

ACTIVIST TO ACTIVIST

*Edited* Ruth Taillon

THE POLITICS AND RELATIONSHIPS  
*of*  
KATHLEEN LYNN

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## Chapter 3

### KATHLEEN LYNN'S EASTER RISING 1916

We watched the little bodies of men and women march off – Pearse and Connolly to the GPO, Sean Connolly to the City Hall. I went with the Doctor in her car. We carried a huge store of first aid necessities and drove off through the quiet, dusty streets and across the river, reaching the City Hall just at the very moment Commandant Sean Connolly and his little troop of men and women swung around the corner and he raised his gun and shot the policeman who barred his way. A wild excitement ensued, people running from every side to see what was up. The Doctor got out, and I remember Mrs. Barrett – sister of Sean Connolly – and others helping to carry in the Doctor's bundle. I did not meet Dr Lynn again until my release, when her car met me, and she welcomed me to her house where she cared for me and fed me up and looked after me till I had recovered from the evil effects of the English prison system.<sup>1</sup>

Most accounts of the 1916 rebellion have Kathleen stationed at Dublin's City Hall throughout the action of Easter Monday, 24 April. Several other ICA women, including Madeleine, were stationed at St Stephen's Green. Ruth Taillon's account of City Hall and the activities of Dr Lynn are most detailed and rely on accounts from Matt Connolly, brother of Sean, and Jenny Shanahan, who was also stationed at City Hall.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Constance de Markievicz, *Cumann na mBan Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 10, Easter, 1926, National Library of Ireland.

2 Ruth Taillon, *When History Was Made, The Women of 1916* (Belfast, 1996) pp. 53–56.

## Kathleen Lynn's Easter Rising 1916

Sean Connolly's objective was to take Dublin Castle but a policeman barred the way, and Connolly shot him, as described in Markievicz's account above. He ordered his force to go in but a moment's hesitation meant that the gates were closed to them. Helena Molony fired a shot at the soldier responsible and another comrade hurled a bomb at the guardroom; but the bomb failed to explode and the attempt seemed doomed. Connolly decided that the advantage of surprise had been lost and ordered his small troop to take their positions in the adjacent City Hall and the *Evening Mail* offices on the other side of Dame Street. From these vantage points ICA sharpshooters could pin down the garrison at Dublin Castle. The rebels were well prepared for the siege at City Hall, having previously had copies of the keys of the building made.<sup>3</sup> Connolly's force was comprised of 16 men and nine women, among them the Norgrove sisters, Emily and Annie, Molly O'Reilly, Jenny Shanahan, Helena Molony, Katie Barrett (Sean Connolly's sister), Brigid Davis and Kathleen Lynn.<sup>4</sup>

Sean Connolly was wounded early in the afternoon of Easter Monday as he raised the tricolour over City Hall. By the time Kathleen crawled across the rooftop under fire to administer aid to him, he was dead, with his head cradled in Helena Molony's lap. Sean Connolly's death left Kathleen, a lieutenant in the ICA, as senior officer in charge of the outpost. Despite their vantage points, the small force, now without their commandant, came under heavy fire from the Castle. Helena Molony and Molly O'Reilly went to the GPO to ask for reinforcements but there were none to be had. City Hall and the *Evening Mail* offices were assailed by heavy machine guns. Later that same evening Kathleen sent for Sean Connolly's 15-year-old brother, Matt; she told him of his brother's death and the sterling nursing work being done by his sister Kate. Kathleen examined the young Matt and ordered him to get some sleep, relieving him from his post as sniper on the rooftop of

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3 Connor Kostick & Lorcan Collins, *The Easter Rising: A Guide to Dublin in 1916* (Dublin, 2000) p. 116.

4 Taillon, *When History Was Made*, pp. 53–56.

## Kathleen Lynn



Plate 5: Some of the women who took part in the Easter Rising. Photo taken in Ely O'Carroll's garden, 1916. Kathleen and Madeleine are seated on the ground in front row to right and left. *Courtesy of Kilmainham Gael and Museum.*

City Hall. It would appear that Kathleen's motive for this action was to prevent the death of another young man from the same family. Certainly, it did save Matt Connolly's life. Matt Connolly's memory of that night was awakening to find that, 'the building seemed to shudder and vibrate with explosions and machine gun fire. Glass crashed, doors and woodwork were being shattered, and somewhere in the distant part of the building a woman screamed.'<sup>5</sup>

Kathleen's diaries begin on Easter Monday 1916. Her description of events is short, even abrupt: 'Easter Mon. Revolution. Emer [Helena Molony] and I in City Hall Seaghan [sic] Connolly shot quite early in day.'<sup>6</sup> It is likely that Kathleen made this entry after the events in City Hall. It may have been

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Diaries*, 24 April 1916. This is the first entry in Kathleen's diaries.

