

BIOGRAPHY



NAME

Nellie Bly

OCCUPATION

Journalist

BIRTH DATE

May 5, 1864

DEATH DATE

January 27, 1922

EDUCATION

Indiana Normal
School

PLACE OF BIRTH

Cochran's Mills,
Pennsylvania

PLACE OF DEATH

New York, New
York

ORIGINALLY

Elizabeth Jane
Cochran

NICKNAME

"Pink"
"Pinky"

AKA

Elizabeth
Cochrane
Seaman
Elizabeth
Cochran
Nellie Bly

Nellie Bly Biography

Journalist (1864–1922)

Nellie Bly was known for her pioneering journalism, including her 1887 exposé on the conditions of asylum patients at Blackwell's Island in New York City and her report of her 72-day trip around the world.

Who Was Nellie Bly?

Born Elizabeth Cochran on May 5, 1864, in Cochran's Mills, Pennsylvania, journalist Nellie Bly began writing for the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* in 1885. Two years later, Bly moved to New York City and began working for the *New York World*. In conjunction with one of her first assignments for the *World*, she spent several days on Blackwell's Island, posing as a mental patient for an exposé. In 1889, the paper sent her on a trip around the world in a record-setting 72 days. Bly died on January 27, 1922, at age 57, in New York City.

Nellie Bly Movie

Announced in late 2017, Lifetime is set to produce a thriller based on Nellie Bly's experience as an undercover reporter in a women's mental ward. [Christina Ricci](#) will star as Bly and *Transparent*'s [Judith Light](#) will play the role of head nurse.

In 2015, director Timothy Hines released *10 Days in a Madhouse*, which also depicts Bly's harrowing experience in the asylum.

Nellie Bly Books

'Six Months in Mexico'

During her early journalism career, Bly wrote *Six Months in Mexico* (1888), which describes her time as a foreign correspondent in Mexico in 1885. In it, she explores the country's people and customs, and even stumbles upon marijuana.

'Ten Days in a Mad-House'

Elizabeth Jane
Cochrane
Elizabeth
Cochrane

FULL NAME

Elizabeth Jane
Cochrane
Seaman

Working for [Joseph Pulitzer](#)'s *New York World*, Bly gained national fame for her undercover work as a patient in a women's mental asylum in New York City. Her report was compiled into a book, *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (1887), and led to lasting institutional reforms.

'Around the World in Seventy-Two Days'

Bly's celebrity reached an international level with her mission to travel around the world in 80 days, just as the character Phileas Fogg did in [Jules Verne](#)'s *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Bly accomplished her goal with days to spare, and, as with her experience in the asylum, her report became a book, *Around the World in Seventy-Two Days* (1890).

Early Struggles

Famed investigative journalist Nellie Bly was born Elizabeth Jane Cochran (she later added an "e" to the end of her name) on May 5, 1864, in Cochran's Mills, Pennsylvania. The town was founded by her father, Michael, who amply provided for his family by working as a judge and landowner.

The marriage was the second one for both Michael Cochran and Bly's mother, Mary Jane, who wed after the deaths of their first spouses. Michael had 10 children with his first wife and five more with Mary Jane, who had no prior children.

Bly suffered a tragic loss in 1870, at the age of 6, when her father died suddenly. Amid their grief, Michael Cochran's death presented a grave financial detriment to his family, as he left them without a will, and, thus, no legal claim to his estate.

Bly later enrolled at the Indiana Normal School, a small college in Indiana, Pennsylvania, where she studied to become a teacher. However, not long after beginning her courses there, financial constraints forced Bly to table her hopes for a higher education. After leaving the school, she moved with her mother to the nearby city of Pittsburgh, where they ran a boarding house together.

What Did Nellie Bly Accomplish?

