Undercover Reporting

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Chronology suggests a direct link from Helen Stuart Campbell’s mostly forgotten reporting on the plight of the poor in the 1870s to the undercover journalism of her more celebrated successors in the decades ahead. She is an important but largely overlooked figure in the development of undercover reporting, an early model whose work more closely resembles that of the twenty-first-century reporter than the stunt girls who followed her in the 1880s and 1890s. A full decade before Nellie Bly personified newspaper stunt girl derring-do in the cause of social reform, Campbell, an economist, was buttressing with research and hard facts the affecting narratives she fashioned from firsthand encounters with slum dwellers and women at the low end of the work force.

The record is too scant to know if Campbell’s volunteerism in New York’s poorest neighborhoods was, from the outset, a guise she assumed for the sake of her reporting, good Christian works performed as a charitable impulse, or a salve for her own soul. We know only that her writing life began in the early 1870s with successful magazine serial fiction for children and columns on diet, cooking, and home economics. We know also that her experience
at the Water Street Mission caused her to abandon the lighter subject matter. Of her efforts at the mission, we learn only that over a period of three years, she returned “again and again” to the facility in notorious Five Points to take her place “among ‘the regulars.’” We do not know at what point, or even if, she let the mission director or any of her subjects know that they would become the grist for her tales of transformation. “With my own eyes,” she reported, “I saw men who had come into the mission sodden with drink, turn into quiet, steady workers,” even though now and then one “fell.” She saw “foul homes, where dirty bundles of straw had been the only bed, gradually become clean and respectable; hard faces grow patient and gentle; oaths and foul words give place to quiet speech.”¹

We know, too, that Campbell, who was born in 1839, was of newspaper reading age when journalists started using undercover tactics to report from the South before the Civil War. And in 1871, when she was thirty-two and writing children’s stories as Helen C. Weeks,² her married name before her divorce, Augustus St. Clair ran a sensational reportorial sting for the New York Times against the city’s abortionists.

Whatever inspired Campbell, she capitalized on her role at the mission to enhance her reporting in an innovative way. The magazine Sunday Afternoon ran a series of six of her prose sketches between January and July 1879. That December, Lippincott’s published her appeal to revamp the institutional treatment of the insane on the model of “The city of the Simple,” the Belgian village of Gheel,³ in a piece she based not on reporting undercover but on an interview with an unnamed physician who was deeply involved in asylum work.⁴ Lippincott’s then picked up the rest of her mission series and featured it from May to October 1880 under the common header “Studies in the slums.”
A good sign of the attention the slum series received was its compilation in 1882 into a widely reviewed book under the title *The Problem of the Poor*. For its preface, Campbell wrote that urgings “from many quarters” convinced her to turn the magazine pieces into a book. “Our poor are fast becoming our criminal class,” she wrote, “and more and more it is apparent that something beyond preaching is required to bring order out of the chaos which threatens us.”

From these intimate encounters with the private miseries of the derelict and disadvantaged, she then fashioned a novel that seemed not to venture all that far from fact. The one-two punch of *The Problem of the Poor* and *Mrs. Hurdon’s Income* established Campbell’s authority as a go-to periodical writer on poverty and launched her eventual career as an economist. In keeping with the times, she helped energize a focus on firsthand reporting for newspapers and magazine on issues of social reform. The *New York Tribune*, in fact, then commissioned Campbell to turn her attention to the appalling situation of women working in the needle trades and department stores. Those twenty-one stories, titled *Prisoners of Poverty*, ran with great fanfare—editorials, impassioned letters to the editor, national exposure through the newspaper exchanges—throughout fall 1886 into spring 1887. The reporting also got major attention from reviewers when it came out in book form, although the *Tribune* publicly dismissed many of her proposals as impractical. Campbell did a similar exercise focused on women wage workers in London and Paris, which appeared in 1889. *Prisoners of Poverty Abroad* moved William Dean Howells to remark in *Harper’s*:

When one reads of the Lancashire factories and little children laboring for sixteen hours a day, inhaling at every breath a quantity
of cotton fuzz, falling asleep over their wheels, and roused again by the lash of thongs over their backs or the slap of “billy-rollers” over their little crowns; and then again of Irish Whitefeet, driven out of their potato patches and mud-hovels, and obliged to take the hill side as broken men—one pauses, with a kind of amazed horror, to ask if this be earth, the place of hope, or Tophet, where hope never comes.12

