

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, 1896-1964

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This piece refers to the microfilm collection which is now included in the digital archive *Women's Studies*

Archive: Voice and Vision.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was an agitator and organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and an official of the Communist Party (CP). In an era when street life and mass strikes had a direct impact on ordinary people, Flynn's notoriety was akin to that accorded to media stars today. The Rebel Girl, as she was called, led immigrant workers in major strikes in Lawrence, Massachusetts and Paterson and Passaic, New Jersey. A great orator, Flynn saw court trials on labor issues as important extensions of organizing; she participated in fights for free speech in Missoula, Montana (1908), and Spokane, Washington (from 1909 to 1910). As part of her defense work, Flynn created the Workers' Defense League, an organization that fought for the victims of the post-World War I Red Scare. She also helped establish the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). She left a permanent record of her protest campaigns through her writing; she produced leaflets, pamphlets, and articles, as well as a regular newspaper column that ran for twenty-six years. Many of these materials can be found in this collection.

In 1905, while still in her teens, Flynn started speaking on street corners. Thus began her long political career, which was both dramatic and successful. Her personal life was equally interesting, though tragic. Gurley, as friends and family referred to her, was no prude; she gave speeches for the IWW on birth control and wrote poems and letters about her numerous romantic affairs, many of which left her broken-hearted. Born into a colorful family, she was a

gifted storyteller who liked eating, drinking, and having a good time.

Why is Elizabeth Gurley Flynn not better known among labor historians, American historians, civil libertarians, and activists? Unlike Emma Goldman or Margaret Sanger, she has not become an iconic figure of the feminist movement. A single collection of her writing has been published and she has been the topic of only one full-length biography and two Ph.D. theses. One of the reasons that Flynn has not received sufficient recognition is that she was a Communist and was jailed for her belief; McCarthyism left a deep scar on the American public and Communists are still vilified. As well, although Flynn was a leading member of the IWW, Americans tend to prefer rugged individuals rather than organization members. Up until the publication of the microfilm, there has not been an easily accessible collection of her work. The microfilm contains her writing, which depicts the complexities of her political life--a team player who was also a dissenter in the IWW and the Communist Party.

Flynn wrote for the unschooled masses; therefore, high school students as well as those doing doctoral research can easily read her work. She was personally affected by such major events as World War I, World War II, the Palmer Raids, and the McCarthy period. The microfilm includes her writings on these topics in the form of pamphlets, letters, columns, and drafts of her unpublished autobiography of her latter years. Her columns include articles about women's suffrage; International Women's Day; the Spanish, French and American Revolutions; portraits of Irish, French, Russian, and American revolutionaries, and of her relatives

and friends, both illustrious and unknown.

Insurgency came naturally to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Born in 1890 in Concord, New Hampshire, she was the eldest daughter of a family of reformers and activists. Her mother, Annie Gurley, who was related to George Bernard Shaw, emigrated from Ireland. She supported the family through tailoring, and resented her work being referred to as “sewing.” She advocated equal rights for women and endowed her children with a keen knowledge of Irish history, English classic literature, Greek mythology, and working-class solidarity. Thomas Flynn, her father, earned a living sporadically; his contributions to the family were political rather than economic. He made an unsuccessful run for the New York Assembly in 1920 on the Socialist Party ticket, though he did get more votes than the Republican candidate. The Flynn household was the center for Irish freedom fighters like James Larkin and James Connolly, who were impressed by Elizabeth’s intelligence and encouraged her rebellious nature.

The young Elizabeth Gurley Flynn attended Socialist meetings with her parents and read *The Worker* and other left-wing publications, as well as the works of Edward Bellamy, Upton Sinclair, Karl Marx, and Frederick Engels. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and August Bebel’s *Women and Socialism* finally propelled her into socialist activism. At fifteen, Flynn mounted her first soapbox to inaugurate her career as a “jawsmith,” as professional agitators were then called. Her experiences, along with her youthful beauty, her radiance, and her passion to remake the world, made Flynn a moving spokesperson.

By the end of 1906, Flynn had been arrested (for the first of many times) and was speaking regularly, using a style that appealed to the emotions and provoked arguments. Broadway producer David Belasco tried to lure her onto the stage, but she told him she wanted to “speak her own piece.” Attending classes seemed irrelevant and dull in comparison with bringing about a new socialist order, which she and her fellow radicals believed to be just around the corner, so Flynn dropped out of school (a decision she never regretted) and joined the IWW as an organizer.

