Dorothea Lynde Dix

Dorothea Dix was born in Hampden, Maine, in 1802. Her father Joseph was an itinerant Methodist preacher who was frequently away from home, and her mother suffered from debilitating bouts of depression. The oldest of three children, Dorothea ran her household and cared for her family members from a very young age. Joseph Dix, though a strict and volatile man prone to alcoholism and depression, taught his daughter to read and write, fostering Dorothea's lifelong love of books and learning. Still, Dorothea's early years were difficult, unpredictable and lonely.

At 12 Dorothea moved to Boston, where her wealthy grandmother took her in and encouraged her interest in education. Dix would eventually establish a series of schools in Boston and Worcester, designing her own curriculum and administering classrooms as a teenager and young woman. In the 1820s Dix's poor health made her teaching increasingly sporadic, forcing her to take frequent breaks from her career. She began to write, and her books—filled with the simple dictums and morals that were thought to edify young minds—sold briskly. By 1836, persistent health problems caused Dix to close her latest school for good.

That same year Dix traveled in England with friends, returning home months later with an interest in new approaches to the treatment of the insane. She took a job teaching inmates in an East Cambridge prison, where conditions were so abysmal and the treatment of prisoners so inhumane that she began agitating at once for their improvement.

Prisons at the time were unregulated and unhygienic, with violent criminals housed side by side with the mentally ill. Inmates were often subject to the whims and brutalities of their jailers. Dix visited every public and private facility she could access, documenting the conditions she found with unflinching honesty. She then presented her findings to the legislature of Massachusetts, demanding that officials take action toward reform. Her reports—filled with dramatic accounts of prisoners flogged, starved, chained, physically and sexually abused by their keepers, and left naked and without heat or sanitation—shocked her audience and galvanized a movement to improve conditions for the imprisoned and insane.

As a result of Dix's efforts, funds were set aside for the expansion of the state mental hospital in Worcester. Dix went on to accomplish similar goals in Rhode Island and

New York, eventually crossing the country and expanding her work into Europe and beyond.

Dix volunteered her services one week after the Civil War (1861-1865) began. Shortly after her arrival in Washington in April 1861, she was appointed to organize and outfit the Union Army hospitals and to oversee the vast nursing staff that the war would require. As superintendent of women nurses, she was the first woman to serve in such a high capacity in a federally appointed role.

With supplies pouring in from voluntary societies across the north, Dix's administrative skills were sorely needed to manage the flow of bandages and clothing as the war wore on. Still, Dix often clashed with army officials and was widely feared and disliked by her volunteer female nurses. After months of hard work and exhaustion, she was eventually ousted from her position, stripped of authority by the fall of 1863 and sent home.

After the war, Dix returned to her work as a social reformer. She traveled extensively in Europe, evidently disenchanted with her experience during the war, and continued to write and offer guidance to what was now a widespread movement to reform the treatment of the mentally ill. Old hospitals were redesigned and rededicated according to her ideals, and new hospitals were founded in accordance with the principles she espoused. After a long life as an author, advocate and agitator, Dorothea Dix died in 1887 at the age of 85 in a New Jersey hospital that had been established in her honor. She is buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Elizabeth Packard

Elizabeth Parsons Ware Packard was born in Ware, Massachusetts on December 28, 1816. Packard attended the Amherst Female Seminary. Her family took in boarders from Amherst College, including Henry Ward Beecher. Beecher would soon become one of the most popular preachers in the country. Beecher's inquisitive nature and his unorthodox religious teachings greatly influenced Packard.

When Packard was 19, she suffered what was then termed "brain fever": a condition characterized by a high fever, headaches, and delirium. When her condition failed to improve right away, Packard's father committed her to an. After six weeks, the asylum's superintendent declared Packard's health restored and released her. This experience contributed to Packard's mistrust of the medical system.

In 1839, Packard married Theophilus Packard Jr., a Calvinist minister. He was 14 years her senior and a longtime associate of her father's. They lived in Shelbourne, Massachusetts where Theophilus led a congregation and the couple had six children. In 1854, they left New England and moved several times in the Midwest before settling in Manteno, Illinois in 1857. Packard found the Midwest to her liking, as she had begun to question Calvinist teachings and appreciated the greater independence she enjoyed outside of her native New England. As the decade went on, Packard stepped further outside the traditional roles of wife and mother: she conducted missionary work, traveled on her own, and expressed religious views that differed from her husband's. Theophilus responded by growing more authoritarian and controlling, claiming that Packard was neglecting her family. Aware that she had spent time in an asylum in her youth, he also began implying that her sanity was questionable.