## Kathleen Lynn's Easter Rising 1916

shock and secrecy that kept her account so brief, but one also detects the stoicism of the physician speaking.

After the capture of their outpost the women, among them the Norgrove sisters, Katie Barrett and Brigid Davis, were taken to Ship Street barracks, close to Dublin Castle. Kathleen wrote, '... we were locked up in a filthy store, given blankets thick with lice and fleas to cover us and some "biscuits" to lie on, not enough to go round'.<sup>7</sup> Another account of the 'store' where the women were kept recounts that it contained offensive-smelling rubbish bins that Dr Lynn insisted should be removed. As a physician she was aware that such debris and offal could cause serious risks to health.<sup>8</sup> There is some irony in this, given that the women had not only risked their health but put their lives in imminent danger for almost 24 hours before.

This sense of outrage at the conditions to which the prisoners were subjected has a particular basis in Republican rationale. Throughout the entire events of the Rising and the preparations beforehand, there was an adherence to military protocols of war and battle amongst the rebels and they followed an honour code. Macardle writes that The O'Rahilly, charged with finding a means of escape from the GPO, first assured himself of the safety of the 13 British prisoners that the rebel HQ had taken. Then, in an effort to advance scout a route out through Moore Street, he was shot dead.<sup>9</sup> The story of the Stephen's Green park keeper coming twice a day to feed the ducks, and combatants preserving a ceasefire to allow him to do so, has lost none of its pathos;<sup>10</sup> nor has that of Pearse surrendering his sword at the post in Parnell Street to Brigadier-General Lowe.

These stories capture the underlying sense, perhaps misplaced or even profoundly foolish, that both sides in a war subscribe to a belief in the essential nobility of the combatants. Kathleen, a woman notably succinct, took twice as long to recount the state of her prison quarters as she did to describe

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7 *Ibid.*

8 R. M. Fox, *The Green Banners. The Story of the Irish Struggle* (London, 1938) p. 153.

9 Dorothy Macardle, *The Irish Republic* (London, 1937) p. 164.

10 Kostick & Collins, *The Easter Rising*, p. 78.

Kathleen Lynn



Plate 6: Aftermath of shelling in Henry Street, Dublin, Easter 1916. Nelson's Column on O'Connell Street can be seen in the background. *Courtesy of National Library of Ireland.*

the traumatic events that preceded her captivity or even those that followed. This is an indication of her shock that her captors did not respect the honour code she expected to underpin the treatment of a surrendered foe.

Kathleen was held in Ship Street Barracks from 24 April to 1 May. The surrender of the rebels came on Saturday, 29 April, and was couriered to all remaining insurgent outposts by Elisabeth O'Farrell, who soon joined Kathleen in Ship Street.<sup>11</sup> The centre of Dublin lay in ruins; 142 British soldiers and policemen, 64 Volunteers and an estimated 254 civilians had been

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11 Interestingly, Elisabeth O'Farrell is buried in the National Grave Plot in Glasnevin. She died in 1957 and is buried with her 'faithful comrade and lifelong friend, Sheila Grenan'. The gravestone was erected in 1961. (Information supplied by Irish National Graves Association.)

## Kathleen Lynn's Easter Rising 1916

killed, and a further 2,000 wounded. Dublin's Fire Brigade Chief put the cost of damaged buildings at £1.1 million, with almost £1 million of stock lost.<sup>12</sup>

On 1 May Kathleen, like the majority of republicans arrested, was moved to Kilmainham Gaol.<sup>13</sup> The Gaol had been taken over as an army detention barracks at the start of the First World War, originally having operated as a convict prison until 1910. By the time the Republican prisoners arrived, the gaol was without heat or light because the gas supply had been cut off by the Irish Volunteers during the fighting. The women were held in the older west wing, built in the 1790s and in serious disrepair with very poor sanitary facilities.<sup>14</sup> Despite the conditions and the frightening uncertainty as to her eventual fate, Kathleen wrote on 2 May: 'Saw MiffM (Madeleine French-Mullen) early this mg. Greatest joy.'<sup>15</sup> Yet again, Lynn's brevity would belie the emotional content of the situation. The depth of her love for Madeleine and the affection between them would have made the intervening days and events until their reunion unbearable. The anxiety of not knowing where Madeleine was or even if she was alive are characteristically reduced to the simple but profound response of, 'Greatest joy'.

