the reform movement desired by Nellie Bly, her supporters or the inmates at Blackwell's.

Ten Days in a Madhouse was originally excerpted as a series of articles in the *New York World*, one of the most highly circulated newspapers in America, headed by Joseph Pulitzer. The popularity of the *World* was not generated from reliability, but from sensationalist journalism, as the *World* commercialized scandals, campaigns, and stunts "...simultaneously sanctimonious and titillating,"²⁵ including that of Nellie Bly. When Elizabeth Cochrane joined Pulitzer's team, she became a part of the exclusive group of stunt reporters who only aimed "...to boost newspaper circulation and to entertain readers with their derring-do, but they were not necessarily concerned

²² Geraldine Muhlmann, *Political Journalism of History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008) p. 62

²³ The New York Herald. "The Insane: Official Statements Concerning Their Present Treatment." April 24, 1878. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030313/1878-04-24/ed-1/seq-11/>

²⁴ Horn, *Damnation Island*, p. 86-87

²⁵ Mike Wallace and Edwin G. Burrows, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998) p. 1151-54.

with cultivating sympathy or reformist indignation in response to the hardships they exposed.”²⁶ Many of the *World’s* investigative journalists focused solely on creating popular stories instead of using their platform to push for reforms in the New York area. By considering themselves as performers for the *World*, many overplayed their investigative roles.²⁷ According to the *New York Herald*, in an article about Nellie Bly and her admittance to the asylum, the doctors claim that she was the “...most peculiar case that ever came into the hospital.”²⁸ The account from the doctors demonstrates that Nellie Bly would often outperform her “undercover” roles in lieu of completing her supposed reformatory goals, especially at Blackwell’s. By understanding the context for Cochrane’s writings, it is clear her motivations were circulation-boosting and sensational, rather than for the reformation of Blackwell’s Island Lunatic Asylum.

In addition to writing for a sensationalist newspaper, although often described as a pioneer in regards to her exposé on mental health institutions, Nellie Bly and her editor followed the examples of others, rather than crafting original ideas.²⁹ Fifteen years earlier in 1872, Julius Chambers, a reporter for the *New York Tribune*, feigned insanity and, with the help of two friends, was committed to Bloomingdale’s Insane Asylum. Unfortunately for Chambers, the *New York Evening Post* later states that “...the mode pursued to obtain information was disreputable...”³⁰ However, his exposé led to the release of sane individuals from the asylum,

²⁶ Laura R Fisher, *In Reading for Reform: The Social Work of Literature in the Progressive Era* (Minnesota UP, 2019).

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ “Who is This Insane Girl?,” *The New York Sun*, Sept. 25, 1887.

²⁹ Diane Bernard, “She Went Undercover to Expose an Insane Asylum’s Horrors. Now Nellie Bly Is Getting Her Due,” *Washington Post*, July 28, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/07/28/she-went-undercover-expose-an-insane-asylums-horrors-now-nellie-bly-is-getting-her-due/>

³⁰ Julius Chambers, “Among The Maniacs: Four Days In The Excited Wards Of Bloomingdale A Night Of Horror Among Raving Patients,” *The New York Tribune*, Aug. 31, 1872, ProQuest Historical Newspapers <https://search-proquest-xaaa.orc.scoolaid.net/docview/572553617/12D45CC5C78A4D91PQ/1?accountid=699>

and help to strengthen lunacy laws in 1874. It is inferred that her editor was inspired by Chambers works and gave the assignment to Nellie Bly, but as a challenge, changed Bloomingdale's asylum, comparatively less harsh, to Blackwell's Island asylum. Despite her reputation of groundbreaking methods in stunt journalism, with respect to her mental institution exposé, neither Nellie Bly nor her editor, produced avant garde ideas.

The end to Blackwell's Island began with what was needed for decades: an intensive investigation lead by a state commission. Published in 1894, the 5,700-page report lead to two new bills to be passed which called for the reorganization of lunatic asylums in the New York City and Long Island area, including Blackwell's. Patients at Blackwell's would be moved to Wards Island and Central Islip asylums, leaving the gruesome and inhumane origin of Nellie Bly's career to close in 1896.³¹ Many claim that her exposé is directly linked to the eventual end of horrors at Blackwell's Island Women's Lunacy Asylum, and although it allowed for temporary monetary aid to the Island, the articles mostly acted as another circulation-boosting story for the paper. Common knowledge of abuses and atrocities lead Bly's story to not reach the "groundbreaking" status that is perceived today. Despite her own hope to break barriers in *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, Elizabeth Cochrane, as Nellie Bly, unfortunately did not lead a reformatory charge to improve the conditions on Blackwell's Island and the treatment of the mentally ill during the Victorian Era.

³¹ Horn, *Damnation Island*, p. 251-255

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Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Bly, Nellie. *Ten Days in a Madhouse*. N.p.: New York World, 1887.

The book *Ten Days in a Madhouse* is the compilation of exposé-style articles written by Nellie Bly published in the *New York World* as a series. The source provided the point of view of Nellie Bly, in regards to her experiences being committed to and living in the asylum and the outcomes of her articles. It allowed me to see what Nellie Bly thought of her own work, as she praised herself and often guaranteed unattainable aid for the inmates.

Dickens, Charles. "New York." In *American Notes*, 91-111. N.p.: Chapman and Hall, 1874.

American Notes is a travelogue of Charles Dickens's trip to North American. The chapter "New York" provides a section on Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum, where he describes it in detail. I pulled a quote from the source in order to show the view of a highly-respected author on Blackwell's, whose description is detailed and can help the reader better understand the atmosphere of the island.

