

# ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN

1890-1964

AMMON HENNACY, AMERICAN ANARCHIST AND CATHOLIC worker, admired people, as he said, "who never chickened." Among those whom he praised for her consistency and courage was Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, whose life was dedicated to gaining rights for and improving conditions of workers. With Eugene Victor Debs and Emma Goldman, Flynn is one of the great radicals of the early 20th century, who suffered for her persistence: loss of her husband and a lover, dismissal from the civil liberties organization she co-founded, and—at sixty—imprisonment.

As a young woman Flynn, like Abby Kelley Foster, was famous for her beauty; with her clear voice and golden-red hair, she was a striking presence on the lecture platform and the picket line. In a memoir at the time of Flynn's death, Dorothy Day recalled the young rebel's effect on a crowd:

She charmed us out of our meager money; people emptied their pockets when the collection was taken for the strikers. I forsook all prudence and emptied my purse, not even leaving myself carfare to get back to the office. . . . In this way she aided countless workers—miners through the far West, workers in wheat, lumber, textiles, all have benefited from her early work.

Flynn gave her first speech for socialism at 16, in 1906, in the Bronx, with the encouragement of her parents and to the delight of reporters for the New York newspapers. From then until her death at seventy-four, she was the subject of articles detailing her defense of Wobblies in the Pacific Northwest and the Mesabi Iron Range; her stormy love affair with Carlo Tresca, the hero of the Lawrence, Massachusetts, strike in 1912; and other labor and civil liberties disputes. To her many other causes she added, during her last years,

that of prison reform; and *My Life as a Political Prisoner* (1963), about her twenty-eight months in Alderson (W. Va.) Federal Reformatory, is a powerful indictment of the system.

Born in Concord, New Hampshire, on August 7, 1890, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn grew up in the Bronx, where her mother insisted they settle in 1900. Her father, a ne'er-do-well, whom Elizabeth later accused of hiding behind her "radicalism" as an excuse for not holding a job, encouraged her interest in socialism. She read widely in the utopian novels and tracts of Mary Wollstonecraft, Edward Bellamy, and William Morris, and in her youth admired the anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, whom she met and followed. She joined the Industrial Workers of the World during its first year, in 1906, and two years later married John Archibald Jones, a miner active in the I.W.W. She had two sons by Jones, one of whom died in infancy; the second, reared principally by Elizabeth's mother and sister, died in 1940. After divorcing Jones, who expected her to give up organizing and agitation, Elizabeth Gurley fell in love with Carlo Tresca, a handsome Italian anarchist. Although they separated about 1930, she mourned him for many years after his death in 1943.

Victimized by various laws harassing radicals, particularly during the Red Scare following World War I, Flynn combined labor organizing and legal defense for workers. From 1926 to 1930, she chaired the International Labor Defense, many of whose members were affiliated with the Communist party; in 1930, she herself joined the party. In 1940, the American Civil Liberties Union, which she had helped to establish, expelled her from its executive board because of her communist affiliations, a decision rescinded only after her death.

In the second Red Scare, after World War II, Flynn was indicted for advocating the overthrow of the United States government. Later she described a typical political arrest in the McCarthy days:

On a hot morning in June, 1951, the bell of our apartment on East 12th Street in New York City rang insistently. A knock came on the door, too soon for anyone to have climbed the three flights of stairs after we had pressed the button to open the downstairs door.

Three F.B.I. agents, two men and a woman, roughly pushed their way past [my sister]. They stated they had a warrant for my arrest. I took the document and read it. It was for alleged violation of the infamous Smith Act. "For teaching and advocating the violent overthrow of the government, when and if circumstances permit," it said.

With several of her old associates, some crippled with age, one routed from a nursing home, she was brought to prison, where she endured further humiliation.

The second step after entering was to strip and leave all one's clothes in a side room where they were searched by an officer, while the prisoner was wrapped in a sheet and taken to the showers. Next we were ordered to take an enema and to climb on an examination table for examination. All openings of the body were roughly searched for narcotics by "a doctor"—a large woman who made insulting remarks about Communists who did not appreciate this country. I told her to mind her business. Once she became so animated in her opinions while she was taking a blood specimen that she allowed the blood to run down my arm. "Watch what you are doing," I said. "Never mind my politics, watch my blood.

Refusing to cooperate with the government in naming her associates in the party, she was sentenced to the federal penitentiary, where she remained from January 1955 to May 1957. A famous case involving her and the Marxist historian Herbert Aptheker brought a legal victory before the Supreme Court and enabled her to travel abroad. In the early 1960s, she visited several times in the Soviet Union. When she died in Moscow, on September 5, 1964, she received a state funeral in Red Square.

In a long, eventful, and often stormy public life, Flynn participated in most of the major struggles for justice during the first half of this century. Her autobiography, *The Rebel Girl* (1976), gives a detailed and instructive account of the education of a woman whose life was lived for the benefit of others. She gave up easier and more

conventional careers in order to side with the workers, a choice that Dorothy Day suggested had religious implications.

Gurley Flynn was of the laity, and she was also my sister in the deep sense of the word. She always did what the laity is nowadays urged to do. She felt a responsibility to do all in her power in defense of the poor, to protect them against injustice and destitution.

The title of Flynn's autobiography is taken from a song written for her by Joe Hill, the Swedish immigrant laborer and Wobblie balladeer. She had come to Hill's defense when he was arrested and brought to trial, as she had for so many young radicals; and Hill's words, later set to a ragtime tune, are a fitting tribute to "the rebel girl":

There are women of many descriptions  
In this queer world as everyone knows.  
Some are living in beautiful mansions,  
And wearing the finest of clothes.  
There are blue-blooded queens and princesses,  
All dressed in diamond and pearl.  
But the only and thoroughbred lady  
Is the rebel girl.

BY ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN

*The Alderson Story: My Life as a Political Prisoner.* New York: International Publishers, 1963.

*The Rebel Girl: An Autobiography—My First Life (1906-1926).* New York: International Publishers, (1955) 1973.

ABOUT ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN

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