

ACTIVIST TO ACTIVIST

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THE POLITICS AND RELATIONSHIPS
of
KATHLEEN LYNN

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FOREWORD

This is the first volume in the *Activist to Activist* series. The series will comprise of a collection of biographical studies focusing on the involvement of women in Irish public life or public life abroad. While we are sure that the series will be of interest to a wide general readership, these books are intended to do more than encourage intellectual curiosity about Irish women's history. We hope that in publishing these short studies on Irish women's lives, we can ensure their legacy is a continuing influence on the thinking and work of today's female activists — and, through them, on social, political and economic developments in Ireland today. Our authors are themselves women involved in Irish public life or Irish women activists working in other countries. They may be involved in community or electoral politics, the trade union movement, or the women's movement. Perhaps they are or have been active in campaigning for social reforms, civil liberties or human rights or on environmental issues. Through this book, and the volumes to follow, they will reflect on their own experiences to bring new perspectives to the lives of their subjects.

It is appropriate that the first subject in the series is Dr Kathleen Lynn. Dr Lynn is today remembered primarily for her outstanding contributions in the field of children's medicine and for her involvement in the Easter Rising of 1916. Although her name is frequently mentioned, detail of her work has been sparse.

We have known even less about the private side of Kathleen's life and Marie Mulholland has broken important new ground with the work presented here.

Kathleen Lynn was one of many young educated Irish Protestant women who, in the early years of the twentieth century, found themselves identifying with the progressive cultural, social and political movements of the day. They were women who, by virtue of their class position, had the economic independence that enabled them to involve themselves in political and social activism. Their educational advantage also gave them the intellectual and social skills that sometimes allowed them to move into positions of leadership. We remember them today, partly because their qualities of leadership and contribution to movements for social change were recognised and noted by their contemporaries. We are also able to reconstruct — however imperfectly — the lives of women like Kathleen because they also

left behind a documented record of their own lives. While celebrating the legacy of women like Kathleen, it is important to remember that the contributions and achievements of many of her sister comrades have been lost to us simply because their social standing precluded the documentation of their lives.

Kathleen, like many of her contemporaries, came first to an awareness of the need to challenge the mores of a patriarchal society that refused her equality with men. Her intellectual rigour and her sensitivity to the suffering and struggles of others led her to generalise this understanding to a holistic socialist-feminist analysis. Her strength of character required her to act on the basis of her analysis and to involve herself in a wide range of political organisations and work for social reform. Like her friend and comrade Constance Markievicz, Kathleen sacrificed many of the privileges enjoyed by other women of similar social background when she aligned herself with the disadvantaged and oppressed. A much greater sacrifice than the loss of economic security and physical comforts, however, was the estrangement from family and other close personal relationships.

Marie Mulholland's exploration of Kathleen's personal and political relationships has been so successful because she brings to it the insight of her own life as both an activist and a lesbian feminist. She is able to read between the lines and fill in the gaps of Kathleen's life by interpreting it through the prism of her own experience. Just as importantly, her telling of the story of Kathleen Lynn draws out the lessons and historical parallels for those of us who are activists today.

My path first crossed that of Marie Mulholland in 1978 at a women's liberation conference in England. I was a young feminist who had recently arrived in Britain from Canada. Marie was an even younger feminist who had recently arrived from Ireland. Marie came to my notice when she took the floor in anger to demand of English feminists that they oppose the British government's war in Ireland. Over the years our paths would continue to cross many times, particularly after we both came to settle permanently in Ireland. Marie's involvement in a wide array of causes and campaigns — as a trade unionist, a feminist, a lesbian, a socialist, and a Republican — has been tireless. To this she has now added the label of a historian. While her analytical skills have been honed, her passion remains undiminished. Like Kathleen Lynn before her, perhaps she too will encourage by her example a new generation of women activists.