The Tribune’s prologue to the series emphasized Campbell’s exceptional reporting and her willingness to present the facts she gathered without embellishment, stressing how she had familiarized herself not only with the poor and their suffering but also with the many charitable organizations working on their behalf. The newspaper estimated that there were some two hundred thousand women working at jobs in New York alone, with seven dollars a week their highest average earnings. Campbell said her intention was to tell the whole truth, even if it meant discrediting “heartless and dishonest and brutal employers of female labor, who grind the last copper out of their helpless workers and even in some cases plot and plan to cheat them out of a few cents.”13

When the book came out, Campbell added a note of her own, explaining that her sketches were “a photograph from life; and the various characters, whether employers or employed, were all registered in case corroboration were needed.” Her only purpose, she said, was not to offer solutions but to “render definition more possible, the questions that perplex even the most conservative can have no solution for this generation or for any generation to come.”14

The response to both the series and the book was enormous. Ida Tarbell noted presciently in the Chautauquan in 1887 that Campbell’s “thrilling pictures of the life of the poor of New York City is a type of work which sooner or later the press must espouse.”15 “It
is the duty of one-half of the world to find out how the other half is living,” Tarbell went on, “and no means can be more effective and far-reaching than that which Mrs. Campbell is using.”

Tarbell may have admired the undercover approach but did not use it in her own very straightforward investigation of Standard Oil. Dozens of other women did go undercover, however, adding their own variations and embellishments to the way they executed these assignments. Men did, too. In fact, consciously or not, Campbell channeled the male pre- and post-Civil War reporters who had so skillfully forged undercover techniques to find answers. Their approach was to assume the most convincing poses they could bring off for the situations they were attempting to investigate—as tourist, slave auction buyer, Southern newspaperman, casual traveler, regiment guardsman, sailor. All of them no doubt got closer to their subjects than they likely could have had they announced their real intentions, pencil and notebook in hand. Indeed, sometimes they got perilously close, giving their stories the elements of danger, bravery, excitement, and intrigue. The lady mission worker among the down-and-out in the city’s worst slum suggests the same. It is no accident that the word photograph so often characterizes reporting done undercover for its capture of the skillful minuet these reporters performed as clandestine observers locked in step with the unknowingly observed.

Their example from the late 1850s onward legitimated the practice. Published explanations of undercover reporting in that earlier period never fixate on the ethics of the method; its efficacy was presumed. Over and over again, we see that what mattered at the point of publication, if it mattered at all—and in Campbell’s case it did not—was to explain the reporter’s actions for the sake of heightening interest in the work, but without any apparent need
to justify the approach on ethical grounds. The point of the expla-
nation was to establish and vouch for the integrity of the reporter,
the veracity of the publication, and the truth of the words.\textsuperscript{18}

It fell to those who followed in the late 1880s and 1890s to help
the method evolve. It was the Age of Reform, after all, an ideal
setting for undercover reporting to flourish. Sensation already was
a byword. Onto the dance floor came growing numbers of ambici-
tious, daring young reporters who choreographed jaw-dropping
new moves. They sought to understand their subject by becoming
them, at least for a time, assuming roles as the downtrodden, the ex-
ploited, the oppressed, and underserved. The observer endeavored
to become the observed, and then to report from the standpoint of
contrived but still actual personal experience. Future generations
of undercover reporters refined this approach even more.

Using guises of various sorts, reporters had the same multi-
pronged objective: to gain access to closed-off worlds more quickly,
more easily, and more effectively than they could by announcing
their intent—just as their undercover predecessors had done—
and then to ingratiate themselves with the people about whom
they were reporting and to insinuate themselves into the lives of
these individuals or to find novel ways of circulating unobtrusively
among them. The reporters’ further purpose was to experience
the conditions, the cruelty, and the difficulties in as much the way
their subjects experienced them as possible, and to fill in what
was by then an already tried-and-true narrative framework with
details amassed from actual experiences.

