

Isabelle Breier: NELLIE BLY

“Energy rightly applied and directed will accomplish anything.”

This statement, which was Nellie Bly’s motto, represents the essence of the American spirit. Bly, a strong and independent woman, is best remembered as an early investigative journalist who used her energy to highlight social issues. Full of fire and courage, she fought for people from all walks of life, paying particular attention to the discrimination of women. Later in her career, Bly contributed to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution by eloquently and passionately writing about the women’s suffrage movement.

Nellie Bly was born Elizabeth Jane Cochran in Pennsylvania on May 5, 1864. (Nellie Bly was the pseudonym that she chose at the beginning of her writing career in 1885; it is the main character of a then-popular song by Stephen Foster.) Her career began with a letter to the editor of the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* challenging an article which advocated against education and careers for women. Impressed by her outrage and skilled writing, the editor invited her to write an article in rebuttal and hired her soon thereafter.

In the spirit of the Founding Fathers of our country, she sought to “promote the general Welfare” and “secure the Blessings of Liberty” all throughout her career. A bold pioneer, she was one of the first reporters to go undercover and reveal corruption in society. She discussed a wide breadth of topics in her articles, including the poor conditions in tenements, factories, sweatshops, jails, and insane asylums. She often applied for jobs or took other measures to uncover and experience firsthand the injustices of these institutions. One of the most famous examples of this undercover journalism was when, in 1887, she convinced doctors and judges that she was insane in order to be committed to the Women’s Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell’s Island. She then detailed the inedible food, abusive and inhumane treatment, and the falsely committed sane inmates she found. Her writings prompted reform in the asylum and established her as a leading journalist and champion of the truth.

Bly was a woman who had no shortage of gumption. She became famous internationally when she traveled around the world in seventy-two days, six hours, eleven minutes, and fourteen seconds. She later became America’s first female war correspondent during World War I.

A lifelong supporter of women, she proclaimed in her column, “Let us all hope to promote the cause of woman suffrage.” She covered a women’s rights convention in 1896 and later interviewed Susan B. Anthony, singing her praises as “all that is best and noblest in woman.” Undoubtedly because of her efforts, as well as the efforts of many other women, the Nineteenth Amendment was passed in 1920.

Nellie Bly’s passion to reform was admirable, representing her very core. She wrote, “I have never written a word that did not come from my heart. I never shall.” The consummate “can-do” American, who dedicated her career to forming “a more perfect Union,” is an inspiration to us all.

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