PHOTO OF NELLIE BLY EPHEMERA BY STARR OCHENGA FROM THE BOOK

Around the World in 72 Days

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NELLIE BLY
Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist
By Brooke Kroeger
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By Grace Lichtenstein

NELLIE BLY is a recognizable name on a tellingly meager list of early role models for female journalists. But what does anyone actually know about her? Very little. Until recently, if asked to name career heroes, many of us probably would have listed Brenda Starr before Bly or any other real-life predecessors.

Brooke Kroeger, a former United Press International reporter and editor, was inspired at the age of 10 by a juvenile biography of Bly. Yet when she sought a similar book for her own 10-year-old daughter, she discovered that no one had ever produced a full-scale adult biography of Bly, an indisputable pioneer in the years around the turn of the century. This prodigiously researched book is the result.

A tabloid star of the first magnitude, Bly, whose real name was Elizabeth Jane Cochran, gained fame as the leading "stunt girl" in an era when few bylines, let alone those of women, were well known by the American public. She was born in western Pennsylvania in 1864 and got her initial training in Pittsburgh. She burst onto the New York scene in 1887 at Joseph Pulitzer's World with a first-person expose of conditions at an insane asylum on Blackwell's (now Roosevelt) Island off Manhattan. Bly successfully posed as a demented immigrant to get herself committed for 10 full days before revealing the gruesome details.

Although the tactic of going undercover in order to get an inside scoop is no longer in favor, it served Bly and her successors very well. She followed with one sensational stunt after another, posing as, among other things, a domestic, an unwed mother and the wife of a manufacturer who was out to bribe a corrupt Albany lobbyist.

The stunt that assured Bly of tabloid immortality was her trip around the world in 72 days, undertaken in order to beat the voyage described in Jules Verne's novel. Her dispatches on route, including one describing her visit with Verne himself in France, set the stage for her triumphant return before cheering crowds at the train station in Jersey City and along Newspaper Row in New York.

Grace Lichtenstein, a former New York Times reporter, is the author of six books.

Wading almost article by article through the archives, Kroeger builds a case for Bly as more than just a plucky adventurer. She was also a talented interviewer who wrote revealing pieces, many of them exclusive, about leading figures of the period, from Susan B. Anthony to Emma Goldman to Jack Dempsey. She covered important events such as strikes and political conventions. And she managed to be in the right place at the right time—including Europe's Eastern front at the start of World War I.

In each case, Bly put her original stamp on her stories. "What set her apart was the force of her personality and the way she wove it without apology or humility into everything she wrote," notes Kroeger. Moreover, she was not just an observer; she was a crusader who believed that she could intervene positively in the affairs of the world.

Some of her ideas seem outlandish today, such as her proposal to recruit women as officers to lead male troops into battle during the Spanish American War. However, in the heyday of yellow journalism, she was apparently an ideal cheerleader. Indeed, Kroeger finds evidence of journalistic practices now scorned. Bly told a government committee she did not preserve her notes after publication of a story, and she allowed at least one interviewee, John Jacob Astor, to read her story about him before she submitted it to her editor. Perhaps these are among the reasons why Nellie Bly usually is not ranked in the pantheon of journalists.

IN ARGUING that Bly has not previously been given her due, Kroeger overlooks several key works, including *Great Women of the Press* by Madelon Golden Schlipp and Sharon Murphy and *A Place In the News* by Kay Mills, both of which give Bly prominent mention. Still, Kroeger makes an impressive case for this most famous stunt girl as a multidimensional feminist. Bly took long sabbaticals from reporting, in one instance to manage a factory inherited from her late husband. She instituted numerous reforms, including health and recreation benefits for its workers. In her final years, writing for the New York Journal, she took up the cause of abandoned, abused and missing children. Bly even became a "fairy godmother" to one young orphan girl. Not the least of Kroeger's accomplishments was tracking down this now-elderly woman and recording her reminiscences.

Though awfully long, *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist* is the saga of a woman who helped write an exceptionally colorful chapter in American newspaper history. It's fun finally getting to know her.