Sometimes, when the publications did not provide an explana-
tory prologue or when the writers have not disclosed the details of
how they got that story, it is hard to tell from the articles and books
alone how they collected the information. In other cases, the writ-
ers anchor the text with their personal experiences and reflections.
Either way, their point was to invite a vicarious, deeply empathetic reaction from readers, whose outrage and cries for reform the publications then could galvanize with editorials, follow-up stories, published letters to the editor, and other efforts aimed at inviting response. The point, as with the effective exposés of previous years, was to focus public attention on important social issues, to invite a wide public conversation, and to have impact. In the most successful cases reforms followed, as did more notoriety and boosts in circulation for the publications. For the writers, it meant career-building personal notice. This perfect circle of positive outcomes reinsured the place of undercover reporting in the evolution of journalistic practice. The pitfalls, then as now, were overexposure and a tendency to veer off into the ridiculous or purely sensationalistic. The key to repeated success was to limit the themes to the pressing matters of the day and to produce these types of stories sparingly enough to avoid wearing out the terrific impact they could have at their best.

It was not Campbell or her Civil War era predecessors, but Bly who emerged as the nineteenth century’s top celebrity exponent of the undercover technique. Someone who should have been no more than a cursor blip on the screen of history retains almost mystical staying power. The prominence she gained in her early twenties as the star Sunday feature writer for the *New York World* stayed with her for the remaining thirty-five years of her short life. She died at age fifty-seven in 1922. In the years in between, she reengaged public interest in herself with two guest reappearances at the *World* during the 1890s, including a groundbreaking jailhouse interview with Emma Goldman and exceptional coverage of the Pullman Strike from the workers’ standpoint. In those years, she shocked her fans by marrying on the fly a man forty
years her senior; embroiling herself in highly dubious business dealings as head of her husband’s company; and filing or defending herself against messy, debilitating family and business lawsuits. She escaped prosecution in the business case by going to Austria, where she reported from the eastern front in World War I for the *New York Evening Journal* and then returned to the United States in 1919 to write regular op-ed columns in the last years of her life under the editorship of her old friend, Arthur Brisbane.

None of what followed would have mattered to the public had it not been for those brief two and a half years as a stunt girl at Joseph Pulitzer’s newspaper. That performance—and it was a performance—fixed her place in legend without any of the usual props for literary legacies that endure: an exceptional body of work; devoted descendants with an asset to protect; a foundation; or even an archive of personal papers preserved for scholars at a manuscript library. The sole sustainers of Bly’s legacy have been timing, charisma, and her pioneering role in making stunt and undercover reporting matter. What tops a ten-day incarceration as an inmate of the women’s lunatic asylum on Blackwell’s (now Roosevelt) Island, her very first *New York World* assignment, published over two Sundays in October 1887? What outpaces a triumphant race across the globe in a record-shattering seventy-two days for a finale in winter 1889–1890? In the one-hundred-plus weeks in between, Bly regularly led the front page of the *World’s* Sunday feature section. Although she sometimes wrote political campaign interviews, frivolous features, and even failed at a personal column in those early years, it was the stunt work—all told, about a score of exposés—that gave her high wattage.

As to her timing, poor and immigrant groups teemed into the city in this period, crowding the metropolis with new social problems that cried out for empathy, explanation, and understanding.
The mass circulation newspaper had arrived. The well-fixed half of the population became increasingly curious about the lives of these newcomers who, as they assimilated, became newspaper readers, too. Also, the times brought a new place for women in the world of work in general and in “The New Journalism” in particular. All of this contributed to Bly’s instant rise.

The writing persona Bly created also was exceptional. Particular to her style was her choice of attention-getting issues and the inventive, widely imitated techniques she developed to bring these issues alive. Among her many exploits, she exposed a corrupt Albany lobbyist by pretending to be a prospective client, caught a trafficker in infants by posing as an unwed mother who had a child to give away, checked out the city’s matrimonial agencies by posing as an applicant, did a variation on the old Doesticks black arts ruse by pretending to be a patient with an ailment, and then visited a number of doctors to compare what they variously diagnosed and prescribed. She hired a mesmerist for an evening’s entertainment and then explained the sham to her readers, sought employment as a maid through the offices of an unscrupulous employment agency, labored in a paper box factory, and danced in the chorus to explain why girls who weren’t harlots or gold diggers would choose a life on the stage. She investigated private investigators by posing as a suspicious wife, gained admittance to a home for women in unfortunate circumstances, slept in a Lower East Side tenement during the hottest nights of August, and engineered her own arrest so that she could find out what happened to women who wound up in jail.

