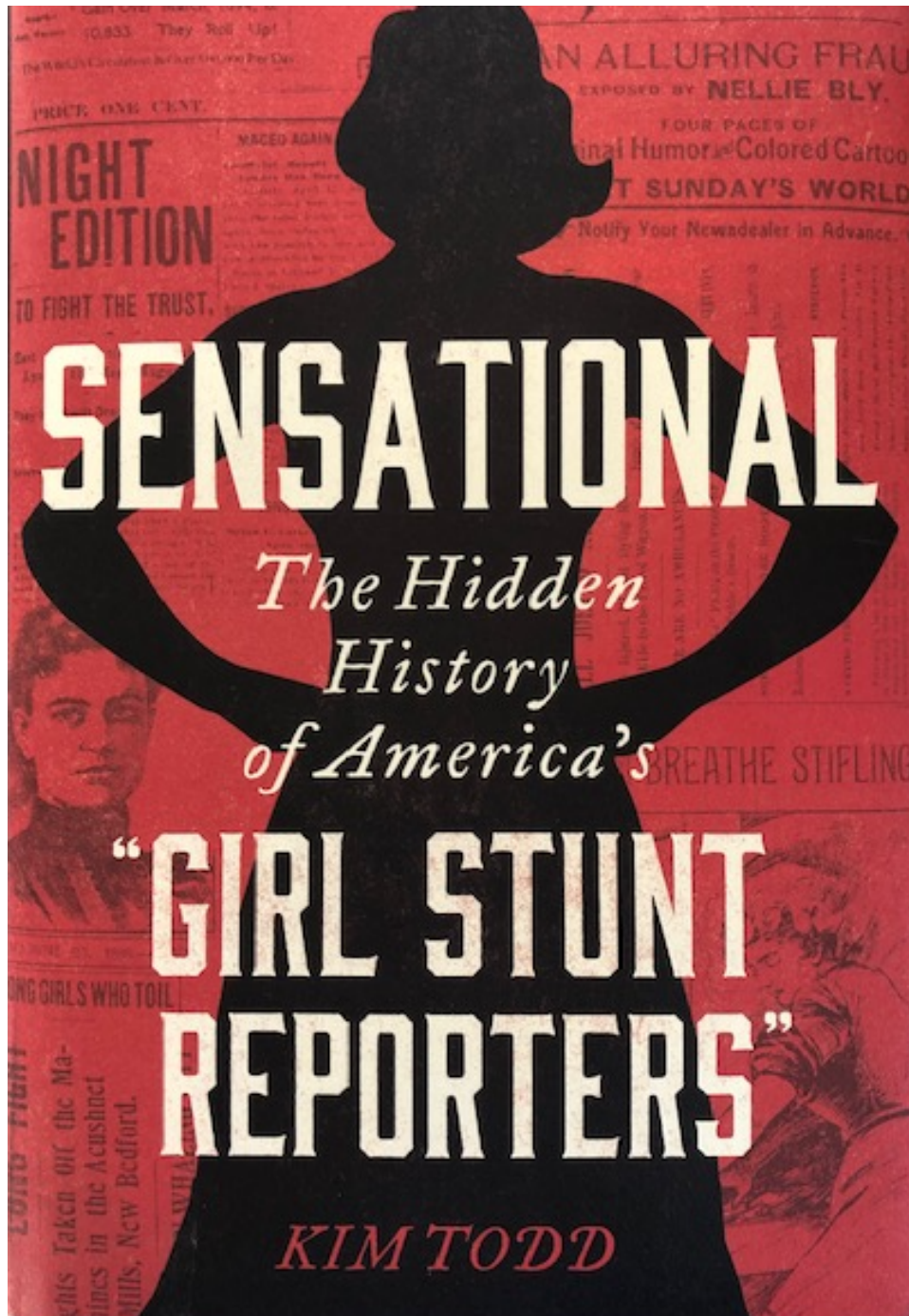


Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



A new book celebrating the 19th century undercover women journalists who exposed society's ills and prefigured contemporary "creative non-fiction." See America's Girl "Stunt" Reporters, p. 2.