Packard's religious beliefs were her greatest offense, in Theophilus's view. Packard's religious exploration led her to adopt ideas from Universalism and Spiritualism, as well as to challenge Calvinist doctrines. Both Packard and her husband opposed divorce: Theophilus found it immoral and Packard, rightfully, feared losing custody of her children.

In 1860, Theophilus committed Packard to the Illinois Hospital for the Insane. At the time, it was legal for a husband to have his wife committed. The law in Illinois stated that a man was entitled to due process (a hearing or trial) to assess his sanity before being committed, but married women could be institutionalized at the request of their husbands, without any evidence of mental health issues. Similar laws existed in many states across the country.

Packard remained at the Illinois Hospital for the Insane for three years. She vigorously protested her confinement throughout her time there. In the spring of 1863, hospital officials declared her incurably insane and released her from the institution. Ostensibly they were making room for “curable” patients. In actuality, they had grown tired of her resistance and acceded to her adult children’s calls for her release. But when Packard returned to her husband, he imprisoned her in their home. Packard was able to get a letter to a friend who made an appeal to Judge Charles Starr. Judge Starr issued a writ of habeus corpus demanding that Theophilus bring Packard before him. Theophilus claimed he allowed Packard “all the liberty compatible with her welfare and safety” due to her alleged insanity. While it had been legal for Theophilus to have Packard committed, it was illegal for him to confine her to their home. Judge Starr ordered a jury trial to determine Packard’s mental state.

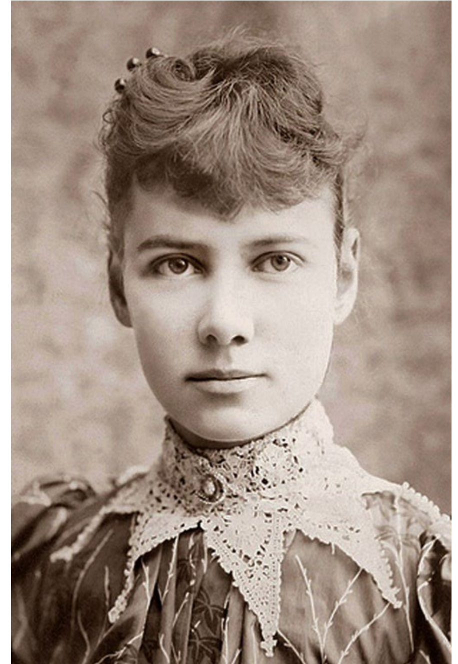
During the five-day trial in January 1864, witnesses testified both for and against Packard. Physicians who had met with Packard before her hospitalization claimed that her religious views and her refusal to submit to her husband demonstrated her insanity. Neighbors and friends testified on her behalf and one doctor and theologian explained that many intellectuals in Europe shared Packard’s religious beliefs. The jury found Packard to be sane, reportedly turning in their verdict after only seven minutes of deliberation.

Following the verdict, Theophilus left Illinois and returned to Massachusetts. Packard was now free, but found herself homeless, penniless, and without her children. Aware of her limited rights as a married woman, and having witnessed firsthand the vulnerability of those in asylums, Packard made it her mission to help both groups.

Packard campaigned for legislation in Illinois and numerous other states that would ensure the rights of those in mental health hospitals and bolster the rights of married women. In Iowa, Maine, and Massachusetts, she helped win the fight for regular visiting teams that monitored conditions in asylums. In Iowa, “Packard’s Law” made it illegal for asylum officials to intercept patients’ mail. Packard won reforms to commitment laws in four states, as well as the passage of a law protecting married women’s property in Illinois. Packard published books detailing her ordeal and gave speeches in order to garner publicity for her campaigns. In 1869, she convinced the courts to award her custody of her three younger children. She supported her children, as well as her reform efforts, with the proceeds from her writings. Packard’s nationwide lobbying efforts continued through the 1880s. Throughout her many campaigns, she faced opposition from the increasingly organized and powerful psychiatric profession, but she continued, undaunted.

In her later years, Packard lived in California with one of her sons and his wife. She and Theophilus never divorced, but lived separately for the rest of their lives. Packard passed away in 1897.