There was, and still is, the novelty she so perfectly depicted of an oh-so-genteel lady scribbler among those coarse, tobacco-spitting male reporters of the city room and out amid the evildoers in the big bad world. Danger! Daring! But more key to Bly’s cel-
ebrated success were her clandestine approaches, her bravery, her moxie, and how this self-described “New American Girl” displayed these abilities on the printed page. What the public got was a well-dressed, wily, ladylike darling who liked to feature her wasp waist and a million-dollar smile in her stories. She was not only fearless, she got results. In her earliest efforts for the *World*, her insane asylum exposé brought an appropriation to improve the asylum, and she ran that lobbyist out of the state capital. Her trip around the world was a global sensation. Her inspiring combination of attributes incited worldwide attention, not to mention deep professional jealousy. All of it made her gossip fodder in the local magazines and journalism trade publications, aggrandizing her celebrity status even more. She had a knack for making the attention stick.

One strong aspect of the Bly persona was its air of authenticity, an absolute necessity for the undercover reporter in any age. The persona she cultivated was a clean mirror image of her private self, at least as glimpsed through her legal actions, testimony, documented business dealings, and what little personal correspondence survives. The persona both pervaded and magnetized the work. But just as significant was the *World*’s willingness to position Bly for stardom. Editors emblazoned her name on the page in big headlines, commissioned handsome illustrations, and offered full-page story display for her every published piece. The importance of this institutional support cannot be overestimated, and it was no doubt fed by the interest from readers that both Bly, as celebrity exponent, and the undercover method itself repeatedly demonstrated.

There is often, still, a clear correlation between the merit and the attention, prominence, prize nominations, and publicity lavished on undercover stories and their writers within the publication’s editorial structure—largely to acknowledge the time and
resources this kind of work commands—and the impact the individuals and their stories are able to generate once the work appears. Then as now, the relatively large number of newspaper and magazine undercover investigations deemed worthy of publication at book length is a telling indicator.

In Bly’s short stint as a stunt girl, she addressed almost every major social issue of the day and foreshadowed many future undercover themes, including safety in public transportation, if you count an ancillary benefit of her trip around the world as a Victorian girl out on her own. In the process, she generated meaningful attention for herself and her newspaper and energized and animated a fledgling journalistic form. Imitation was inevitable, in cities across the country, in Canada, and overseas. By the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth, men increasingly were going undercover once again, too. More and more, the role of the journalist expanded beyond that of recorder, explainer, and reflector on the news to that of explorer and hard-hitting investigator. More sophisticated “detective” techniques soon emerged, harkening back to Campbell to produce stories that reflected far greater investigative skill, with or without a personal narrative dimension. Tarbell’s Standard Oil exposé would be an obvious case in point. University-trained sociologists and ersatz ethnographers tried their hand. As for the undercover method, the sheer excitement it created, its bravura, its ability to get results and public attention—and for women just entering the field, the way it opened locked doors—assured its permanence as an effective reporting approach.

For late nineteenth-century reporters and writers, female or male, no investigative fields were more fertile to till than the world of work and the lack of it. In the 1880s and 1890s, male writers
would produce their share of undercover work, largely among the unemployed, but in that period, women predominated in stealth reporting on workplace hardship and abuse.

As it happened, work was not a major theme of Bly’s stunt reporting, although she did do the couple of brief turns noted above. In her well-shaped shadow, the clones came swiftly. Eva McDonald, another twenty-two-year-old, was among the very first. Early in 1888, the Minnesotan outfitted herself from a rag-bag on assignment from the *St. Paul Globe* and went undercover for very brief periods in dozens of local mattress, bag, shirt, and blanket factories. McDonald wrote as Eva Gay but later went on to distinguish herself as a labor organizer under her married name of Eva Valesh. So effective was her reporting that the competing *Minneapolis Tribune* sniped in print that her tales of “poor working women employed at starving wages who were compelled to work in mere hovels” had practically been the direct cause of a labor strike by local women.

Not long after, Charles Chapin, editor of the *Chicago Times*, hired Nell Cusak to investigate conditions for women in the factories of Chicago. Under the byline Nell Nelson, her twenty-one part *White Slave Girls* series was provocative enough to warrant a book contract. Her explanatory prologue emphasized the same “just-the-facts” virtues that other undercover writers highlight to justify their subterfuge. She told of her “earnest endeavor” to “give all absolute facts with all their bearings to portray with exceptional fidelity and guardedness the state of things as existing.”

