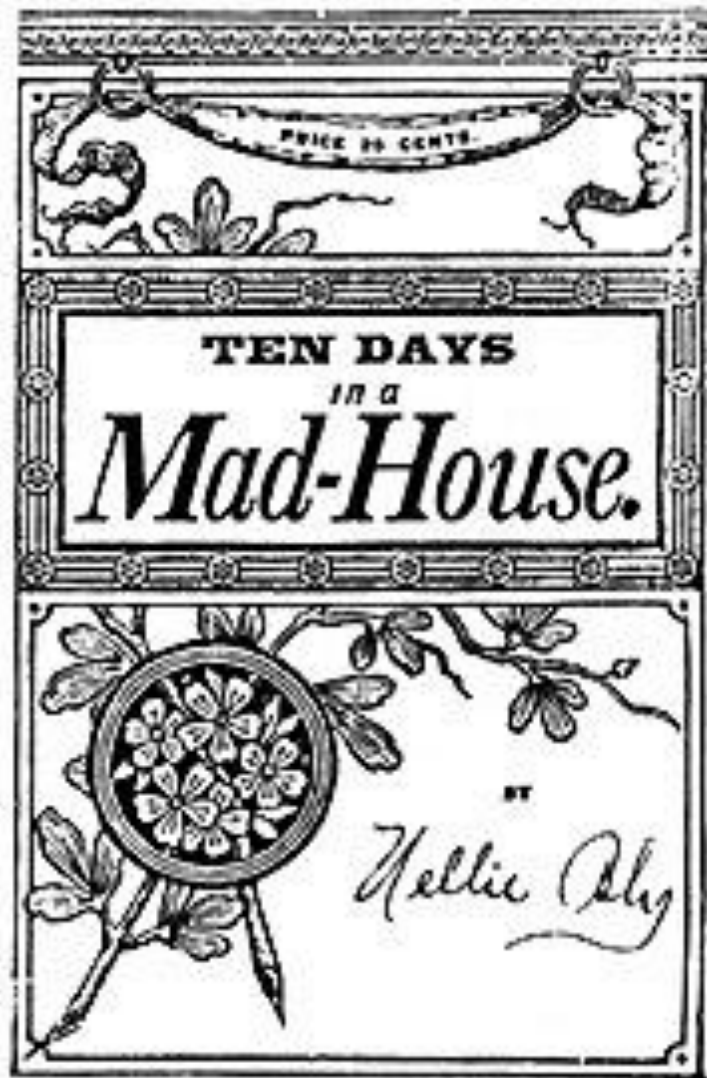


BOOK DISCUSSION KIT



Ten Days in a Mad House

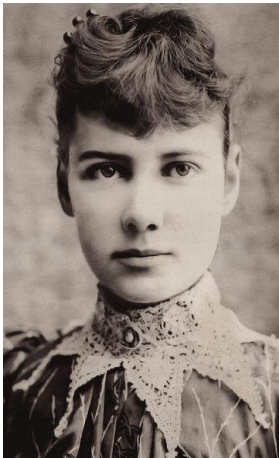
by Nellie Bly

Summary

Nelly Bly, posing as a mentally disturbed woman, went undercover to investigate the deplorable conditions of insane asylums. Her memoirs of her ten day stay at Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum forever changed the way the world looks at treatment and housing of the insane.

Author Information

One of the pioneers of investigative reporting, Elizabeth Jane Cochran, known to the world as Nellie Bly, was born on May 5, 1864 in Cochran's Mills, Pennsylvania. She moved with her family to Pittsburgh in 1880. A column in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* newspaper so infuriated Cochran, that she wrote a scathing response to the editor, who promptly offered her a job. Discovering that she was a woman, the editor initially rescinded the job offer, but Cochran talked him around. As the few female journalists of the era typically wrote under pen names, the editor gave her one, and Nellie Bly was born.



At that time female journalists usually covered fashion, gardening and the society news, something Bly would never be satisfied doing. She wrote a series of investigative articles on the plight of female factory workers before becoming for a short time a foreign correspondent in order to escape editorial pressures.

Eventually, Bly gave up on the Pittsburgh newspaper and relocated to New York City in 1887, where she talked her way into a job at Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. Her tenure there began with her now famous assignment to go undercover at the city's lunatic asylum, which resulted in the book *Ten Days in a Mad House*. She went on the following year to circumnavigate the globe in less than the 80 days taken in the Jules Verne novel published the decade before.

In 1895 Bly married Robert Seaman, a wealthy manufacturer, and retired from journalism. She became the president of the Iron Clad Manufacturing Co., where she secured patents on several of her own designs, including a milk can and a stackable garbage can. Forced into bankruptcy by employee embezzlement, Bly returned to journalism. In her later career she continued her earlier themes, covering stories on women's suffrage and World War I's Eastern Front. She continued to work to improve social institutions of her day, taking a special interest in orphanages.

In 1922 Nellie Bly died of pneumonia in New York City's St. Mark's Hospital. She was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.

Other titles by this author:

- *Around the World in Seventy-Two Days* (1890)

About the Book

The work began as an assignment to Nellie Bly, to go undercover as an inmate and report on the actual conditions at the asylum. Bly had been trying to secure a position at the *New York World* as a reporter, but had been repeatedly turned down due to her gender. She was finally granted the impossible assignment as a test of her abilities.

Bly practiced her insanity in a mirror before taking a room in a boardinghouse, where she went on to convince the other residents of her poor mental state. She was eventually taken to Bellevue Hospital where she was pronounced "undoubtedly insane," and then on to the asylum on Blackwell's Island. After ten days, the *World* arranged for her release.

