



Photo by Lona on Unsplash

Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

***“...Nothing is impossible
if one applies a certain amount of
energy in the
right direction. If you want
to do it, you can do it.”***

Elizabeth Cochrane, aka Nellie Bly



Nellie Bly, age 26, by H. J. Myers

The Original Muckraker: Elizabeth Cochrane, aka Nellie Bly

In 1885 when twenty-year-old Elizabeth Cochrane read an essay in the local newspaper entitled, [*“What Girls are Good For.”*](#) little did she know that it would catapult her into a career as an investigative journalist. Upset by the writer’s argument that women should stay out of the workforce, were valuable only for having children and housekeeping, Cochrane wrote a ferocious rebuttal. The newspaper editor was so impressed by her prose, that he offered her a job.

Born May 5, 1864, near Pittsburgh, PA, Cochrane went on to become a widely respected journalist, best-selling novelist, and world traveler while bravely forging new careers for women. According to her biographer [Brooke Kroeger](#), Cochrane was the original muckraker and invented what was called “...stunt or detective reporting.” Her groundbreaking work proved that women had the brains and the ability to take on dangerous assignments, and she paved the way for other women to follow.

One of 15 children, Cochrane's father died when she was six-years-old, leaving the family impoverished. As a teen, she enrolled at what is now Indiana University of Pennsylvania, but had to drop out after one term because she couldn't pay the tuition. In 1880, she moved with her mother to Pittsburgh working odd jobs. Five years later, the [Pittsburgh Dispatch](#) ran the article that launched her career.

Cochrane's rebuttal, [The Girl Puzzle](#), argued that women needed educational and economic opportunities on par with boys and set the tone of her life-long activism for women's equality and her compassion for the working poor. In her second article, [Mad Marriages](#), she explored the effect of divorce on women and promoted changes to divorce laws. As it was customary at the time for women writers to use pseudonyms, Cochrane chose the pen name, [Nellie Bly](#), after a popular song by [Stephen Foster](#).



Nellie Bly, age 21 in Mexico. Photographer unknown.

Cochrane continued to expose gender inequities and wrote a series of articles about the harsh conditions faced by female factory workers. The paper received numerous complaints from factory owners, and Cochrane was reassigned to the society pages to write about domestic affairs such as fashion, child rearing, and homemaking.

But Cochrane had other ideas. She had [determined](#) "...to try by every means to make my mission of benefit to my suffering sisters." It wasn't long before she [moved](#) to Mexico. She was just 21. She spent six months reporting on the lives and cultural traditions of the Mexican people. Eventually, her stories were compiled into a book, [Six](#)

[Months in Mexico](#). However, when she criticized the Mexican government for imprisoning and silencing a local journalist for speaking out against the country's dictator, Cochrane was threatened with arrest and she returned to the U.S.

Broke and out of work, in 1887 she went to New York where she [talked](#) her way onto the staff of [Joseph Pulitzer's New York World](#) by accepting an assignment to expose the horrific treatment of patients at the [Women's Lunatic Asylum](#) on Blackwell's (now Roosevelt) Island. Even the process of being declared insane presented risks. To feign mental illness, she moved to a boarding house, then refused to sleep so that she could better assume the visage of a disturbed, wild-eyed woman. The police were called and Cochrane was escorted away to be examined by a police officer, a judge, and a doctor. Her ruse worked and she was sent to the asylum.

Ten days later, the newspaper had her released. Her stories shocked the public and she later published them as a book, [Ten Days in a Mad-House](#). Cochrane's articles uncovered horrific abuse and conditions, and prompted significant reform. It also secured her reputation as a first-rate investigative journalist. She became a celebrity and her status landed her interviews with notorious criminals, activists, and thought leaders including the serial killer, Lizzie Halliday, suffrage leader, Susan B. Anthony, feminist, Emma Goldman, and the socialist labor organizer Eugene Debs.

Cochrane's undercover techniques, and her factual yet compassionate style captivated

readers as she exposed the underbelly of political corruption, mistreatment of immigrants, and even the black market purchase and sale of babies.