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Blackwell’s Almanac

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America’s Girl “Stunt” Reporters

On September 21, 2021, Kim Todd, award-winning author and associate professor in the creative writing program at the University of Minnesota, spoke to Roosevelt Islanders about a seminal development in journalism. Based on the speaker’s new book, Sensational: The Hidden History of America’s “Girl Stunt Reporters,” her talk was part of the continuing lecture series hosted by the Roosevelt Island Historical Society and our local branch of the New York Public Library. It took place simultaneously in person at the library and on Zoom.

Most Roosevelt Islanders know about Nellie Bly. At a time when women were largely relegated to home-making and child-rearing, were often denied education, and were generally thought to be “delicate flowers,” the intrepid young Bly feigned mental illness to infiltrate the notorious Blackwell’s Island Lunatic Asylum. The result of that 1887 “stunt” was not just her famous exposé of the institution’s horrors... nor even just city authorities’ efforts at reform. According to speaker Todd, it also became the trigger for a completely new kind of journalism—young women going undercover to investigate and unveil society’s ills.

Nationwide, newspaper publishers were galvanized by the fame and soaring circulation Bly’s reporting brought to Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*. At the same time, young women readers, from East Coast to West, saw an opportunity to break out of the boredom of home or the drudgery of menial labor. Through the late 1880s and 1890s, they were hired to sneak into sweatshops, penetrate corrupt adoption agencies and fake their way into abusive public hospitals. In the



The first in Bly’s two-part series on her experiences incarcerated for 10 days in the women’s lunatic asylum on Blackwell’s Island.

end, Todd explained, these daring reporters “changed laws, launched labor movements and redefined what it meant to be a journalist.”

A Forbidden Subject Surfaces

In 1888, a timid-looking young woman sat in a Chicago doctor’s office while her companion communicated to the physician the delicate nature of the girl’s problem. After a few questions, the doctor wrote the patient a prescription for ergot, a substance thought to induce premature labor.

The woman never filled the prescription or took the drug. Instead she visited more than 200 other doctors, always presenting the same scenario. Many agreed to do or induce an abortion, although it was illegal. Many others refused, but referred her to someone who would. Some were sympathetic to her plight, some utterly dismissive. What the young lady learned was that abortion was widely available across the city and respectable, upper-class women were as likely to seek the procedure as poor ones.

When the “Girl Reporter’s” month-long exposé on abortion lit up the *Chicago Times*, “the city editor quit in disgust,” the speaker related, while “letters of praise and outrage flooded the news desk.” The reporter’s message was mixed, for while she personally seemed to condemn the practice, she also provided explicit how-to instructions. A furious controversy ensued. And although there was no concrete outcome (except, perhaps, the newspaper’s increasing readership), the exposé

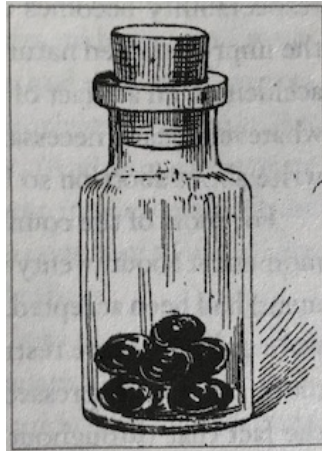


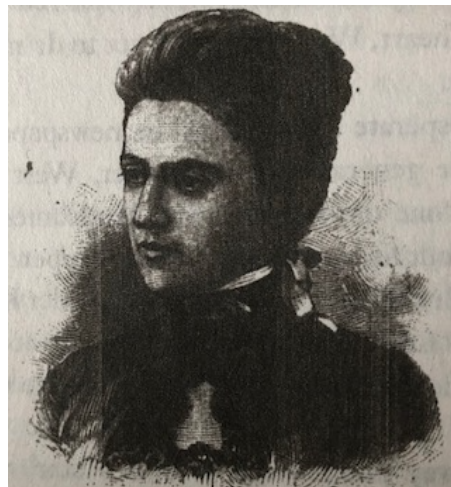
Illustration of medicine prescribed for the Girl Reporter as it appeared in the Chicago Times, December 18, 1888. Credit: Center for Research Libraries, Chicago.

began the conversation, still continuing today, about women’s bodies, women’s rights and the power imbalance between the sexes.