Nelson got gratifying attention from the Chicago Trades and Labor Assembly, which endorsed her series at its August 19, 1888 meeting. One speaker told the assemblage that the Nelson articles about women workers had done more to open the eyes of the “skeptical class” than a report about a laboring man ever
could. Over the coming days, her Chicago newspaper gave prime front-page display to the responses of readers, proudly touting praise. One letter, from a Dr. Charles Gilman Smith, said the series was better than anything the newspaper had produced in the previous ten years. Another, a poignant one from a seamstress who signed herself Mary McGray, provided a perfect opportunity to send Cusak back out for new fodder to keep the story going. The letter writer thanked Cusak for her efforts on behalf of her “poor sisters, the shop-girls of Chicago” who can’t stand up for themselves. “Oh, you have not told half; you do not know half we have to bear,” she wrote. “We are indeed slaves, worse slaves than those my brothers died to free. I wish you could see my book for the last month; you would wonder how I have lived.”

Nelson traced the woman by match light down a dark hallway to a sorry little flat. The woman’s face brightened when the reporter introduced herself, and as they settled in to talk, the woman gave as wise a critique of undercover reporting as any seasoned professional observer could. She got how effective the method was at attracting interest to a social problem across social classes. (“Your articles have helped the girls more than you’d think. Every hand read them and so did every boss and manager.”) She understood its power to champion the weak (“I cannot fight for my rights and this is the case with many of us.”) But gently, she chastised the writer for superficiality, for spending too little time reporting on each of the factories she visited. (“That is the employers’ defense and the employees’ complaint. If you only had staid [sic] for a payday now I am sure you could have moved the public to pity.”) She even assessed the use of deceit in Nelson’s approach, first questioning it, but then, in the same thought, apprehending astutely from her own experience how impossible it would have been for Nelson to get meaningful information without sneak-
ing around. The seamstress told of what she witnessed when her manager had foreknowledge of another reporter’s arrival, and how he had managed the visit to hide the flaws and show off the factory to its best advantage.41

The seamstress went on to elaborate on her own experience in doing the work and redoing the work, never knowing what she would earn until payday and then inevitably being disappointed by the little that ended up in the envelope. A neighbor came by the apartment to say hello, carting a sack of groceries that she never mentioned but that she discreetly, and with obvious intent, left behind. The seamstress brought her brother out of his room to meet the reporter. Moved by his merry temperament and his troubles—“left arm shriveled to the bone”—Cusak gave him all the coins in her purse to buy tobacco. She put that in her story, too.42

Indeed the story of Nell Nelson’s encounter with the seamstress symbolizes the value, virtue, and vice of undercover reporting. It underscores its ability to make the significant interesting to wide swaths of the population and its incredibly rich means of providing graphic, real-life examples and illustrations of pressing societal issues. It provides the opportunity for an unadorned insider view that otherwise would not be possible. It can be a powerful means of telling truth to power, and of speaking for those who cannot. It promotes more detailed, if not necessarily deeper understanding and enables the collecting of knowledgeable sources of information both before and after publication.

On the down side is the contradiction of truth-seeker as deceiver, the awkward ethical conundrums invited by the intimacy of these encounters (the tobacco money), and the inherent superficiality of a drive-by encounter with distress, whether the time involved is a day, a week, a month or two or three, or even a year.
As the wise seamstress said, the brevity of the Nell Nelson experience in each factory left her open to criticism and gave “employers’ defense and the employees’ complaint.”

There were other issues caused by the superficiality or at least the incompleteness of the reporting, too. One of the manufacturers who Nelson named filed a $50,000 lawsuit for misrepresentation against the Chicago Times. From Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the Evening Gazette challenged her for slipshod analysis, specifically for ascribing the deplorable conditions she encountered to employer avarice when other factors bore greater responsibility for the situation, including cutthroat competition and a mania for selling.

Whatever the inadequacies, the series and its aftermath achieved and surpassed its major objectives: it brought serious attention to the issues, it brought readers of all societal strata to the newspaper, and it worked out well for Cusak personally. Not only did she land a book deal; the editors of the New York World ran the series soon after, in fall 1888, in typical Pulitzer fashion, right under Bly’s retroussé nose.