New York Times. "MISCELLANEOUS CITY NEWS: TORMENTING THE INSANE. WHAT THE BOARD OF CONSULTING PHYSICIANS TO BLACKWELL'S ISLAND ASYLUM ARE DOING ABUSES TO BE CORRECTED." Nov 07, 1879.
<https://search-proquest-xaaa.orc.scoolaid.net/docview/93818416?accountid=699>

This article provided useful information on three deaths that occurred within 18 days on Blackwell's Island. This was helpful as it helped me to understand the severity of the conditions on the island and helped me further prove my point of the public's knowledge of the atrocities that happened on the island.

The New York Herald. "Charities and Correction." February 1, 1877, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030313/1877-02-01/ed-1/seq-5/>.

This source is an article published in early 1877 which described the expenditures, appropriations and number of inmates for all health institutions in the New York City area, including Blackwell's. The article provided me with the number of permanent inmates in the year 1877, which was 1,373, compared to the capacity of 200 which the asylum was designed for.

The New York Herald. "Smallpox." Dec. 19, 1875, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030313/1875-12-19/ed-1/seq-13/>.

The article, written in 1875, detailed the unsanitary conditions of the smallpox hospital on Blackwell's Island. Although the source is not about the Lunatic Asylum, it does show how the public was well aware of the terrible conditions of institutions on the island. I used the source by quoting the first sentence that describes the public recognition of the atrocious conditions.

The New York Herald. "The Insane: Official Statements Concerning Their Present Treatment." April 24, 1878. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030313/1878-04-24/ed-1/seq-11/>.

The article, from 1878, is an interview with the current manager of Blackwell's Island lunatic asylum, Dr. Strew, where he is asked questions about the management and conditions of Blackwell's. In this source, he describes a budgetary rethink and I used this information to prove that Nellie Bly's exposé did not effectively cause any reforms as it had no significant effect on the budget.

The New York Sun. "Who Is This Insane Girl?" September 25, 1887.

This article describes Nellie Bly's commitment to the insane asylum as though it was a mystery, showing how Nellie Bly overperformed her insanity, which was common among stunt journalists. In order to show her motives were not only reformatory, but sensational as well, I quoted the article when it described how Bly was the most peculiar case to come to the asylum.

"Suicide On Blackwell's Island." *The New York Times*, May 24, 1880. <https://search-proquest-xaaa.orc.scoolaid.net/docview/93860164?accountid=699>.

This source is a news report from 1880, and occurred the day before the start of a Senate investigation. The report further showed me how abuses on the island occurred extremely frequently. I placed the reference to the source after introducing the Senate investigation in order to emphasize how common deaths and suicides were on the island.

Secondary Sources

A&E Television Networks. "Nellie Bly Biography." *Biography*. Last modified November 6, 2019. <https://www.biography.com/activist/nellie-bly>.

The biography provides information about Cochrane's childhood, and it allowed me to understand how she began her career in journalism. I used the source in the paragraph where I introduce Cochrane and describe her childhood.

Bernard, Diane. "She Went Undercover to Expose an Insane Asylum's Horrors. Now Nellie Bly Is Getting Her Due." *Washington Post*. Last modified July 28, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/07/28/she-went-undercover-expose-an-insane-asylums-horrors-now-nellie-bly-is-getting-her-due/>.

This article was used as an example of the multiple articles who describe Nellie Bly as pioneering or innovative, which my argument is based on. The article was one of the first I read when beginning the research on my project, where its characterization of Bly acted as my inspiration for my claim against the theme of “breaking barriers.”

Fisher, Laura R. "Forms of Mediation: Undercover Literature." In *Reading for Reform: The Social Work of Literature in the Progressive Era*. N.p.: Minnesota UP, 2019.

Reading for Reform presented information crucial to my argument, that Nellie Bly was not a reformative journalist, but rather one that focused on boosting circulation for *The New York World*. I used the source to connect Nellie Bly to the movement of “yellow journalists” that began in the 1880s and reached its height in the 1890s.

Goldberg, Jacob Alter. "History of New York's Policy of Caring for the Insane." In *Social Aspects of the Treatment of the Insane: Based on a Study of New York Experience, Volume 97, Issue 2*. Columbia UP, 1921.

The chapter of *Social Aspects of the Treatment of the Insane* describes the history of mental institutions in New York, including “The Act Concerning Lunatics,” which was instrumental in creating the need for insane asylums, separate from prisons. I used the information on “The Act Concerning Lunatics” to give an account of the history of Blackwell’s Island and the Lunatic Asylum.

Horn, Stacy. *Damnation Island: Poor, Sick, Mad & Criminal in 19th Century New York*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2018.

This book was the most useful for providing background information and evidence to support my argument. It’s a historical account of the institutions on Blackwell’s Island, including information on Nellie Bly and her exposé. I used this source for the history of the Lunatic Asylum, public awareness of abuses, the famous case of Sister Mary, the Senate investigation, the effects of Bly’s expose, and the closing of Blackwell’s.

Muhlmann, Geraldine. "Unifying through a Test: Nellie Bly, Albert Londres, and Edward R. Murrow." In *Political Journalism of History*. N.p.: Polity Press, 2008.

The chapter of *Political Journalism of History* provided useful information on whether Bly’s exposé was effective. I used the source to prove that Bly’s articles did not have any significant effect on the budget for Blackwell’s, contrary to what Bly claims in her exposé.

Wallace, Mike, and Edwin G. Burrows. "That's Entertainment!" In *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898, 1151-54*. N.p.: Oxford University, n.d.

As one part of my argument involves *The New York World* and Joseph Pulitzer, this chapter presented a history of yellow journalism, spearheaded by Pulitzer during his time

managing the *World*. I used the information to further prove how Bly's motivations were, similar to many other journalists under Pulitzer, sensational rather than for the improvement of conditions for the insane.