

# Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



Surprise!! The famous Nellie Bly had a now-forgotten travel competitor. See "Nellie Bly vs. Elizabeth Bisland: The Race Around the World," p. 2. © Corbis and © Getty Images.

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## Nellie Bly vs. Elizabeth Bisland: The Race Around the World

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### Blackwell's Almanac

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Island Historical Society

*You probably know that Nellie Bly was the intrepid woman journalist who went undercover into the notorious Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum and later traveled around the world in a record-making 72 days. (See Blackwell's Almanac, Vol. II, No. 3, 2016, at [rihs.us](http://rihs.us).) What you almost certainly do not know is that another young lady departed the very same day in competition with her.*

*Author Matthew Goodman recounted this exciting story at February's Roosevelt Island Historical Society library lecture. Based on his incredibly well-researched book, *Eighty Days:**

*Nellie Bly and Elizabeth Bisland's History-Making Race Around the World, Goodman painted an intimate portrait of the two women who vied to outrun the 80-day 'round-the-world journey imagined by Jules Verne.*

By 1889, when Bly embarked on her circumnavigation of the globe, she had already demonstrated her utter fearlessness. Investigating and writing hugely popular exposés of society's ills for Joseph Pulitzer's *The World*, she feigned insanity to get committed to the Lunatic Asylum; worked for pennies to reveal the abuse of workers in a paper-box factory; sought employment as a servant for similar ends; went for treatment in a medical dispensary for the poor, where she narrowly escaped having her tonsils removed; and even bought a baby to expose New York's white slave trade.

So, it was hardly out of character when she proposed to the newspaper's business manager that she undertake a journey, unescorted and speaking only English, to beat the fictional character Phileas Fogg's 80-day feat. The proposal was met with disapproval and denial. It was an era when a woman traveling alone was unheard of. According to Goodman, even sending a woman reporter by herself across the city was considered dangerous. Moreover, everyone knew that "a woman could not travel without taking along innumerable steamer trunks."

A year later, however, *The World's* circulation had begun to decline. Management was looking for a quick injection of publicity... and Bly was given the go-ahead. At 9:40 am, November 14, 1889, she would depart from Hoboken and head east across the Atlantic Ocean. Anticipated travel time: 75 days.



*Nellie Bly. Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org.*

### The Other Woman

Elizabeth Bisland worked for *The Cosmopolitan*, a well-respected arts publication, where she was literary editor. Soft-spoken and refined, she would hardly



Elizabeth Bisland. Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org.

have found the notion of slogging via ship, train and rickshaw over some 25,000 miles attractive.

Nevertheless, her publisher, serial entrepreneur John Brisben Walker, learning that very morning of Bly's adventure, realized two things: 1) the

enormous and protracted publicity that would accompany such an undertaking, and 2) the wrong-headedness of the direction Bly had chosen. Having lived in China as an advisor to the Chinese military, he knew that the prevailing winds at that time of year blew across the China Sea from the northeast, conferring advantage to a traveler going west rather than east.

The minute he reached his office he summoned Bisland and informed her she would be setting out that evening (it was now 11:00 am) for San Francisco and then proceed from there around the globe—with the goal, moreover, of doing it faster than her rival from *The World*.

The young lady absolutely did not want to go, the author stated. She despised the idea of publicity and fame. What's more, she was entertaining some friends at her home the following evening. It was only after fierce cajoling, the promise of a handsome salary, and possibly the threat of termination that she agreed. And so, at 6:00 pm, more than eight hours after Bly's start, Bisland set out westward on the New York Central railroad.

### A Study in Contrasts

The two women might have seemed similar in certain ways. Both were attractive, young—Bly 25, Bisland 28—and had grown up in financially strained circumstances. Both had started out writing on the women's pages of their hometown newspapers. Both were early feminists, Goodman noted, who ultimately balked at fashion, cooking, child-rearing and society reporting, described by some contemporaries as "prostitution of the soul." And so, both had come to New York City, from Pittsburgh and New Orleans respectively, to work as journalists—pioneers in a male-dominated profession. But, there the similarities ended.

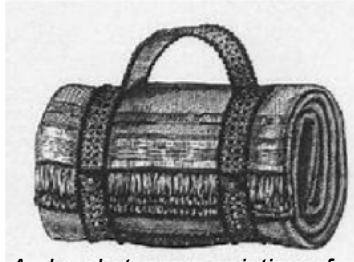
Bly, hailing from Pennsylvania's coal country and her widowed mother's rooming house, was an ambitious, scrappy and audacious reporter, willing to risk personal safety in pursuit of the most sensational stories. By contrast, Bisland was thoughtful, genteel, studious. She had grown up in a Louisiana plantation family ruined by the Civil War. A lover of literature, she had taught herself to read from tattered, burned copies of Shakespeare and Cervantes that she found in her grandfather's library. She had taught herself French, while churning butter, so that she could read Rousseau in the original.