City Slaves

The identity of “Girl Reporter” was never revealed, somewhat atypical for the period. For like Nellie Bly, many of these crusading girls became famous in their own right. Atop the articles they wrote, their names—or, more likely, pseudonyms—were emblazoned in the headline or subhead because celebrity “sold.” And that celebrity was earned, not only by the sensational nature of their subject matter, but also by the personality of their writing. They described scenes, they developed characters, they incorporated dialog. It was non-fiction, Todd pointed out, that read like a novel.

One such riveting wordsmith was Helen Cusack, or Nell Nelson, as she became known. A school teacher, Nelson was also an experienced journalist. Her detailed, first-person perspective, her wisecracking, often caustic style melded perfectly with stunt reporting. And she wrote explosive pieces (also for the *Chicago Times*) on the cruelties of child labor, the hideous factory conditions in which women worked, the sexual molestation they suffered, and how they were pauperized by society.



Portrait of Nell Nelson as it appeared in The Journalist, 1-26-1889. Credit: University of Minnesota Libraries.

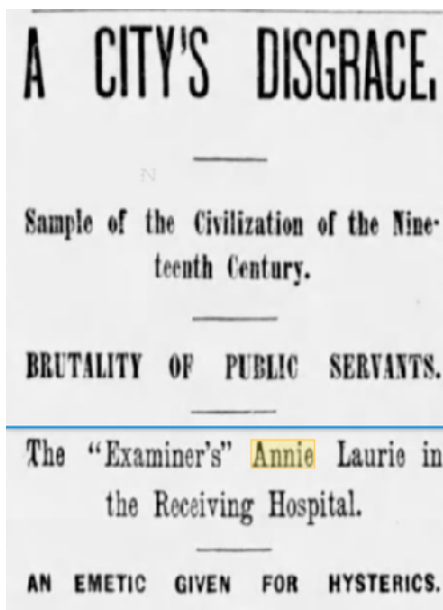
Among the grievous offenders condemned in her series “City Slave Girls” was the Western Lace Manufacturing Company. Its contract for piece-workers required their upfront payment of \$2 for “crocheting lessons” and \$1 as a security deposit. One employee reported making about 60¢ a week, but having to pay 10¢ each way in streetcar fare. Most made no more than 20¢ a week and many quit the unprofitable

labor, thus sacrificing their initial investment before making it back. Given the lax market for lace at the time, it was clear the company was actually making much of its money off its employees.

Nelson eventually moved to New York, where she joined the *World* and worked in competition with Nellie Bly. But her legacy lay in Chicago. Author Todd writes that Nelson's undercover reportage spurred formation of the influential Illinois Women's Alliance. Eventually the organization's lobbying efforts triumphed with passage of an Illinois law (unfortunately, short-lived) limiting women to an eight-hour workday and restricting child labor.

Treatment vs. Mistreatment

When ex- (not very successful) actress Winnifred Sweet arrived in San Francisco in 1889, the wildly imaginative and hard-charging William Randolph Hearst had just taken over management of the *San Francisco Examiner* from his father. In it, the forceful young lady found a home. Her first stunt assignment involved the City Receiving Hospital, about which there were many ugly, though uncorroborated, rumors.



Headline and decks of Annie Laurie's article, *San Francisco Examiner*, January 19, 1890.