Kathleen, Madeleine and Helena Molony shared a cell together and consequently the conditions of her imprisonment were made more tolerable with the company of her most intimate friends. Constance Markievicz was kept in solitary confinement and allowed no contact with the others. Unknown to most of the women prisoners, the surviving male leaders of the Rising were also held in Kilmainham. As the executions took place the truth began to dawn: 'On Tues. Wed. Thurs. at 3am we heard volleys fired under cell windows. On Tues. 3, Wed 3, Thurs 1. We hear they have shot members of the Provisional Govt.' 'Heard 3 shots this mg. Told later on Mallin, Ceannt & Colbert had been shot'.<sup>16</sup>

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12 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

13 Kathleen Lynn's Diaries, 1 May 1916.

14 Sinéad McCool, *Guns & Chiffon: Women Revolutionaries and Kilmainham Gaol*, (Dublin, 1997) pp. 29–30.

15 Kathleen Lynn's Diaries, 2 May 1916.

16 *Ibid.*, 3–8 May 1916.

## Kathleen Lynn

Lt.-General Sir John Maxwell, commander of the British Forces in Ireland, decided who should be detained further and allocated the prisoners to their eventual places of confinement. Many of the women were released, their sex a deciding factor in their fate. On the evening of 8 May, the women in Kilmainham were ordered to the central hall. Those whose names were called had to cross to one side and were informed of their release.<sup>17</sup> Twelve women, known to the police before the Rising, were further detained. Despite Maxwell's distaste for imprisoning women, he believed it would be unwise to have these women 'at large'. Among them were Countess Markievicz, Helena Molony, Madeleine French-Mullen and Dr Kathleen Lynn.

On 10 May, Kathleen was moved to Mountjoy Gaol.<sup>18</sup> Kathleen's diary entries from this period cease one week later, on 17 May. During the first week of June, Kathleen's beloved Madeleine was released, along with four of her comrades. The remaining women were transported to England. Kathleen's family had influential contacts and strong representations were made to prevent her from being incarcerated in an English prison. They argued for Kathleen to be taken into care with a family friend, the rationale being that she was '... a sort of lunatic', as Kathleen later recalled.<sup>19</sup> Naturally, Kathleen rejected such interventions but the Great War had placed onerous demands on medical practitioners and physicians were urgently needed in England. With the help of Jenny Wyse Power, who took no part in the Rising, work was arranged for Kathleen with Dr Cusack, a Galway man working as a locum at Abingdon outside Bath. In July of that year, her sister Muriel was taken ill and permission was granted for Kathleen to return to Cong to minister to her. By the time she returned in August to Dr Cusack's practice the authorities had agreed she could

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17 McCool, *Guns and Chiffon*, p. 31.

18 Kathleen Lynn's Diaries, 10 May 1916.

19 Kathleen Lynn's statements to the Military History Tribunal. Lynn's Home Office 1916 files have been destroyed (D.R. Taylor, Home Office, to Ruane, 19 February 1996). See correspondence between Home Office, Dublin Castle and Dublin Metropolitan Police, National Archives of Ireland, 13503/6.



## Kathleen Lynn's Easter Rising 1916

return to Dublin.<sup>20</sup> Two of the women internees were released in July and the other three the following December. Constance Markievicz, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment, was released in June 1917.

Kathleen Lynn is described as 'the sole female doctor with nationalist sympathies'.<sup>21</sup> Just how did these sympathies develop to the stage where she jeopardised her professional and personal relationships by joining a revolutionary army and taking part in an armed uprising? Kathleen has left no intimate reflections on her involvement, nor any explanation of her motivations. In the absence of such material, a new lens must be taken to the personal records of the diaries.

In the week before her deportation, Kathleen's family and family friends commenced a concerted campaign to persuade her to disavow her comrades and her politics. The diary entries show how difficult this time was for Kathleen. These are the only sustained comments on her emotional responses to her situation and the first insights into the rift with her family. The day before her transfer to Mountjoy, she notes that a message was delivered to her from family friends, the Carletons, advising her 'to give up her Republican friends'.<sup>22</sup> The following day her father, 'Fardie', comes to remonstrate with her in Mountjoy and the visit is obviously a distressing one for both: '... it is hard to grieve one's father, but I could not do otherwise.'<sup>23</sup>

On 12 May, the family renew their assault. Both her sister and father visit her with disturbing effect:

A very black Friday. Fardie and Nan were here, oh so reproachful, they wouldn't listen to me and looked as if they would cast me off forever. How sorry I am for their sorrow! Erin needs very big sacrifices. I am glad they go home to-morrow. Why do they always misunderstand me?<sup>24</sup>

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20 NAI, 13503/16.