Bly was a regular at O'Rourke's saloon on the Bowery. Bisland hosted tea parties in her apartment for New York's literary set.

Although Bly was unaware she had a rival contestant until far into her travels, she had always viewed her idea as a race, a heart-pounding trial against time and Phileas Fogg. Thus, she was always preoccupied with schedules and deadlines, constantly urging ships' captains to go faster. Bisland, on the other hand, saw the trip as an opportunity to see the world; in her chronicle of the journey, she always referred to it as just that, never as a "race."

Bly realized that cumbersome baggage would not just weigh her down, it would slow her down—checking steamer trunks, looking after wayward bags. So giving the lie to the feminine stereotype, she carried just a single bag, a leather grip sack measuring at its

bottom 7 inches by 16 inches, into which she fit everything she would need for three months. Aside from the blue dress and checked coat that constituted her traveling outfit, she packed: a silk bodice, three veils, a pair of slippers, a set of toiletries, an inkstand, pens, pencils, paper, pins, needles and thread, a dressing gown, a tennis blazer, a flask and drinking cup, several changes of underwear, handkerchiefs, and a jar of cold cream.



*A shawl strap, consisting of straps attached to a handle, compactly carried a shawl or steamer rug.*

Possibly more given to fashion than Bly, Bisland filled a steamer trunk, a Gladstone valise, and a shawl strap that she could sling over her shoulder. In addition to her travel outfit of a black dress and stylish coat, and more or less duplicating Bly's basics, Bisland also took two cloth dresses, a half dozen light bodices, a silk dress for evening wear, shoes, gloves, a nightdress, a supply of books, a heavy wool overcoat, a travel rug, rubber overshoes and an umbrella.

A final contrast was soon to develop during their travels: the ladies' differing opinions of Britain and the British. This becomes patently obvious in Goodman's book, which details almost every event and nuance of Bly's and Bisland's experience.

### **En Route** Eastward with

Bly:  
(11/14–  
11/25/1889)  
Passage on  
the Hamburg-  
American  
Line's  
steamship  
Augusta  
Victoria across  
the Atlantic to  
Southampton,  
England, was  
notable for two  
things: Bly's  
induction into



*The steamship Augusta Victoria, Bly's transport across the Atlantic Ocean. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, No. LC-D4-22337.*

the seafarers' club—she was desperately seasick for quite a few days until her body finally surrendered to the strange motion of the water; and her introduction to the vagaries of maritime schedules—bad weather delayed the ship by some 16 hours, putting her connection to the mail train to Brindisi, Italy, in jeopardy. Upon docking, she was informed that Jules Verne had requested to meet her. By forfeiting several nights' sleep, she was able to follow an improvised schedule on two trains and a ferry across the English Channel to Boulogne, another train to Amiens, France, a short stay with the august author and his wife, then trains to Calais and Brindisi.

(11/25–12/10) Next was the steamer *Victoria* of the Peninsula and Oriental (P&O) Line, which would take Bly across the Mediterranean, through the Suez Canal to the Red Sea and across the Arabian Sea as far as Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka). This leg of the trip yielded several proposals of marriage—she was rumored to be an heiress, and an incipient dislike of the English. Her route around the world was taking her largely through lands controlled by or part of the British Empire. Although she admired the Brits' love of Queen and country, she resented the warships that safeguarded their theft of almost all the world's desirable seaports, and condemned the many arrogant

Englishmen who thought themselves expert on countries (like America) where they had spent only a day or two. She also objected to the English insensitivity to their surroundings; they were blind to the visual and cultural

differences of the countries they passed through since the perquisites of empire allowed them to eat British food, travel in British conveyances, sleep in British hotels, pay with English currency and speak no language other than English.

(12/10–12/13) Though Ceylon was a literal Garden of Eden, it had its serpent: a scheduling delay of three days while Bly's next P&O steamer, the *Oriental*, waited for connecting passengers and mail from another ship before departing. Anxiety! Catastrophe! She would probably miss her connection in Hong Kong, lengthening her estimated travel time to at least 81 days!