As Todd described, Sweet donned shabby clothing, then weaved through the downtown crowds pretending to be weak and ill, the ruse enhanced by belladonna-caused dilation of her pupils. When she feigned collapse, a police wagon carried her to the hospital, where the unimaginable became real. Deciding she might have been poisoned, a medical student tried to make her drink hot mustard water to induce vomiting. Though she resisted, the staff ignored her objections. They held her nose, jerked her head back and poured some of the liquid down her throat as she retched and writhed. A Dr. Harrison, assistant police surgeon, recommended a good thrashing to make her comply. He then gripped her head violently, and scraped the skin off her shoulder as he threw her down onto a cot. "If she makes any fuss, strap her down," he added.

"A City's Disgrace," written under the pseudonym Annie Laurie, detailed in no uncertain terms the mistreatment of defenseless female patients at the hands of abusive male physicians. But Dr. Harrison outdid himself when subsequently interviewed. The diagnosis was hysteria, he claimed, and hot mustard and water, "a good strong cathartic, or injection of spirits of turpentine...anything to give her something else to think about" was the proper treatment. He even suggested, in the most graphic and foul language, that sex would be the best medicine.

At the insistence of an outraged public, other doctors and the governor, Dr. Harrison was first suspended, then subsequently fired.

Rise and Fall

The competition among publications and "stunt" reporters was fierce. During the heyday of the movement, stories appeared unrelentingly, one after another. Expensive cosmetics were revealed to contain poisonous ingredients. A southern employment agency that promised jobs in New York was actually trafficking in prostitution. Unscrupulous divorce lawyers turned out to be running a high-priced scam. Large immigrant families were consigned to living in unsanitary, unventilated, poorly lit, one-room apartments. Though the term didn't

exist then, women were regularly being sexually harassed, not just with words and innuendo, but by pinching, fondling, and unwanted kissing. New England textile mills ferociously fought unionization to preserve their right to pay starvation wages and engage in unfair practices.

To keep up the sensationalism, newspaper editors were constantly trying to steal other papers' reporters. And because of the demand, salaries skyrocketed. In a consummate irony, these women were often the highest-paid journalists in the profession.

Still...if there is one thing that is inevitable in this world, it is change. And that applies even to the compelling reportage that had trended for over a decade. The speaker dated its peak popularity to 1898. But, she noted, the seeds of its decline had been sown some years before.

In 1895, Hearst, longing to compete head-to-head with Pulitzer, bought the *New York Journal*. He then proceeded to stoke the paper's shock index. He hired more reporters, published more stories, included more elaborate and increasingly sensational illustrations, and threw decency to the winds. Of course, the *World* took countermeasures. And as the circulation rivalry between the two became ever more vicious, "stunt" journalism began to change for the worse.

- Pressured to report high drama, sometimes even when there wasn't any, reporters started to exaggerate, even falsify, certain details.
- Girl journalists were encouraged to take on stunts that were physically risky, yet devoid of societal value. One young lady was obliged to scale a Harlem River bridge to retrieve a coin on its top; another to take a "wild ride" on a snow plow; and yet a third to wrap herself in a boa constrictor.
- The nature of some coverage descended into salaciousness and depravity. Murder, criminality and prostitution became allowable content, depicted in all their gruesome and prurient detail.

As this was occurring, so too was the Cuban conflict—Cuban rebels fighting for independence from Spain. Hearst and the *Journal* were clamoring for the U.S. to declare war against the colonial power. The paper had its journalists engaging in all sorts of antics and unreliable narratives, including the "heroic rescue" of a maiden detained by the Spanish.

It didn't take long before the term "yellow journalism" became current, meaning news that was outrageous, over-the-top, reckless, even false.



Some of the girl stunt reporters' literary legacy.

Unfortunately, legitimate stunt reporting was smeared with the same yellow stain as the more objectionable reportage. And pretty soon the *Journal* and the *World* were being banned from libraries and reading rooms and thrown in the trash.

