

## THE BIRTH OF THE MYTHOPOETIC MEN'S MOVEMENT

by Thomas R. Smith

In opening himself to the possibility of teaching men, Bly . . . signaled a willingness to engage his own neglected or unexamined masculinity. His 1981 collection, *The Man in the Black Coat Turns*, articulates this change, not only in its title image but in poems such as "The Prodigal Son," "The Grief of Men," and "Fifty Males Sitting Together." The latter, a meditation on Bly's own isolation as a self-described "mother's son," was subsequently adopted as a key text by the nascent men's movement.

Soon other opportunities for teaching men arose. In California, the first Mendocino Men's Conference in 1983 became the prototype of the gatherings for which Bly was to become famous: a mix of inspired teaching by Bly, psychologist James Hillman, storyteller Michael Meade, and others, home-grown ritual addressing American men's lack of initiatory experiences, and alternately exuberant and tearful self-discovery.

Bly's decade of teaching and organizing such groups became the testing ground for his best-selling book-length essay, *Iron John*. In fact, Bly had chosen to teach that particular Grimm Brothers tale at his very first men's workshop for the Lama commune, one of a handful in the Grimms' collection he had identified as specific to the problem of male initiation. Bly's exploration of the "Iron John" story took a giant step toward the book it would eventually become in an interview, "What Men Really Want," conducted by Keith Thompson for *New Age Journal* in March, 1982. That interview probably did more than any other single source to alert American men to the potential of Bly's new concentration on masculinity. In the proliferating men's groups of the 1980s, new men would typically preface their introductions with the sentence, "I'm here because of that interview in *New Age Journal*."

Minnesota understandably became an epicenter of the new men's work, as Bly, responding to local demand, agreed to lead the first Mendocino-style conference to be held in northern Minnesota in September, 1984. . . . The 1984 conference directly inspired the formation of the Minnesota Men's Council, which met monthly into the mid-1990s at the YMCA on the University of Minnesota campus in Minneapolis. In 1987, Paul Feroe, who operated his Ally Press as a comprehensive clearing house for Bly's work, published *The Pillow and the Key*, an essay worked up from the Thompson interview, the first chapter of Bly's prose masterwork. A second chapter and chapbook, *When a Hair Turns Gold*, quickly followed.

Toward the end of this decade of ferment, Bly used the Twin Cities men's community as a sounding board for his work in progress. Fifty or sixty men would converge on the University Y on a Sunday evening to hear a new chapter and then respond. Bly has always demanded forthrightness of his audience, and these men, despite their admiration for Bly and his project, could be bluntly critical. Bly took it in stride, duly noting remarks that seemed to him on-target, whether positive or negative. I think we all left those sessions feeling that our intelligence had been exercised, honed, and privileged by this sharing.

In many ways, the five years on either side of 1990's publication of *Iron John* were the golden age of men's work in Minnesota and perhaps in the United States as a whole. At the time I was helping to edit a small men's literary journal, *Inroads*, and had many vigorous, sometimes heated discussions with fellow editors over whether the media attention which was sure to result from the impending publication of *Iron*

*John* was an altogether good thing. We and many groups like ours around the country had up until that point been able to conduct a disciplined exploration of masculinity with a minimum of outside scrutiny and judgment. During that time, we were effectively invisible to mainstream society and appropriately esoteric. We harbored serious doubts that a psychologically unsophisticated America could do anything but mock a men's movement based on poetry, storytelling, and Jungian psychology, and we were right to be wary, as subsequent events proved.

In January 1990, a Bill Moyers public TV special, *A Gathering of Men*, gave Bly's mythopoetic men's work its first big splash of national exposure. Moyers' presentation, interspersing thoughtful interview footage with scenes from a large workshop for men in Austin, Texas, effectively balanced Bly's private and public sides. Almost immediately, the Moyers program took its place alongside the *New Age Journal* interview as a major recruiting instrument for the new movement. The Moyers special also helped whet the reading public's appetite for Bly's forthcoming book.

The first hardcover copies of *Iron John* appeared in bookstores in early October, 1990. From our perspective almost twenty years on, it's difficult to recall the explosive power of this arrival. For a generation of confused and father-hungry men, *Iron John* signaled the beginning of a process of self-reclamation that would have far-reaching effects on our lives and the lives of our spouses, lovers, sons, and daughters. And for a multitude of women nervous about this whole enterprise of men redefining masculinity, it served to manifest extremes of fear and loathing over the next few years.

In the Grimm Brothers tale for which Bly titled his book, a boy discovers, in the person of a "wild man" covered with rust-colored hair at the bottom of a pond, a powerful teacher. In emphasizing the tempering of a modern man's psyche through acknowledgment of grief over the absence of the "wild man" in his life, *Iron John* proposed an alternative to the stoicism of traditional masculinity. Beneath the colorful mix of poetry, mythology, psychology, and social commentary lay a brooding conviction that the emotional isolation and violence of American men masks a hunger for fathering and male mentoring, a hunger heightened in a time of multiplying divorce rates and single-parent households.

I remember, reading *Iron John* for the first time, my admiration at how Bly had unified all those disparate ruminations previewed piecemeal in interviews, chapbooks and critiques at the Y. The sturdily handsome volume somehow made coherent that far-flung speculation and debate, and did so in a way that felt both organic and constructed, familiar and startling. Breaking the Grimm Brothers' story down into eight primary stages, Bly applied literary, psychological and mythological understanding to each of the main components, in a dazzling display of intellectual dexterity. *Iron John* represents Bly at the peak of his associative and intuitive power, adroitly weaving the varied threads of his learning into a rich tapestry. In *Iron John*, Bly really does give readers his all as a poet and thinker.

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