Her story was published in two installments in the *New York World*, beginning with "Behind Asylum Bars" on October 9, 1887. Bly collected the two reports and expanded on them slightly for book publication. *Ten Days in a Mad House* was published by Ian L. Munro shortly after the original stories ran in the paper. It appeared on the scene in the midst of government investigations of abuse accusations and hearings for increased funding for the institution. As a result, Bly was invited to participate in the grand jury hearings, attesting to conditions she witnessed and making recommendations to improve conditions, many of which were implemented.

Historical Overview

The explosive economic and population growth during the industrial revolution lead to an equally rapid growth in the underclass of society: the poor, the sick, the criminal and the insane. Throughout the nineteenth century, institutions were founded to deal with these "undesirables." In 1828 the city of New York purchased Roosevelt Island in the East River for this purpose. Originally known as Blackwell's Island, named for the family who had owned the land, the island was home to jails, hospitals and poorhouses.

One of the earliest facilities built by the city was the lunatic asylum, which opened its doors in 1839. The first municipal mental hospital in the United States, it was originally designed to be a state-of-the-art facility based on the new theories of "moral treatment." These theories proposed that different forms of insanity be identified and that inmates suffering from different forms be housed separately. They also emphasized humane treatment of the mentally ill, a radical shift away from the nightmarish prisons common at the time.

Unfortunately, financial constraints limited the grand scope of the original plan. In the end, only two wings of the original design were built, leaving the asylum perennially short of space to house the patients. As a further measure, guards and attendants were hired from among the convicts of the nearby prison, making a bad situation much worse for those unlucky enough to be committed.

Stories of torture and abuse abounded, appearing in *The New York Times* and other publications throughout the 1800s. Even early articles, which are on the whole more complimentary, mention overcrowded living conditions, abusive attendants and occasional starvation. (Several newspaper and magazine articles, as well as an excerpt from Charles Dickens' travelogue *American Notes*, are included in this book kit for those who are interested in reading reports of the period.)

In the months leading up to Bly's undercover assignment, reports of shocking abuse at the lunatic asylum, as well as other city institutions became increasingly common. This all came to a head when Bly's exposé was published in the *New York World* in October 1887. The charities and corrections board, which oversaw the various institutions on Blackwell's Island had already been investigating various allegations of abuse. Following the published reports, a grand jury convened to address the matter. A number of abuses Bly described in her report had already been corrected, and more was done following the recommendations of the grand jury. A previously proposed increase to the institution's budget was also approved, which aided in making those changes.

None of the changes undertaken could ever change the public perception Bly had instilled. In the end, the asylum closed its doors 1894. The buildings were taken over by the Metropolitan Hospital, which occupied the area until the 1950s, when the hospital relocated to Manhattan. At that point, the buildings were abandoned. Eventually, the wings were demolished, leaving only the distinctive central octagonal tower. The tower was eventually added to the historical register and designated for preservation by New York City as a city landmark. After restoration work, it was eventually incorporated into an apartment complex that now stands on the former asylum site.

References:

- Boardman, Samantha and George J. Makari. "The Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island and the New York Press," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 2007, p.581. Accessed online 8 March 2012, <http://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/article.aspx?articleid=98193>.
- "Brooke Kroeger's Nellie Bly," New York Correction History Society website, <http://www.correctionhistory.org/rooseveltisland/bly/html/blackwell.html>, accessed 8 March 2012.
- "Octagon Tower," Landmark Structures, Roosevelt Island Historical Society website, <http://www.rihs.us/landmarks/octagon.htm>, accessed 8 March 2012.

Images of the Lunatic Asylum

Images were retrieved from the Asylum Projects wiki,

<http://www.asylumprojects.org/index.php?title=Blackwell's_Island_Asylum_Image_Gallery>, 8 March 2012.



An image of the asylum in 1880. The image shows the backside of the buildings, rather than the more typical front view.

The front view of the main asylum building during its time as part of the Metropolitan Hospital.



Two views of the octagonal tower interior showing the spiral staircase. The image on the right was taken during the Metropolitan Hospital period, with all the institution's nurses gathered around the spiral, and the Christmas tree in the center of the lobby.



The images below show the general state of disrepair more than a decade after the Metropolitan Hospital abandoned the buildings. The first two images were taken in 1969. The date of the third is unknown.



The images below show the restored tower, now part of an apartment complex located on the site.



Discussion Questions

1. What role should undercover reporting play in society?
2. Did Nellie go to Blackwell Island solely to document the abuses there or was it a calculated career move on her part? Do you think that the fact that her editor encouraged her to go sheds any light on her motivations?
3. Nellie's list of grievances against the asylum was a long one: frigid cold, poor food, not enough clothing, safety concerns, issues with hygiene, physical abuse and more. Why do you think that mental health services were, and continue to be, so underfunded and unmonitored?
4. One of the most shocking aspects of the book is the inability of qualified doctors to determine whether or not someone would be considered insane. Do you think the lack of diagnostic tools played a role in who was committed? If so, how large a role?
5. If a similar exposé ran in a newspaper today, what do you think the reaction would be?
6. In the ward Nellie was sent to, several of the women were there because they spoke a language other than English or they didn't behave like in a way people considered acceptable for ladies at that time. Why did this happen?
7. How much of a role did cultural norms play in the State's decision to commit the women of Blackwell Island?
8. Historically, asylums, prisons and infectious disease wards have all been erected on Roosevelt Island (current name of Blackwell Island). The Island is also isolated geographically and lacks the transportation infrastructure of the rest of the city. Some have asserted that this isolation provides security for the patients and other that it is a way to keep social issues out of sight. Which do you think it is?