The final blow to women's journalism came when the U.S. battleship *Maine* was destroyed and the U.S. launched the Spanish-American War. Despite the conflict's primacy as subject matter, newspapers wouldn't send women reporters into a combat zone. Male hires were suddenly favored. And so the era of stunt reporters ended.

A Modern Legacy

Many of these women went on to become novelists, literary editors and activists. Yet, most of their names—with the prominent exception of Nellie Bly—have faded into

oblivion. That does not mean, however, that they were inconsequential.

Their can-do attitude and daring journalistic feats were the models for today's comic book heroines. They are certainly the progenitors of activist journalism. And their "creative non-fiction" has found literary echoes almost 100 years into the future. In the 60s, think of Truman Capote's novelistic rendition of a true murder spree in *In Cold Blood*. Or George Plimpton hanging out with and chronicling scenes and dialog from the Detroit Lions.

Or Joan Didion and her up close and personal depiction of the Haight in San Francisco. Then, in the 1970s, Tom Wolfe codified this type of narrative in what he called the "New Journalism" and contemporary writing was awash in this new literary form.

The world has lauded the originality of these celebrated authors; Kim Todd has made clear, however, that they and their craft stand on the narrow, but exceedingly strong, shoulders of America's girl stunt reporters.

The Holidays Are Coming!

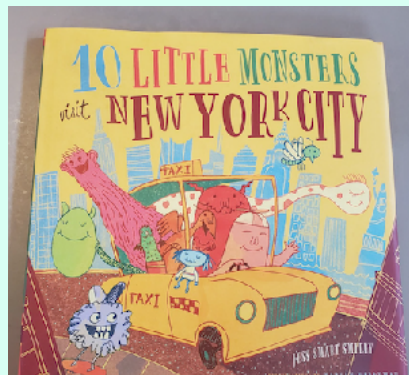
Christmas, Chanukah, Kwanza, birthdays and anniversaries, and any other gift-giving occasions have an easy solution:

Check Out the Visitor Center Kiosk

Toys



Books



Cuddlies



Clothing Items



Ornaments



NYC Subway or	
Amtrak Train Set	\$28
10 Little Monsters	\$20
Large Owl	\$22
Cap	\$20
Ornament	\$20

“Blackwell’s Island Quarry Contains Gold”

From the New-York Daily Tribune, Sunday, December 9, 1900: Commissioner Lantry* is the guardian of three chunks of quartz which he fondly believes is richly ribbed with gold. The rocks were hewn out of the quarry on Blackwell’s Island, and if the dreams of the Commissioner are finally realized, this city will find itself possessed of a gold mine which may relegate to obscurity the fame of the Klondike or Cripple Creek. As the Commissioner expressed it yesterday, “there will be no more taxes in the city, but, on the contrary, every citizen will be paid for living here.”

The mine will also work favorably, the Commissioner believes, in the Police Department. The members of the force would receive such high wages from the profits of the mine that it would be beneath a policeman’s dignity to accept such pittance as \$50 or \$100 from crooks and blacklegs.

Commissioner Lantry first discovered the nugget last Wednesday. He was standing on Riker’s Island watching a workhouse gang unloading a mass of rock which had been brought over from the Blackwell’s Island Quarry. The rock was to be used in building a roadbed. As the sun happened to strike one of the tumbling rocks at a certain angle, the Commissioner saw a yellow glitter. Stooping down, he caught up the rock and found it thickly seamed with yellow ore. The Commissioner filled his pockets with several more lumps and carried them to his office. For fear some thief might carry off his prizes he finally took them to his home. For fear that some one might steal them there while he was away he started to carry them to a bank. Because this might provoke discussion he finally decided to carry them around in his pockets.

