

# Nellie Bly's Gonzo Journalism Cloaked in Victoriana

By Maureen Corrigan

*Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist*, by Brooke Kroeger. Times Books, 631 pages, \$27.50.

When feminism first infiltrated academia in the heady 1970's, its primary mission was to dig up the life stories and works of Great Women who'd been plowed under by the patriarchal caretakers

**Book Review** of history. Zelda Fitzgerald, Ida Tarbell, Dorothy Day, Willa Cather, Sojourner

Truth and Louisa May Alcott are just some of the women whose reputations have been resurrected. These days, most feminist scholars have moved out of the traditional field of biography into hipper areas of study—*écriture féminine*, post-post structuralism, Camille Paglia-chromosomal determinism—partly because the conventional wisdom in academia has it that the really worthwhile forgotten women have already been recovered.

That's why Brooke Kroeger's biography of Nellie Bly comes as such a surprise. It's as though a team of archeologists, who thought they'd exhausted the discoveries in the Valley of the Tombs, remembered right before they sealed up their excavation tunnels that they'd forgotten to take out the sarcophagus of King Tut.

Whether or not you know about Nellie Bly largely depends upon whether you

were ever exposed to those doggedly inspirational biographies manufactured for juvenile readers. Bly's incredible life generated at least a score of them, but no doctoral dissertations, no adult biographies or movies-of-the-week. Yet this woman, upon her death in 1922, was eulogized in big block letters as THE BEST REPORTER IN AMERICA by *The New York Evening Journal* (for which she had worked).

This time, William Randolph Hearst's sensation sheet wasn't exaggerating. For nearly 40 years, Bly had been a star reporter for *The Journal* and its rival, *The New York World*, owned by Joseph Pulitzer. She covered the Pullman Strike of 1894 and was the first woman to report from the eastern front in World War I; she cajoled intimate interviews out of Susan B. Anthony, Emma Goldman, Jack Dempsey and Eugene V. Debs; and, almost single-handedly, she pioneered "stunt" journalism. Her most famous feat, in 1889, was circumnavigating the globe faster than Jules Verne's fictional traveler, Phineas Fogg. (Bly made it in 72 days.) And Bly's extracurricular activities included running her aged millionaire husband's iron factory, organizing out-of-work American seamen and finding homes for children of unwed mothers.

Only seven of Bly's letters have been preserved, so Ms. Kroeger, who has worked as a reporter and editor for U.P.I. and *New York Newsday*, spent months

squinting into microfilm machines at the thousands of first-person newspaper stories and interviews Bly produced. It was well worth the effort. *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist* is a triumph of investigative journalism. It not only fleshes out Bly's daredevil personality and thrilling career, but also offers readers a rough-and-tumble history of the development of modern journalism and a vivid picture of the popular culture of turn-of-the-century New York. Ms. Kroeger has restored Nellie Bly to her rightful place among American heroines.

Bly's life is a Horatio Alger story with corsets. She was born in 1864 in rural Pennsylvania and was her father's 13th child. Michael Cochran was a prosperous judge, but he never made provisions for Bly's mother, his second wife. When he died, the 6-year-old Bly (then known by her nickname, "Pink"), her mother and her siblings were left, as the Victorian novelists would say, in "distressed" circumstances. When she was a teenager, Pink moved to Pittsburgh with her mother and brothers and got The Big Break that changed her life.

In the winter of 1885, a columnist for *The Pittsburg Dispatch* wrote an essay that railed against women who wanted to work outside the home. When Pink wrote an angry letter to the editor pointing out that many poor girls like herself had to work

in order to eat, the managing editor was so taken that he offered her a job. Soon Pink, whom her editor rechristened "Nellie Bly" after a popular Stephen Foster song, was masquerading as a factory girl to write about the plight of Pittsburgh's working women. Not satisfied with the fashion and society stories she was as-

---

*William Randolph Hearst's sensation sheet wasn't exaggerating when it called Nellie Bly 'the best reporter in America.'*

---

signed, Bly paid her own way to Mexico—with mother in tow—to do political reporting. Because her editors kept assigning her feminine fluff, Bly didn't report to work one day and instead sent them a note: "I am off for New York. Look out for me. Bly."

The New York newspaper world she encountered was a nasty, backbiting, male-dominated arena. (So, what's new?) But Bly wangled her way into the office of the editor in chief of *The New York World*, at that time the most successful

newspaper in the country, and swiftly got one of her most famous assignments. Feigning insanity, she had herself committed to the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island. (The uplifting "Nellie Bly" biography I read as a girl made much of Bly's tender trust that her editors would rescue her.) After a 10-day stint, Bly published an exposé detailing the horrific treatment the Blackwell's patients endured.

Other stunts followed: She posed as a prospective maid to uncover shady practices in employment agencies; she pretended to be an unwed mother to roust a clandestine baby-trafficking ring. Ms. Kroeger writes that this socially conscious "stunt" reporting—which she describes as "gonzo journalism cloaked in Victoriana"—offered women reporters their only chance to escape from ladylike assignments. Bly's stories—brave, brazen, moving and quite narcissistic—were at their best when she gave her personal response to a situation. Here, for instance, is one of her dispatches during World War I, in which she describes an ugly incident in a camp near Budapest:

"A ragged bare-footed woman, with an old shawl wrapped around her head, stood watching our waiting train. Some of our party ... finally persuaded her to go to the cluster of houses in the valley way below and get them some chickens. She returned after the long trip with four young broilers—Pullets. She said they cost five kronen—one dollar. A man laid four kronen

on the ground and grabbed the chickens. The woman protested ... The man left her crying, took the chickens to the other side of the train and killed them."

Bly, ever the journalistic social worker, demanded the peasant woman be paid in full. The surly Hungarian soldiers complied and then turned their attention to the chickens. Bly tells her readers she dined that night on five biscuits because chickens did not agree with her under those circumstances. "At any rate," she concluded drily, "I was not invited to eat."

Bly's life, of course, was not simply a long string of successes. There was the strange, tumultuous marriage to industrialist Robert Livingston Seaman in 1895—Bly was 30, Seaman was just turning 70. (New York columnists speculated that the marriage was just another one of the reporter's notorious "fakements"). After Seaman's death, Bly was swindled out of millions of dollars by unscrupulous employees of the Brooklyn iron company her husband left her. And there was her final rift with her beloved octogenarian mother.

Bly proved that there were second, third and even fourth acts in American life. "If one would become great," she told readers in *The New York Evening Journal*, "two things are absolutely necessary. The first is to know yourself, the second is not to let the world know you." Thanks to Ms. Kroeger's stunning new biography, the world finally has a chance, if not to know her, certainly to know about her.