As “One Big Union,” the IWW stood in direct opposition to the staid American Federation of Labor (AFL), which primarily organized skilled white men. Founded in 1905, the IWW was a new and irreverent labor union and social movement that sought to organize all workers--unskilled, immigrant, and migrant--regardless of race, sex, or creed. From 1906 to 1918, Flynn was one of the few female organizers among the Wobblies, as IWW members were called, and certainly the youngest, working alongside other flamboyant agitators, like Big Bill Haywood and Eugene V. Debs. Flynn used her energy, commitment, and oratorical talent in strikes and free-speech battles throughout the country.

In Minnesota’s Mesabi Range in 1908, she spoke to miners about the IWW. She fell in love with the West, and with IWW member Jack Jones. Flynn, who was naïve, romantic, and by her own account, lusty, married Jones in January 1908; she departed almost immediately to fulfill her speaking engagements. After two years of marriage, with her baby due, Flynn decided that she had fallen out of love and did not want to settle down. She left Jones and returned home to the Bronx to live with her supportive mother and sisters. Fred Flynn

was born on 19 May 1910. Flynn's family looked after him so that she could continue her life as an organizer. Flynn later regretted that she had missed being an attentive, present mother.

Flynn organized iron miners in Minnesota, copper miners and timber workers in Montana, textile workers in the renowned strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, silk workers in Paterson, New Jersey, and hotel cooks and waiters in New York City. The IWW met strong resistance, which sometimes turned violent. Towns tried to discourage labor organizers by enacting legal restrictions on free speech. Fueled by zealous commitment, the IWW generally regained the right to speak in public.

Flynn led the organizing operations in major strikes of the century. Lawrence, Massachusetts was a major textile-producing center in 1912. Flynn estimated that 30,000 workers were employed there in woollen mills. They were paid starvation wages to labor in dirty, noisy, unventilated, and unsafe mills. The IWW became the organizing core of the woollen workers' strike. Flynn gave speeches and took care of the logistics: arranging for outside speakers and entertainment, setting up schools and dances, organizing the food distribution, arranging to send the children away from the violence, and sustaining long parades and pickets that formed many blocks of human chains. The violence of the strike--one woman was killed and many people were beaten and injured--brought news reporters and humanitarians to Lawrence, fueling a nationwide protest that helped force the employers to negotiate. On March 14, 1912, the strike was settled; worker demands for wage increases and increased overtime pay were met. Another outcome of the Lawrence strike was

Flynn's encounter with the don of Italian anarchists, Carlos Tresca, who became her lover for fourteen years (from 1912 to 1926) and remained the love of her life until he was murdered in 1943. He edited an Italian-language anarcho-syndicalist newspaper, was a master of propaganda and agitation, and often aroused uncontrollable emotions, which frequently landed him in jail.

With the victory of the Russian Revolution, the American government grew alarmed about bolshevism and immigrant radicals. Repressive legislation was passed, culminating in the Palmer Raids. In 1919, IWW headquarters in many cities and towns were raided, IWW leaders were arrested, tens of thousands of immigrants were beaten and jailed, and some were even deported. These indictments decimated the IWW and other leftist organizations. Flynn's response was to mobilize a broad coalition called the Workers Defense Union (WDU) to represent these political prisoners, who numbered more than fifteen hundred. Over 170 labor, socialist, and radical organizations participated in this truly united front organization, which consisted of unions, cooperative apartments, vegetarians, consumers, and progressive women. Over the next five years, Flynn worked tirelessly to raise money, provide lawyers and bail, publicize the cases, visit prisoners, provide relief for prisoners' families, and appeal to government agencies to secure pardons. Most of the people she represented were poor and remained unknown, but a few, like Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, who were the focus of Flynn's energy from 1919 to 1926, became a worldwide cause célèbre.

Along with defense work, Flynn labored tirelessly on the Passaic strike of 16,000 woollen workers in 1926. The longest textile strike in history, it lasted over a year and was a dismal failure, partly due to sectarian battles between the Communist Party and the union. Flynn's hectic life, with its constant organizing and traveling, began to take a toll. In 1923, Flynn experienced betrayal and emotional devastation when Tresca - always a ladies' man - had a child with Elizabeth's younger sister, Bina. In 1926, Flynn finally suffered a physical and mental collapse.