He kept the secret until yesterday, when he took Deputy Fanning into his confidence. It



“Zebras,” or prisoners, on Blackwell’s Island were put to work excavating and breaking up rock. From: The N.Y. Public Library Collection.

was then decided that the rocks had better be subjected to the skill of an assayer. Accordingly, a messenger boy was summoned and dispatched with an exhibit to the Assay Office in Wall-st. The boy reached the office too late for the specimen to be examined, so that the Commissioner must wait until to-morrow before he learns the result of his find.

The rock, he says, was hewn in the quarry on Blackwell's Island where rock is now being cut out not only to be used in the reconstruction of the Administration Building on Blackwell's Island, but also for the rubble used to make roads on Riker's and other islands belonging to the city. The quarry is worked by a gang of nearly three hundred men from the Workhouse. The Commissioner has not found the ledge in the quarry which corresponds with his lumps and so cannot tell the extent of the yellow streak.

When he was asked by a Tribune reporter yesterday what commission he expected should the mine prove of great wealth, he answered:

"If it's gold, why, the city gets it, that's all. All I want is to keep my job."

The Commissioner then took one of the lumps out of his pocket and showed it to the reporter. The lump was an innocent looking piece of quartz with several veins of a dark yellow color. By the use of a knife the reporter was able to split off several flakes of the yellow material.

"Do you see those flakes?" the Commissioner was asked.

"Yes; they're gold leaves, I guess. But I'm not going to do much talking about it until I hear from the Assay Office."

**Editor's note: Lantry was the Commissioner of Charities and Corrections, which was the city agency that ran Blackwell's Island at the time. As New York has regularly needed to scabble for operating funds in subsequent years, decades, and centuries, it is probably safe to conclude that the Commissioner was mistaken.*

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Dancing by Lunatics: How 19th Century Media Viewed Blackwell's Island

by Stephen Blank

"The Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island was the scene of a most interesting and remarkable spectacle on the night of November 6. The completion of the first of a series of four frame buildings was celebrated by a ball, in which the patients of the Asylum were the dancers, 'tripping the light fantastic toe' after a fashion even more fantastic than Milton dreamed of in 'L'Allegro.'"

So opened an article about Blackwell's Island in the December 2, 1865 issue of *Harper's Weekly*. Looking back, the journal's interest in our little island was not unique.

Beginning in the late 1700s, there emerged a new type of publication—the general-interest magazine, each issue exploring war, politics, science, travel, literature and the fine arts, as well as other aspects of "civilization." Many such periodicals were launched, then faded quickly (including Ben Franklin's pioneering *General Magazine*). But some survived, and by the mid-1800s the genre had evolved further into illustrated weeklies—usually 16 pages carrying 16 to 32 woodcut engravings. The widespread increase in literacy and the emergence of a larger consuming class seemed to stoke their popularity. And the competition among publications became fierce. Blackwell's Island, with its asylum, hospital, alms house, penitentiary and restricted access, provided just the exotic content and potentially gripping graphics required.

It appears from present reading that these magazines aimed to be interesting and informative, not controversial. They were mostly descriptive, although they did stray at times to more serious and critical reporting.

Lunatic Asylum

Harper's, for example, seemed to straddle the fence. Regarding the inmates, it demonstrated a marked sympathy. In the continuation of the opening paragraph describing the Asylum ball, the writer noted that although "wild action" might be expected from such a population,

"...extravagant gesticulation and absurd antics were common enough, but of real impropriety there was nothing."



Harper's: *Dancing by lunatics turned out to be tame.*

And its illustration shows a fairly sedate party. Similarly in a February 1866 issue, devoted entirely to the Lunatic Asylum, the author (an ex-inmate, it is worth noting) lauds the patients' rectitude and responsiveness to "the moral power that holds [them] more effectually than strong rooms..." He also defends their complaints about criminal inmates occupying the same halls and sitting at the same table with them.

"One of the unhappiest results of the reception of this class is, that the other insane feel truly degraded by the association, and are fearful that their own lives are endangered. Many of the patients are exceedingly sensitive, and feel deeply any real or fancied injury or injustice."

