Undercover in an Asylum:
How Nellie Bly Changed Journalism Forever

同志社国際中学校　1年　李　　　懿　文

Imagine being locked inside an asylum. Not as patient, not because of a mistake, but on purpose. Imagine intentionally pretending to be insane so you can uncover the truth about a place where no one was allowed to see inside. In 1887, one woman did exactly that.

Her name was Elizabeth Jane Cochran, but the world would come to know as Nellie Bly, and she changed investigative journalism forever.

When Bly was only 6, she lost her father, leaving her family impoverished. Her mother's brief and abusive second relationship showed her early on that marriage couldn't guarantee safety or stability. These experiences helped shape the independence and determination that would guide her throughout her career.

When she first tried to enter journalism, society denied her a place, shutting her out of a field dominated by men. In that era, women were marginalized, and viewed as mere household objects. But Bly refused to be confined in the box that society placed her in. She moved to New York City, and got an assignment which would later become her most famous investigation. It started with one simple question: What really happens in a mental asylum? There were rumors and complaints of mistreatment, but no one had any proof. The institutions denied everything, and no journalists were allowed inside. The public knew nothing about the things that happened behind the closed doors. So, they came up with a plan. A risky one. She would pretend to have a mental illness to be admitted to the psychiatric hospital. Then, she would report on what she saw from the inside. No journalist had ever done this before.

First, she started acting strangely and pretended to be confused. Police were soon called, and after examination, she was declared delusional, and taken to Blackwell's Island Insane Asylum, which was already infamous for its poor conditions.

What she found there was worse than anything the public had ever imagined. People who were entirely sane were trapped inside. Patients there were abused, starved, and neglected. They were forced to eat rotten food, take ice cold showers, and were not given a chance to prove their sound mind. Nellie Bly lived in these conditions for 10 days, speaking with other women she suspected were being wrongly confined. When she was finally released, she wrote shocking articles exposing the corrupt system, and published what is now known as "Ten Days in a Madhouse". People were horrified. Because of her undercover work, investigations were launched, and health facilities received more funding. Real change happened, just because one person stood up for the truth.

But that's only one part of Nellie Bly's career as a journalist. She also traveled around the world in just 72 days, beating the fictional record from a story called Around the World in 80 days. She revealed important truths, and wrote even more stories throughout her lifetime. Today, we call what she did "investigative journalism," which is a type of reporting that exposes hidden problems and social injustice. Back then, it didn't have a name. But Nellie Bly transformed journalism and made it possible.

Her work reminds us of something important: the truth matters, even if it's not easy to uncover. Sometimes, it takes courage. Sometimes, it takes determination. Sometimes, it takes a person willing to go undercover into an asylum. Nellie Bly was that person. And if there's one thing, one thing only that I want you to take away from this speech is that sometimes, the only way to open closed doors, is to walk through them yourself.

Thank you.

出典

【図　書】

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