(12/13–12/23) Across the Bay of Bengal, through the Straits of Malacca to Singapore, across the South China Sea to Hong Kong: Tides were problematic and a monsoon sent the ship bucking like a bronco (by now veteran sailor Bly was unaffected). Yet miracle of miracles, the *Oriental* covered the 3,500 miles in a record-breaking 10 days, not only making up the three-day loss, but arriving two days ahead of schedule. However, Bly's elation was short-lived. At the Occidental and Oriental (O&O) Steamship Company offices, she first finds out she has a rival who, moreover, is ahead of her. And, she is told, she will be stuck five days in Hong Kong, plus another five days in Yokohama, Japan. Devastated, she is still determined to find a way to win.

(12/23–12/31) On the riverboat *Powan*, Bly killed time going up the Pearl River to Canton (now Guangzhou), China, spent Christmas touring the city via sedan chair, returned to Hong Kong and spent New Year's Eve aboard the O&O's *Oceanic*, crossing the East China Sea. The sight in Canton of an American flag flying over our consulate reinforced her growing sense of patriotism and added to her grievances against the English. She felt anger at the many insults she had endured from British fellow-travelers who seemed to regard the U.S. as an embarrassing younger brother, lacking in education or culture. We don't know, but she might also have reviled the nation for the scenes she saw of human depredation caused by opium, a drug the British had

fought a war to force upon the Chinese.

(1/7–1/21/1890) Leaving Yokohama, Japan, behind and continuing on the *Oceanic*, Bly had every reason to expect an arrival in San Francisco two days ahead of schedule. The ship had recently recorded the fastest time ever eastbound across the Pacific, 13 days, 14 hours. Then four days of unprecedented head winds and torrential rains prompted an agony of uncertainty. Bly relentlessly urged the ship's engineer to make more speed. In the end, the ship arrived only a day later than predicted, still one day ahead of schedule; Bly was easily on track to make her targeted 75 days, if not 73.

#### Westward with Bisland:

(11/14–11/19/1889) Bisland made it across the continent in less than five days—first on the opulent Fast Western Express of the New York Central Railroad to Chicago, transferring to an Omaha-bound train on the Rock Island Railroad, then connecting to the Union Pacific Line terminating in Oakland and a ferry to San Francisco. The Union Pacific leg featured a new, fast mail train hell bent on cutting 10 hours off the New York–San Francisco run in order to win a \$750,000 mail contract from the U.S. government. Near the Utah border heading into the Wasatch mountain range, it was considerably behind schedule. There the train took on a new, more powerful locomotive and a fearless “mountain engineer” named Cyclone Bill, who proceeded to careen up and down the



*Bisland's westbound New York Central train departed from Grand Central Depot (precursor to today's Grand Central Terminal). Picture Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.*

mountains and around crooks and curves, sometimes with only one set of wheels on the track, at a stomach-lurching average speed of over 60 miles an hour. He made up the time, a fitting, but death-defying start to Bisland's trip.

(11/19–12/8) After 48 hours in San Francisco and a calculation that her voyage would take 73 days, Bisland headed across the Pacific to Yokohama, Japan, on the *Oceanic*, the very same ship Bly would travel on in the opposite direction. She stared up at the fluttering Union Jack and, no doubt influenced by her literary tastes, was "thrilled to feel herself, for a time, under English rule." Indeed, her cultured aura was not lost on reporters. While Bly was considered a coarse muckraker, newspaper stories about Bisland seemed to land on the Society pages. Nevertheless, no amount of refinement could mitigate the effects of the racking storms that ensued; like Bly, Bisland, too, was desperately seasick, in addition to suffering images of a watery death.

(12/8–12/10) Bisland arrived in Yokohama three days ahead of schedule and was captivated by the city's quaint rickshaws, jewel-like temples and tombs, serene countryside and silk fabrics so magnificent she could not resist having them made into several gowns. She dubbed it a land of "porcelain and poetry, where even the most commonplace things were beautiful."

(12/10–12/18) Continuing on the *Oceanic* across the East China Sea to Hong Kong, Bisland experienced the sophisticated island as a "little piece of England" and marveled at the power of England to tame the world's exotics; she so looked forward to seeing the

mother country, the "fortress" land she had first imagined reading Coleridge and Wordsworth in her grandfather's ruined library. In the midst of these admiring thoughts, disaster struck: the very fast Norddeutscher Lloyd steamship *Prussian*, scheduled to take Bisland all the way to Genoa, Italy, broke a screw. The best alternative was the P&O's *Thames* to Ceylon (slower, but leaving Hong Kong three days earlier than the *Prussian*), then the same company's *Britannia* supposedly to Le Havre.



Hong Kong waterfront. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, No. LC-USZ62-98424.