On the other hand, the March 19, 1859 issue of the publication is distinctly critical of the facility's management, referring to "lazy-looking and rude officials."

Of course, we know that Nellie Bly's 1887 exposé of the Asylum in the *New York World* (a daily newspaper, not a magazine), was a scathing indictment of "a human rat trap." Many of the patients were quite sane, she insisted, and had only been committed because they didn't speak English and couldn't explain themselves, or because their husbands had tired of them and left them there. And the doctors didn't care. Bly's screed certainly put the lie to the existence of any "moral power" in the institution. And yet, there is no evidence that either *Harper's* or any other illustrated magazine devoted any space to her undercover adventure.

Not much verbiage on the subject seems to have survived from *Gleason's Pictorial*. But, as they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. In its February 9, 1853 paper, an illustration of the Lunatic Asylum features an obviously added and poorly drawn cage on the left side of the image. Presumably the editors felt the original depiction was too tranquil and needed some sort of "madhouse" element—cages and monkey-like creatures—to juice it up.



Gleason's: *The Lunatic Asylum and the "Madhouse" at left.*

Hospital and Alms House

One might expect media praise for these seemingly benevolent institutions on

Blackwell's Island. In fact, *Harper's* was generous in its plaudits for Charity Hospital. In its December 12, 1868 number, it focused on the kindness of aid offered to incurable patients; and in 1874, it applauded and illustrated weekly musical events at the hospital, with audiences (presumably residents) well turned out and deeply interested.



Harper's: The hospital staged weekly musical events for the patients.

About the Alms House, the "ink" wasn't as good. Reflecting a continuing theme of expense and corruption in Blackwell's Island coverage, *Gleason's* describes the new construction taking place, and adds that although the cost was "a large sum," it "doubtless will ever continue, from faulty construction and design, to be a channel of perpetual expense."

Penitentiary

Built in 1832, the prison was not usually the recipient of glowing reportage. Nevertheless, as late as 1853, *Gleason's* commented:

"The institution is a credit to the State of New York, and the country generally, conducted as it is in the most thorough and perfect manner, and being officered in the most admirable way, by men who thoroughly understand their business, and who take pride in its proper discharge."

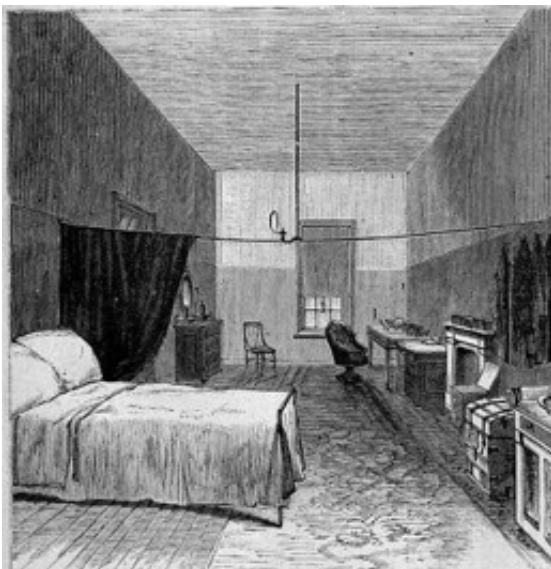
A few years later (1859), *Harper's*, by contrast, snidely lambasted the authorities' exploitation of convicts.

“Blackwell’s Island itself will one day be a perfect garden. There is a luxury of fencing and a prodigality of agricultural labor which rather confound the common visitor. It is not until one realizes that convict labor costs nothing that the mystery of elaborate cultivation...is understood. The officials certainly have something to show for the animal power under their control.”

Other articles criticized the Penitentiary administration for using convict labor for public sector construction projects. *Harper’s* also went on to complain about lazy prisoners and, in particular, escapes from the island that was guarded by the very prisoners themselves. Not surprisingly, the *New York Evening Express* proceeded to pile on.