Flynn spent most of the next ten years recuperating in Portland, Oregon, at the home of Dr. Marie Equi, an out lesbian who was involved in prison reform. Equi also provided abortions and dispensed birth control, which was then illegal. The hundreds of letters in the collection include one Flynn wrote to her sister Kathie in which she describes this period as one of the most difficult times in her life, but acknowledges that it gave her a chance to reflect, rest, and plan for the future. Prompted by the suicide of her brother, Tom, and a need to be with her son and her mother, who were both ill, Flynn returned east in 1937.

Shortly after her return to New York, Flynn became a member and a paid officer in the Communist Party of the United States. During the New Deal, the Communist Party was the nation's largest, most important left-wing organization. Having doubled its membership between 1936 and 1938 to just over 80,000, the Party was the largest it had been in its American history. Party leaders had long wooed Flynn because she had a devoted following. She saw joining the Party as a way to continue her IWW commitment to labor organizing and defense work. The transition was not entirely smooth,

however. Having come from a flexible anarchist movement, Flynn was unaccustomed to and uncomfortable with the discipline and doctrinal shifts often directed from Moscow. She preferred militant direct organizing to bureaucratic reform work, radio talks, and internal party politics. Her constituency remained the immigrant workers, and in the late 1950s and 1960s, the militant civil rights workers and students. Having come into the Party at the top, she never developed her own base, although she was one of its most popular speakers and columnists. Nonetheless, Flynn adjusted; she generally remained silent when she disapproved, carrying out back-and-forth Party policy in speeches and writings. However, in her personal writings, which are included in the microfilm, she jotted down her disagreements.

Flynn assumed the position of chair of the Women's Commission, a largely honorific, powerless post, and in 1938, was elected to the Communist National Committee, but she was more of a figurehead than a powerbroker. In 1942, Flynn ran unsuccessfully for a Congressional seat in New York, receiving 50,000 votes. Flynn was also a regular and popular teacher at the Party's Jefferson School and its national training school.

Flynn had barely settled into life with the Communist Party when she was ousted from the American Civil Liberties Union. She had helped found the ACLU and was on its National Board of Directors. In 1940, the ACLU demanded that Communists resign from its official posts. Flynn alone refused and defended her position. Denied a hearing, she was expelled. Flynn's expulsion for guilt by association haunted the ACLU; in 1976, the organization repudiated the ouster on the

grounds that it was inconsistent with its basic principles.

The Cold War period (from 1945 to 1955) was a difficult one, especially for Communist Party members and other leftists. During the New Deal and World War II, the Communist Party was tolerated because the Democratic Party needed its members to push liberal legislation and help organize the Congress of Industrial Organizations. As well, the Soviet Union was an American ally. After the war, the Soviet Union became the number one enemy, thus Communists in the United States were considered to be the enemies within. Communist Party members and sympathizers, suspected of being anti-American, were often shunned and even lost their jobs. Party membership declined almost fifty percent due to the repression and fear. In 1948, several members of the Communist Party, along with other radical aliens, were arrested and held for eventual deportation. Later that year, twelve top Party leaders--the entire National Board, with the exception of Flynn--were arrested for having violated the Smith Act by conspiring to teach, advocate, and overthrow the American government by force and violence.

With her expertise in defense organization, Flynn became the chair of the Smith Act Defense Committee. She toured the country, raising money for publicity, legal fees, and support for families of the accused, and alerting Americans to the threat to their basic freedoms - the right of assembly and the right to free speech. Anti-Communist hysteria mounted with the Korean War and the Rosenberg trial. Loyalty oaths were enforced and books were burned. The McCarran Act was passed, mandating government registration of Communists and members of Communist front organizations. The FBI

sent agents to disrupt the support committee meetings and sympathizers were considered guilty by association. States passed anti-subversion laws, and Communists were denied the right to unemployment and social security benefits and were evicted from their homes. Included in the microfilm are records of the CIA and FBI that document surveillance on Flynn: opening her letters; spying on anyone to whom she talked, including the waitress at the luncheonette where she ate breakfast.