Journalism With a Feminist Perspective

Bly's future began to look brighter in the early 1880s, when, at the age of 18, she submitted a racy response to an editorial piece that had been published in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*. In the piece, writer Erasmus Wilson (known to *Dispatch* readers as the "Quiet Observer," or Q.O.) claimed that women were best served by conducting domestic duties and called the working woman "a monstrosity." Bly crafted a fiery rebuttal that grabbed the attention of the paper's managing editor, George Madden, who, in turn, offered her a position.

In 1885, Bly began working as a reporter for the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* at a rate of \$5 per week. Taking on the pen name by which she's best known, after a Stephen Foster song, she sought to highlight the negative consequences of sexist ideologies and the importance of women's rights issues. She also became renowned for her investigative and undercover reporting, including posing as a sweatshop worker to expose poor working conditions faced by women.

However, Bly became increasingly limited in her work at the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* after her editors moved her to its women's page, and she aspired to find a more meaningful career.

Asylum Exposé

In 1887, Bly relocated to New York City and began working for the *New York World*, the publication that later became famously known for spearheading "yellow journalism." One of Bly's earliest assignments was to author a piece detailing the experiences endured by patients of the infamous mental institution on Blackwell's Island (now Roosevelt Island) in New York City. In an effort to accurately expose the conditions at the asylum, she pretended to be a mental patient in order to be committed to the facility, where she lived for 10 days.

Bly's exposé, published in the *World* soon after her return to reality, was a massive success. The piece shed light on a number of disturbing conditions at the facility, including neglect and physical abuse, and, along with spawning her book on the subject, ultimately spurred a large-scale investigation of the institution.

Led by New York Assistant District Attorney Vernon M. Davis, with Bly assisting, the asylum investigation resulted in significant changes in New York City's Department of Public Charities and Corrections (later split into separate agencies). These changes included a larger appropriation of funds for the care of mentally ill patients, additional physician appointments for stronger supervision of nurses and other healthcare workers, and regulations to prevent overcrowding and fire hazards at the city's medical facilities.

Bly followed her Blackwell's exposé with similar investigative work, including editorials detailing the improper treatment of individuals in New York jails and factories, corruption in the state legislature and other first-hand accounts of malfeasance. She also interviewed and wrote pieces on several prominent figures of the time, including [Emma Goldman](#) and [Susan B. Anthony](#).

Sailing Around the World

Bly went on to gain more fame in 1889, when she traveled around the world in an attempt to break the faux record of Phileas Fogg, the fictional title character of [Jules Verne](#)'s 1873 novel, *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

Given the green light to try the feat by the *New York World*, Bly embarked on her journey from Hoboken, New Jersey, in November 1889, traveling first by ship and later also via horse, rickshaw, sampan, burro and other vehicles. She completed the trip in 72 days, 6 hours, 11 minutes and 14 seconds—setting a real world record, despite her fictional inspiration for the undertaking. (Bly's record was beaten in 1890 by George Francis Train, who finished the trip in 67 days.)

Bolstered by continuous coverage in the *World*, Bly earned international stardom for her months-long stunt, and her fame continued to grow after she safely returned to her native state and her record-setting achievement was announced.

Marriage and Industrialist

In 1895, Bly married millionaire industrialist Robert Seaman, who was 40 years her senior, and she became legally known as Elizabeth Jane Cochrane Seaman. Also around this time, she retired from journalism, and by all accounts the couple enjoyed a happy marriage.

Upon her husband's death in 1904, Bly took the helm of his Iron Clad Manufacturing Co. During her time there, she began manufacturing the first practical 55-gallon steel oil drum, which evolved into the standard one used today. While in charge of the company, Bly put her social reforms into action and Iron Clad employees enjoyed several perks unheard of at the time, including fitness gyms, libraries and healthcare. Ultimately, the costs of these benefits began to mount and drain her inheritance.

Faced with such dwindling finances, Bly consequently reentered the newspaper industry. She began working for the *New York Evening Journal* in 1920 and reported on numerous events, including the growing women's suffrage movement.

When Did Nellie Bly Die?

Just two years after reviving her writing career, on January 27, 1922, Nellie Bly died from pneumonia in New York City. She was 57 years old.

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