As the 1880s turned over to the 1890s, the girl/reporter/working girl ruse continued to engage editors, reporters, and readers. In 1893, Elizabeth Banks, who worked briefly for the St. Paul Globe, could not find steady work in the United States, so she took herself across the ocean where readers of the Weekly Sun got to know her as the self-proclaimed “American Girl in London.” Her undercover investigation of domestic servants led to a series of seven undercover pieces that a British publisher compiled into a well-received book the following year under the title Campaigns & Curiosity. Interestingly, Banks’s recounting of her escapades in a 1902 autobiography provoked an attack on her journalistic ethics. This was not so much for disguising herself as a maid, but for
the very un-British indiscretion she had shown in telling tales on the families in whose homes she found work and shelter. In a “London Letter” column to the New York Times Sunday Review of Books, William L. Alden presaged some of the criticism that eventually would stalk the practice of undercover reporting. Banks’s articles were “certainly not in accordance with the ethics of decent London journalism,” he wrote, and “were generally thought to be in extremely bad taste.”

Chapin moved on from Chicago to become editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch in 1896 and hired Lucy Hosmer to make the rounds of the city’s shoe factories as “another helpless girl cast upon the world to battle for her daily bread.” At least three Canadian women took up the form. Ella S. Atkinson as Madge Merton was one; she disguised herself as an elderly housekeeper for a story on working conditions for domestics. Kathleen “Kit” Black Coleman attracted flattering attention in 1892 for venturing overseas and cross-dressing as a male worker in London to spend a few days reporting for the Toronto Daily Mail on life in London’s East End. Escorted by a male detective, she wandered into “all sorts of queer places” in the hamlets along the Thames as part of the male writer tramp-fest that had been under way since as early as 1782. And Alice Freeman taught school in Toronto by day and then transformed herself by night into Faith Fenton, undercover reporter for the Empire.

In summer 1898, Chapin, by then in New York and editor of the New York Evening World, paired reporters Catherine King and Charles Garrett to pose as young people in search of work. Lived three months on five cents a day was the headline on Garrett’s series, which the newspaper promoted in a front-page introduction as “the remarkable disclosure of the inner life of this great
HARD LABOR, HARD LUCK, PART ONE

metropolis.” King’s story ran several pages deeper into the paper under the headline GIRL TOILERS OF THE CITY.

From the timeline of girl-reporter exploits in this period, the pattern of prominence, publicity, and profit becomes obvious, as does how crucial were the vision, the backing, and often the instigation of editors and publishers to the success of these undertakings. Also clear is how prevalent were women in the doing, uniquely positioned as they were to investigate subjects where women were newly and deeply involved. A graph by date could easily show how Campbell begat Bly begat Valesh begat Nelson begat Banks begat Atkinson, Freeman, Coleman, Hosmer, and no doubt others. The twentieth century, and then the twenty-first, would bring along even more.

The tramps: Carl Philipp Moritz tramped through England in 1782 with only four guineas in his pocket; Bayard Taylor tramped through Europe and wrote a book about his experiences in “the college of the world” in 1846; Lee Meriwether dropped out of Harvard and passed as a worker to tour Europe on fifty cents a day in 1885. All retain their place in the long tramping procession, but only Josiah (Frank) Flynt Willard qualified as an expert social investigator. Although mostly forgotten now, he was the tramp’s tramp, revered in his day as the “tramp authority,” which was Jack London’s phrase. His “Josiah Flynt” adventures on two continents in the 1890s appeared in some of the most prestigious publications of the period, including Contemporary Review, the Atlantic Monthly, the Century, and Forum. By mid-decade, Flynt’s name-recognition was pervasive enough to inspire a poem by Philip Morse.

Flynt claimed a scientific methodology for his work, an approximation based on field observation, he later said, of how his fellow
students at university in Berlin performed science lab experiments “to discover the minutest parasitic forms of life, and later publishing their discoveries in book form as valuable contributions to knowledge.” His purpose, he said, was “to give a picture of the tramp world, with incidental references to causes and occasional suggestions of remedies.” Contemporaries, such as the English poet Arthur Symons, described as unmatched his ability to transform himself into his tramp identity, “Cigarette.”