21 Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, p. 103.

22 Kathleen Lynn's Diaries, 9 May 1916.

23 *Ibid.*, 10 May 1916.

24 *Ibid.*, 12 May 1916.

## Kathleen Lynn

There is a poignancy to this entry. It is the voice of a daughter, a sibling whose actions have confounded and shamed her family, and she is bewildered by their reaction. Kathleen's final sentence implies that her troubles with the family are not new ones; the question does not appear to be rhetorical. Rather, it is a plea for understanding and enlightenment as to how she has become so dislocated from them. Some days later she writes, 'Saw D. Maguire yesterday and Dora Carleton, both very disapproving. Lizzie Smartt today the same'.<sup>25</sup> These are Kathleen's peers in background and social position. Kathleen had betrayed the expectations of her gender, her social class, the politics of that class, her family and her profession. She had sacrificed all that for a bloody, ill-fated armed rebellion, allying herself with people whom her family and their friends looked upon as a bunch of rebels and renegades. It is not difficult to understand the frustration and anger of her family and old friends. But how does one understand Kathleen?

Kathleen's mother Katharine died in 1915; her anniversary is noted regularly in the diaries and frequent trips to her grave in Deansgrange cemetery are recorded. After Katharine's death, Kathleen was closest to her mother's unmarried sister Florence. It was in the Dun Laoghaire home of dear 'aunt Flo' that Kathleen found unquestioning acceptance and perhaps something like the maternal love that she so missed. Kathleen is buried with Katharine Wynne, in the grave that Kathleen and Flo visited often together and where flowers were always laid.<sup>26</sup> It was to Flo that Kathleen turned for solace and acceptance, particularly during the years after her involvement in the Easter Rising, when she was barred from the family home in Cong. Kathleen's despair and anguish over the estrangement is most palpable in the diaries at Christmastime. Despite the sisterhood and company of women friends and comrades throughout the year, the traditional season of family and hearth was a painful reminder of her loss, Aunt Flo's open door notwithstanding: 'Christmas with Aunt F. a happy day, tho' lonely, they won't

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25 *Ibid.*, 17 May 1916.

26 Deansgrange Cemetery Plot No. 100/R.S./S.W.

## Kathleen Lynn's Easter Rising 1916

have me still at home<sup>27</sup> and '... when shall I go home again for Christmas?'<sup>28</sup>

Finally, in 1920, the family relented at the eleventh hour (one wonders had Aunt Flo a hand in persuading them), but stringent conditions were attached to her visit: 'Letter by this mgs [morning's] post to say I may go home for Xmas if I won't have a demonstration (do they picture bands?), or see people not their visitors. I'll go joyfully but come back Mon.'<sup>29</sup>

Kathleen can return, but only as a demure daughter, and there is to be no radical talk or presence in the family home. With this kind of censorship – in the midst of a reign of terror by Black and Tans, arrests, deprivations and sanctioned killings, and Kathleen herself in the preceding year having to flee raids and go 'on the run' on occasions – it is unsurprising to learn that, despite Kathleen's best intentions, the visit was fraught. Her father preached a sermon on St Stephen's Day denouncing nationalists and justifying the actions taken against them. Not satisfied to insist his daughter submit to his will whilst in his home, he then willfully and publicly provoked her: '... Evening sermon annoyed me much, hate my father to be unfair. He should say nothing if he can only think of police'.<sup>30</sup> Despite her obvious desire to be accepted into the family and her efforts to comply with their conditions, Kathleen's was not a prodigal return to the fold. She took a stand against the family's condemnation of her beliefs, precipitating a row before her departure: 'We had argument re murders etc. before I left. I hope they take it as it was meant, for they only see one side...'<sup>31</sup>; 'they' being not only her father but also her two sisters Muriel and Nan. Muriel was a staunch Unionist and after Independence took up residence in Northern Ireland, stating her preference for living under the Union Jack.<sup>32</sup> The family had tested her desire to be with them and it appears that this

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27 Kathleen Lynn's Diaries, 25 December 1917.