In June 1951, a second group of Smith Act victims, referred to as "second-string CP leadership," were arrested and prosecuted. The *New York Times* described Flynn as the most notorious and important of the accused. Flynn acted as her own counsel, bearing the brunt of the courtroom offensive for ten months. She was eloquent, courageous, and witty, calling up her long career and her personal reasons for joining and advancing the Party. Judge Dimock was so impressed with Flynn's intelligence and her belief in the Bill of Rights that he offered her the option of spending the rest of her life in Russia as a substitute for prison. Flynn's reply to this unprecedented offer was unequivocal: "I am an American; I want to live and work in the United States of America. I am not interested in going any place else and would reject any such proposition." On 20 January 1953, all the defendants were found guilty.

From 1953 to 1955, Flynn waited while the case went through the appeals process; during this time, she wrote her autobiography, *I Speak My Own Piece*. First published in 1955 and republished in 1973 under the title *Rebel Girl*, it covered Flynn's life up to the period before she joined the Communist Party. The

autobiography, which is political rather than personal, minimizes her leading role in the IWW, probably in order to emphasize her Communist Party years; nevertheless, it is powerful, informative, and often exciting. On 11 January 1955, Flynn went to Alderson Federal Reformatory for Women in West Virginia to serve her twenty-eight-month sentence.

Flynn tells the story of her incarceration in *The Alderson Story: My Life as a Political Prisoner*, which she wrote after her release and published in 1963. Flynn was assigned to a maximum-security residence, although at the age of sixty-four, arthritic, overweight, and suffering from high blood pressure, she was clearly no threat. Flynn was much older than most of the prisoners and had a hard time with the noise and loud music, as well as the adolescent personalities of the other inmates. She used the time to read over two hundred books: poetry, plays, classics, philosophy, and psychology. She had intended to write the second half of her autobiography, but prison officials censored her writing and she even had difficulty obtaining paper.

Flynn left Alderson Prison on 25 May 1957. In the fall of 1956, during Flynn's last year in jail, Khrushchev made a speech to the Twentieth Party Congress that revealed Joseph Stalin's brutal crimes against his own party members. The Soviet invasion of Hungary soon followed. As a result of these developments, Communist Party membership in the United States declined by eighty-five percent--the largest percentage drop in its history. Therefore, a month after her release, Flynn was on the go again.

In 1960, Flynn attended a fiftieth anniversary celebration of International Women's Day in Copenhagen. She had wanted to visit the Soviet Union for some time, so she accepted many invitations to speak in the socialist world and celebrate May Day in Moscow. Flynn traveled for eight months and enjoyed the respect and recognition she had been denied under capitalism. She wrote such glowing reports from the socialist world that even the *Daily Worker* readers objected to her unadulterated praise. On returning to the United States, Flynn was elevated to the post of Party chair, but with her appointment, the job became largely symbolic.

Under the McCarran Act, passed during her absence, Flynn was now denied the right to travel. When the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the law, she returned to the Soviet Union to finish her autobiography in peace. However, her strength of spirit was not matched by strength of body; Flynn was hospitalized within a month of her arrival. She died on 5 September 1964, of stomach and intestinal inflammation aggravated by a blood clot to her lungs. Flynn was given a full-scale state funeral in Red Square, attended by over twenty-five thousand people. In accordance with her wishes, her body was returned to the United States to be buried in Chicago's Waldheim Cemetery close to the Haymarket martyrs. The *New York Times* gave her a substantial front-page obituary. In October, a memorial service was held for her at the Community Church, with over a thousand people in attendance.

For more than half a century, Flynn was a professional revolutionary and an agitator against capitalism. She spoke, organized workers, and wrote pamphlets, newspaper columns, and books to convince ordinary

people that private ownership and the profit system were inhumane and not part of the American revolutionary tradition. During her illustrious and stormy life, she was best known as a fiery orator, an adept organizer, and a remarkable publicist. As an indigenous Marxist of the heart, nurtured by class struggle and her parents' working-class socialism, her strength was her ability to communicate with working people. Her autobiographical writings, speeches, and articles, which are all contained in the microfilm, call attention to the crucial issues of the twentieth century--war, poverty, sexism, and civil liberties--and are written in a clear, simple style that generally avoids party rhetoric and political cliché.

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