(12/18–1/1/1890) On its way to Singapore and Ceylon, the *Thames* plied the South China Sea. Somewhere in the water's vastness, in the third week of December, the two voyagers passed each other unbeknownst to either one of them.

(1/1–1/16) Sailing the *Britannia* across the Arabian Sea to Aden, Yemen, up the Red Sea

to the Suez Canal, and across the Mediterranean, Bisland docked in Brindisi, Italy, with a change in plans: the India mail train could get her to a Paris suburb, shaving days off the original schedule. She could then connect with the French Line's steamship *La Champagne* in Le Havre to arrive in New York on January 26, 73 days from her start.

(1/16–1/19) Although the mail train was behind schedule, *La Champagne* was going to wait for her. But misinformation from a travel agent—whether innocent or deliberate has never been determined—caused Bisland to revise her itinerary yet again. She detrained at Calais, caught a ferry across the Channel and a train to London. The sight of England filled her "with a passion of pride that I, too, am an Anglo-Saxon," and awe at being on the "mother soil." Sadly, her

admiring thoughts were again dashed by the moment's developments. The fast steamer she was supposed to board in Le Havre had been withdrawn from the schedule; now she had to train to Wales and cross the always turbulent Irish Sea to Queenstown, Ireland, where the only ship available to her was the Cunard's slowest vessel, the *Bothnia*.

**The Home Stretch**

Eastward with Bly:

(1/21–1/25) A four- or five-day railroad trip cross-country was all that remained. Simple...except that a massive blizzard had dumped seven to 15 feet of snow through much of the American West and shut down all rail traffic for the immediate future. Despair! But *The World*, sparing no expense, had already chartered a special train that would take a circuitous southern route through California to Mojave, Albuquerque, Colorado, then Kansas City to Chicago with a "regardless order," giving it priority over every other train. Finally, the Pennsylvania Railroad would bring Bly to Jersey City. At every stop along the way, bands played and throngs of well-wishers—including dignitaries and celebrities—jockeyed to see and cheer the young heroine. Local newspapers wrote paeans to Bly's pluck and success, and a congratulatory note arrived from Jules Verne. In Jersey City, amidst pushing and pandemonium, Bly stepped from the train after a journey of 72 days, 6 hours, 11 minutes and 14 seconds.

Westward with Bisland:

(1/19–1/30) The weather along the transatlantic steamship routes that January was terrifying: hurricane-force winds, plummeting temperatures, blanketing ice storms, an ocean "like a boiling cauldron." Vessels were severely damaged and fatalities were not unknown. At one point, the *Bothnia* was lost at sea, no one knew where. Bisland, meanwhile, was for most of the crossing ill and shivering with cold. In the end, the ship's veteran captain pulled it through. The *Bothnia* entered New York harbor and docked on the West Side of Manhattan. There was a crowd, but it numbered only in the hundreds versus Bly's reception of thousands. Bisland had accomplished a stunning feat—around the

world in 76 days, 16 hours and 48 minutes, but through a bit of bad luck, finished only second best.



The "Guessing Match" coupon could only be gotten by buying a copy of *The World*. Milstein Division of U.S. History, Local History & Genealogy, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

**Epilogue**

Having instituted the Nellie Bly Guessing Match, a reader contest to predict the exact time of Bly's return, *The World* received some 600,000 ballots and enjoyed unprecedented readership and publicity. Bly,

in turn, reveled in the attention and celebrity and, aside from writing a series of articles about her trip, soon embarked on a 40-city lecture tour. Bisland, too, reported on her experience. Yet she was fairly soon forgotten and was quite happy to resume a quiet, literary life.

It's worth noting that Bly's hostility to the English would persist to the very end of her life. Elizabeth Bisland, on the other hand, had become good friends with fellow traveler Lady Broome. Visiting England the following summer as Lord and Lady Broome's house guest, she was given entrée to the best

English society, meeting such luminaries as the Prince of Wales and Rudyard Kipling. Later in life, she and her husband lived for several years in England.

*Eighty Days* would be notable alone for its plot suspense and rich descriptions of exotic lands. But it is about a lot more than just the two ladies' journeys. Goodman's digressions provide a fascinating insight into 19<sup>th</sup>-century life, industry, technological advances, customs and attitudes around the globe, particularly as manifested in the far-flung British Empire. A great read and a great adventure for these physically restrictive times.

From the RIHS Archive:  
NY Times Ad, 1976

**Where do you find a scenic, spacious, secure Manhattan neighborhood for your family?**

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All overlooking the East River and Manhattan's skyline. All within a stone's throw of Manhattan's cultural, business and entertainment centers.