28 *Ibid.*, 16 December 1918.

29 *Ibid.*, 24 December 1920.

30 *Ibid.*, 26 December 1920.

31 *Ibid.*, 27 December 1920.

32 Author interview, 9 May 2000.

## Kathleen Lynn

may have been anticipated, at least by Madeleine. The same entry ends, '... M [Madeleine] met me, she and I are glad I'm back.'<sup>33</sup> One can surmise the discussions between them before Kathleen returned to Cong and Madeleine's anxieties for her whilst there. The two often travelled separately on political business around the country or on errands for St Ultan's. It was unusual for Madeleine to meet Kathleen's train and it indicates the concern she must have felt for Kathleen's emotional well-being whilst at Cong. It is also interesting to note that Madeleine never accompanied Kathleen on any of her trips to the Lynn family home.

Robert Lynn died in 1923 and Kathleen was with him at the end.<sup>34</sup> It is not known if there had been a reconciliation between the two, given her determination to have her family accept her as she was. A tentative, perhaps conditional, arrangement seems to have allowed her to remain in contact, including infrequent visits to Cong up until the time of her father's death. The effort to remain in touch with her family seems to have emanated solely from Kathleen and required the sublimation of her own sensibilities as the price of their toleration. After 'Fardie's' death, Kathleen's unmarried sisters had to vacate the rectory for the next incumbent. The diaries indicate that Kathleen was keen to have them live close to her in Dublin. She made several efforts to find them appropriate accommodation, which were rejected.<sup>35</sup>

An interesting postscript to the Lynn family dynamics is the disappearance – after their mother's death – of Kathleen's younger and only brother, John. In the same year of her father's death, 1923, a diary entry on 3 November reads: 'John's birthday. Where is he to-day? I think off [sic] when I first heard of his birth, dear John.'<sup>36</sup> Ruane's research has uncovered that John, without taking leave of the family, had gone with his wife to Australia, later deserting her there whilst she was pregnant with a third child. In later years, Kathleen tracked down this

33 Kathleen Lynn's Diaries, 27 December 1920.

34 *Ibid.*, 8 April 1923.

35 *Ibid.*, April-May 1923.

36 *Ibid.*, 3 November 1923.

## Kathleen Lynn's Easter Rising 1916

family and established contact with her only nieces and nephew.<sup>37</sup>

Kathleen's decision to become a doctor and the commitment it required – at a time when women were barred from many professions and their education still regarded as something of an aberration – indicates a profound motivation. Her strong sense of social justice led her to dedicate her skills to the service of the most disadvantaged, but in particular to the most vulnerable of all, the children. We can only speculate as to whether childhood experiences of vulnerability within her own family were at the root of her passionate empathy for her young patients.<sup>38</sup> Kathleen exerted herself far beyond most of her medical peers in her efforts to provide a more holistic approach to the physical and emotional needs of her charges. When she introduced Dr Maria Montessori and her methods to St Ultan's in 1934, Montessori had been denounced by the Vatican for her promotion of children's emotional and sexual consciousness. Ruane has pointed out that 'Both doctors shared a profound belief in the essential human and civil rights of the child'.<sup>39</sup> Kathleen was on a quest. It was not enough to save infants and children from the diseases and illnesses caused by poverty and neglect, nor to prevent the occurrence of such diseases by introducing the pioneering vaccination treatment of Drs Stopford-Price and Alston. Kathleen viewed children as individuals with rights and emotional needs.<sup>40</sup>

This was her life's work as a physician, a vocation developed in early childhood. There is little more than brief factual material on Kathleen's early life, most of it relating to the genealogy of her parentage and her father's professional progress. Neither was Kathleen given to introspection or much personal reflection in her own writings. She was a woman who acted, who identified an injustice in need of redress and took both personal and political steps to ensure its eradication. Even in this most

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37 Author interview, 9 May 2000.

38 Interview with Ruane, where Kathleen's father's authoritarianism was discussed, 9 May 2000.

39 Ruane, *Ten Dublin Women*, p. 66.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

## Kathleen Lynn

basic of instincts, she differed from her family and siblings. It would appear from the few reminiscences left to us by Kathleen that her perceptions of conditions around her and her responses to them were at variance with those of her family from an early age. Kathleen, like many of the new generation of medical women, put her skills at the service of those most in need, but she went further than any of her contemporaries. Having witnessed grave social inequities, Kathleen was impelled to take direct action to overthrow the system she held responsible.