Flynt compiled his stories into a book, *Tramping with the Tramps*, which was published to appreciative reviews in all the major venues in 1899 and widely read. In a class of five hundred books the next year, librarians contacted for an annual *New York Times* survey voted it number twenty-two of the top fifty books.

The *New York Times* reviewer recalled that as Flynt’s articles began appearing, starting in 1891, readers reacted to his stories with incredulity, a “suspicion bred from the ‘literary’ treatment given of late to a great deal of reputed science,” but then came to understand that they were true, which “seemed incredible only because it was so novel.”

As the new century arrived, Flynt switched his focus to gambling and pool rooms and also produced short stories and a memoir, titled *My Life*, that a *Times* reviewer admired for its lack of artifice: “There are no insufferable reminiscences; he did not assume a pose and write a book about himself. The attitude is always that of the boyish investigator.” Flynt died the year before its publication in 1908. He was thirty-eight.

So much poseur journalism had been produced by the last years of the nineteenth century that by the start of the twentieth, reporter derring-do already had the feel of reporter derring-did. This did not, however, stop writers or the newspapers and magazine edi-
tors who published them from presenting stories conceived in this form. In February 1894, Stephen Crane, in the year before publication of *Red Badge of Courage*, performed two quick-hit acts of “class transvestitism” for the *New York Press*. The first piece, “An Experiment in Misery,” is an etching the poet John Berryman considered one of Crane’s finest. It brought Crane “a measure of the popularity” he sought. A week later, its flipside appeared, “An Experiment in Luxury.”

Given how common such stories were at the time, it is likely, as scholars suggest, that Crane was helped to publication both by the pairing of misery with luxury—though that, too, was a worn device—and his news sense: Coxey’s Army of the impoverished was just then on its march to Washington. Michael Robertson also notes Crane’s unusual skill at freeing his prose from the all-too-common ploys of “moralizing, sentimentality, and proposals for reform” and how the “catalysts of poverty and wealth” transformed his reporter’s consciousness as he immersed himself in each experience, however briefly.

At least two sociologists got into the undercover game as writers in the late 1890s. Alvan Francis Sanborn masqueraded as a tramp in a variety of lodging houses so that he could provide “transcripts from life. I have written true things simply about poor people” for a book he called *Moody’s Lodging House, and Other Tenement Sketches*, published in 1896. Walter Wyckoff, a lecturer in sociology at Princeton University, left home without a penny and spent two years trying to understand the life of the itinerant day laborer. Scribner serialized his book in its magazine and then published it in hardcover in 1897. In his introduction, Wyckoff explained what inspired him to move out of the library and set off incognito to do his research as a day laborer at West Point, as a hotel porter, as
a hired man at an asylum, as a farm hand, and as a logger. He titled his book *The Workers: A Study in Reality*, and said it was inspired by a chance encounter with a well-traveled adventurer whose “catholic sympathy with human nature, made him a man wholly new and interesting to me,” especially when it came to the large social questions. He said, “I could but feel increasingly the difference between my slender, book-learned lore and his vital knowledge of men and the principles by which they live and work.” He reported without preconceptions, he said, and produced an account that was “strictly accurate even to details; apart from confessed changes in the names of the persons introduced.”

As for Sanborn, the *Bookman* compared him favorably to Flynt in the way he “exploited the *vie intime* of the lodging-house tramp.” The reviewer also admired “the matter-of-fact brevity” in his descriptions of “disgusting and debasing details” and the way he struck a “blow to sentimentalism which is at the root of most of our mistaken dealings with the poor and the social outcast, by neither being shocked by facts nor seeing them for better or worse than they are.”

Another reviewer, this one writing for the *Critic*, compared Sanborn’s work somewhat less favorably to a book by Julian Ralph of the *New York Sun*, published at about the same time. *People We Pass* was a collection of short stories, sketches of life on the Bowery, derived from Ralph’s close encounters with the poor, amassed not by stealth or in disguise but “in the regular way of his business during a twenty years’ service as a reporter for a New York newspaper.” Though admiring of Sanborn’s work, the reviewer far preferred Ralph’s, even though it “lack[s] the romance attaching to Mr. Sanborn’s experiences in a disguise” and “is not so scrupulous in unpleasant details.”