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When you get here, you'll find beautiful apartments that take full advantage of their island location.

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**Westview and Island House, outstanding rental apartments at less than Manhattan rents.** 1 bedroom, \$443 to \$481. 2 bedrooms, \$500 to \$579. 3 bedrooms \$660 to \$795. 3 bedroom duplexes \$660 to \$587. All utilities included.

**Rivercross, Manhattan's only cooperatives with a 5-year buy-back plan.** For example, a 2-bedroom apartment (212E) has a cash purchase price of \$17,397.98, with estimated monthly maintenance charges of \$675.44, of which approximately \$398.01 is tax deductible. All utilities included.

**Over 99% rented.** There is room for just 2,000 families in all in this truly unique urban setting. And over 1,000 families have already decided to live here. Take your place in this scenic, spacious, secure Manhattan neighborhood. Visit us today.



## RI Inspires the Visual Arts: Tom Otterness's "The Marriage of Money and Real Estate"

You've walked by it numerous times: Otterness's sculpture trilogy consisting of: 1) a clawing lobster trying to merge with a house that doesn't seem too happy about the prospect; 2) a coin, engraved with E Pluribus Unum, being pulled into the water by some demonic creature; and 3) in the center, the coin and house married and joyful in our capitalist world.

Kansas-born, DUMBO-based Tom Otterness is



Otterness "hot spot." A landmark show was a collection of 25 of his stylized bronze figures displayed in 2004–2005 on the Broadway median from 60<sup>th</sup> Street (Columbus Circle) all the way up to 168<sup>th</sup> St. (Washington Heights). Including "The Marriage of Money and Real Estate," the exhibition explored the range of human experience, from grand ambition to human weakness, from myth to popular culture—all presented as humorous commentary.



one of this country's most prolific public artists, and it's certainly no coincidence that "The Marriage of Money and Real Estate" sits in the East River between two notable residential neighborhoods: Roosevelt Island and Manhattan's Upper East Side. Although his work seems cartoonish and playful, it is also known to be political. The sculpture's installation here in 1996 was no doubt intended to make a statement about the invincible power of that capitalist combination.

Otterness has exhibited (and made pointed statements) extensively in the U.S. and abroad. But New York City appears to be an

Other sites that are or have been populated by the sculptor's iconic people: the entrance canopy of the Hilton Times Square ("Time and Money"), Battery Park City ("The Real World") and, one of the most popular, the 14<sup>th</sup> Street–8<sup>th</sup> Avenue subway station ("Life Underground"), consisting of over 100 bronze sculptures scattered throughout the station's platforms and stairways. Among them are a woman carrying a large subway token under

her arm; a stylishly dressed fare-beater crawling under a metal gate; a homeless person being roused by the police; two figures on either end of a saw about to saw through an I-beam supporting a stairway.



Credit; [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com).

Otterness has also dabbled in film and balloon sculpture for Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. His work appears in other sites around the city, as well as in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Dear Friends,

### **Our Calendar**

We have not had a normal spring. I cannot tell you if and when we will have programming at our new NYPL branch. We are in touch with manager Carlos Chavez and peer into the windows of the almost finished branch. We also pray for the end of the Covid lockdown. Watch your email for further information.

### **Our Quarantine Contribution**

During the pandemic we have been digging through the RIHS archives and discovering all kinds of topics to write about. As of May 1, we have published 41 issues of FROM OUR ARCHIVES—one each weekday and one for the weekend since March 18th. We have covered every imaginable topic of island history from art and artists to the hospitals, the residential buildings and the people who lived and worked here. One of our more popular issues was the one recalling Roosevelt Island's early days in the late 1970s. The one featuring the island in art had wonderful images.

These installments are not meant to be encyclopedic, with masses of text. If you are interested, we can always refer you to sources for more details.

We are doing this with the help of Bobbie Slonevsky, Melanie Colter and Deborah Dorff. After a shaky start with Mail Chimp, it is getting easier to put an edition out.

Melanie was a great teacher and editor who gave me confidence to do this. Every evening we email the next issue to Deborah Dorff in Austin, Texas, where she prepares the issue to be seen on [www.rihs.us](http://www.rihs.us). At some point in the evening, I push the magic button for the issue to be sent to 700+ subscribers at 6:15 a.m. (We get to your house before the NY Times).

Planning the issues leads down a path of: What images can we find? What online research can we use? and What is fun and interesting? You will note that we are emphasizing positive stories to keep us away from the current world for a few hours a day.

If you have suggestions, just email me.

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