Nellie Bly



Elizabeth Cochran was born on May 5, 1864 in Cochran's Mills, Pennsylvania. The town was founded by her father. Elizabeth had fourteen siblings. Her father's rise from mill worker to mill owner to judge meant his family lived very comfortably. Unfortunately, he died when Elizabeth was only six years old and his fortune was divided among his many children, leaving Elizabeth's mother and her children with a small fraction of the wealth they once enjoyed. Elizabeth's mother soon remarried, but quickly divorced her second husband because of abuse, and relocated the family to Pittsburgh.

Elizabeth knew that she would need to support herself financially. At the age of 15, she enrolled in the State Normal School in Indiana, Pennsylvania, and an added an "e" to her last name to sound more distinguished. Her plan was to graduate and find a position as a teacher. However, after only a year and a half, Elizabeth ran out of money and could no longer afford the tuition. She moved back to Pittsburgh to help her mother run a boarding house.

In 1885, Elizabeth read an article in the Pittsburgh Dispatch that argued a woman's place was in the home, "to be a helpmate to a man." She strongly disagreed with this opinion and sent an angry letter to the editor anonymously signed "Lonely Orphan Girl."

The newspaper's editor, George A. Madden, was so impressed with the letter that he published a note asking the "Lonely Orphan Girl" to reveal her name. Elizabeth marched into the Dispatch offices and introduced herself. Madden immediately offered her a job as a columnist. Shortly after her first article was published, Elizabeth changed her pseudonym from "Lonely Orphan Girl" to "Nellie Bly," after a popular song.

Elizabeth positioned herself as an investigative reporter. She went undercover at a factory where she experienced unsafe working conditions, poor wages, and long hours. Her honest reporting about the horrors of workers' lives attracted negative attention from local factory owners. Elizabeth's boss did not want to anger Pittsburgh's elite and quickly reassigned her as a society columnist.

To escape writing about women's issues on the society page, Elizabeth volunteered to travel to Mexico. She lived there as an international correspondent for the Dispatch for six months. When she returned, she was again assigned to the society page and promptly quit in protest.

Elizabeth hoped the massive newspaper industry of New York City would be more open-minded to a female journalist and left Pittsburgh. Although several newspapers turned down her application because she was a woman, she was eventually given the opportunity to write for Joseph Pulitzer's New York World.

In her first act of "stunt" journalism for the World, Elizabeth pretended to be mentally ill and arranged to be a patient at New York's insane asylum for the poor, Blackwell's Island. For ten days Elizabeth experienced the physical and mental abuses suffered by patients.

Elizabeth's report about Blackwell's Island earned her a permanent position as an investigative journalist for the World. She published her articles in a book titled 10 Days in A Mad House. In it, she explained that New York City invested more money into care for the mentally ill after her articles were published. She was satisfied to know that her work led to change.

Activist journalists like Elizabeth—commonly known as muckrakers—were an important part of reform movements. Elizabeth's investigations brought attention to inequalities and often motivated others to take action. She uncovered the abuse of women by male police officers, identified an employment agency that was stealing from immigrants, and exposed corrupt politicians. She also interviewed influential and controversial figures, including Emma Goldman in 1893.

The most famous of Elizabeth's stunts was her successful seventy-two-day trip around the world in 1889, for which she had two goals. First, she wanted to beat the record set in the popular fictional world tour from Jules Verne's Around the World in Eighty Days. Second, she wanted to prove that women were capable of traveling just as well as—if not better than—men. Elizabeth traveled light, taking only the dress she wore, a cape, and a small traveler's bag. She challenged the stereotypical assumption that women could not travel without many suitcases, outfit changes, and vanity items. Her world tour made her a celebrity. After her return, she toured the country as a lecturer. Her image was used on everything from playing cards to board games. She recounted her adventures in her final book, Around the World in 72 Days.

In 1911, she returned to journalism as a reporter for the New York Evening Journal. She covered a number of national news stories, including the Woman Suffrage Parade of 1913 in Washington, D.C. Elizabeth often referred to suffrage in her articles, arguing that women were as capable as men in all things. During World War I, she traveled to Europe as the first woman to report from the trenches on the front line.

Although Elizabeth never regained the level of stardom she experienced after her trip around the world, she continued to use her writing to shed light on issues of the day. She died of pneumonia on January 27, 1922.