In 1888, Cochrane was ready for change. A fan of the [Jules Verne](#) novel, [Around the World in 80 Days](#), she pitched her editor a bold idea: she would race against the book's fictional character, Phileas Fogg, by traveling around the world in a fewer number of days. Her proposal was met with skepticism, but one year later, she boarded a steam ship and began her 24,900-mile journey.

Her fame and following spread. *The World* organized contests such as asking readers to estimate her arrival times in various cities. Cochrane's journey took her to England, France, Egypt, and to multiple ports in Asia. Circumnavigating the globe in just 72 days, she [set](#) a world record and returned to a hero's welcome. Her travels were memorialized in postcards, posters, and the board game, *Round the World with Nellie Bly*.



Publicity Photo for Bly's *Around the World* tour

Back in the U.S. she turned her attention to novel writing and published 11 serial novels for the weekly, [New York Family Story Paper](#). She continued to write influential newspaper articles and she covered major events such as the march of [Jacob Coxey's Army on Washington, D.C.](#) and the [Pullman strike](#) in Chicago.

In 1895, at the age of 31, Cochrane married the millionaire manufacturer, Robert Seaman. When his health failed, she took over the business which made steel containers. He died in 1904 and Cochrane went onto [receive](#) patents for two inventions of her own design: a new type of milk can and a stacking garbage bin. For a brief time, she was a leading female industrialist, but ultimately, she was unsuited for the job. [According](#) to biographer Kroeger, "She ran her company as a model of social welfare, replete with health benefits and recreational facilities, but...was hopeless at understanding the financial aspects...and ultimately lost everything."



Returning to news reporting, she covered the Women's Suffrage Parade in Washington, D.C., in 1913 for the [New York Evening Journal](#). Titled, "Suffragists Are Men's Superiors," Cochrane correctly predicted that it would be another seven years (1920) before women won the vote. During World War I, she became the first woman and was among the first foreigners to report from the Eastern front. She also visited the war zone between Serbia and Austria where she was briefly mistaken for a British spy and arrested.

In early 1922 Cochrane contracted pneumonia. She [died](#) in New York City at the age of 57. Inducted into the [National Women's Hall of Fame](#) in 1998, and in 2002 she was [honored](#) with a U.S. postage stamp. In 2021, the [Nellie Bly Memorial Statue](#) was erected on Roosevelt Island. Since 1978, the New York Press Club has conferred its annual "[Nellie Bly Award](#)" to a distinguished cub reporter. Cochrane's life has also been memorialized in Broadway musicals, an opera, and in film, and she has been the subject

of several biographies and novels.

Note: Thank you, Tony for suggesting this story!

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Nellie Bly said, "Progress is not achieved in leaps and bounds, but in small, steady steps."

Ask a Friend: Do "small steady steps" bring about real change or is that an excuse to settle for less?

Ask Yourself: Do you agree or disagree? Why / why not?

Calling Salt Lake City Readers

I'll be joining journalist and author

[Stephanie Gorton](#) for a discussion of her

fabulous new book, [The Icon and the](#)

[Idealist](#), about the bitter rivalry between

Margaret Sanger and Mary Ware Dennett

for leadership of the reproductive rights

movement. Hosted by [The King's English](#)

[Bookshop](#), the event is **Saturday, Feb. 22, 2 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.**, at [Fisher Brewery](#)

downtown. It is free but requires a [ticket](#).



And...I'm honored to share that last November I was named [runner-up](#) in the General Fiction category of the [2024 Book Pipeline Unpublished Writing Contest](#) for my manuscript about Dennett. Fingers crossed that my novel finds a publisher this year.



[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, when she married one of Dennett's great-grandsons. Today, she curates the family's archives.

Sharon has spent twelve years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her essays about Dennett have appeared in [Ms.Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), and [New Hampshire Magazine](#).

Sharon is a popular speaker at women's and civic groups, and also book clubs. She is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. **Hint:** Women's History Month is March. [Schedule](#) a talk with your group!

Sharon lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs, Gus and Hank.