“If the statement is true that frequent escapes of Blackwell’s Island prisoners are matters of course, and that when a convict is sent to that place, there is little probability of his serving his full term, in case he has his objections to doing so, it would be well for those who have the Penitentiary in charge to establish a reform. It would seem to be quite useless to spend thousands of dollars for the support of a useless institution for the punishment and suppression of crime.”

This may, as it turns out, be an example of early fake news! There is actually no evidence of “frequent” escapes from the prison.



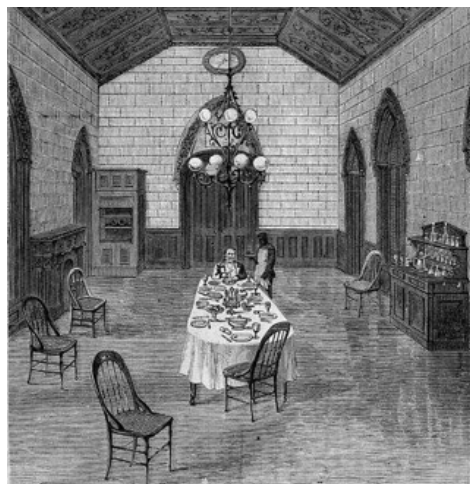
Boss Tweed and the Penitentiary

Perhaps the most scandalous of scandals of that period was the embezzlement of tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars from state and city government by “Boss [William] Tweed,” the head of Tammany Hall. In 1871 he was arrested twice and twice released on bail. But after his trial, in 1873, he was sentenced to 12 years in the Blackwell’s Penitentiary (although he served only one).

Harper’s illustrator Thomas Nast was gleeful at Tweed’s downfall and incarceration. In 1874 he laid it on with a full page of illustrations comparing the famous inmate’s soft prison life to that of other prisoners. Over the caption “A Statesman’s Retreat,” Nast depicted his lavish bedroom and luxurious dining arrangement.

Waning Interest

The doings on Blackwell’s Island became less interesting with the outbreak of the Civil War. Not only did several of the illustrated magazines fold; predictably, editorial content shifted to the drama and horrors of the battlefield. After the truce, there was some renewed island coverage. Soon, though, the reading population became caught up in the news and scandal-mongering of the numerous cheap daily newspapers. And by the century’s end, the remaining weeklies were completely marginalized by a new publishing phenomenon—the golden age of the modern American magazine (*Forbes*, *Life*, etc.) printed in color on hard paper and filled with... photographs!



Harper’s: Thomas Nast compared Tweed’s spacious and privileged living conditions with other inmates’ narrow cells and harsh treatment.

RIHS Calendar

FREE Roosevelt Island Historical Society Lecture Series presented in conjunction with the New York Public Library. Attend in person at the NYPL Branch, 504 Main St., or on Zoom.

Tuesday, November 16, 6:30 pm

NYC Water

Meet Dorian Yurchuk, an Associate at the architectural firm W.B. Melvin, for a discussion of how NYC gets its potable water—focus will be the upstate areas where it is collected and the construction of the infrastructure that delivers it. Register at: <https://www.nypl.org/events/programs/2021/11/16/clone-rihs-lecture-nyc-water-dorian-yurchuk>

Tuesday, December 21, 6:30 pm

Hart Island Update

Melinda Hunt, President and Founding Director of the Hart Island Project, returns to our lecture series to describe recent developments. Note: This presentation will be via ZOOM only. Register at: <https://www.nypl.org/events/programs/2021/12/21/rihs-lecture-hart-island>

Save these Lecture Dates in 2022

Tuesday, February 15

Tuesday, March 15

Tuesday, April 19

Tuesday, May 17

February 2022

“Old New York”

Watch for the continuation of this series, “Old New York: Part V—The Late 19th Century” in the February issue of *Blackwell’s Almanac: the Gilded Age, skyscrapers, mass transit, engineering feats...and tenements.*

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