

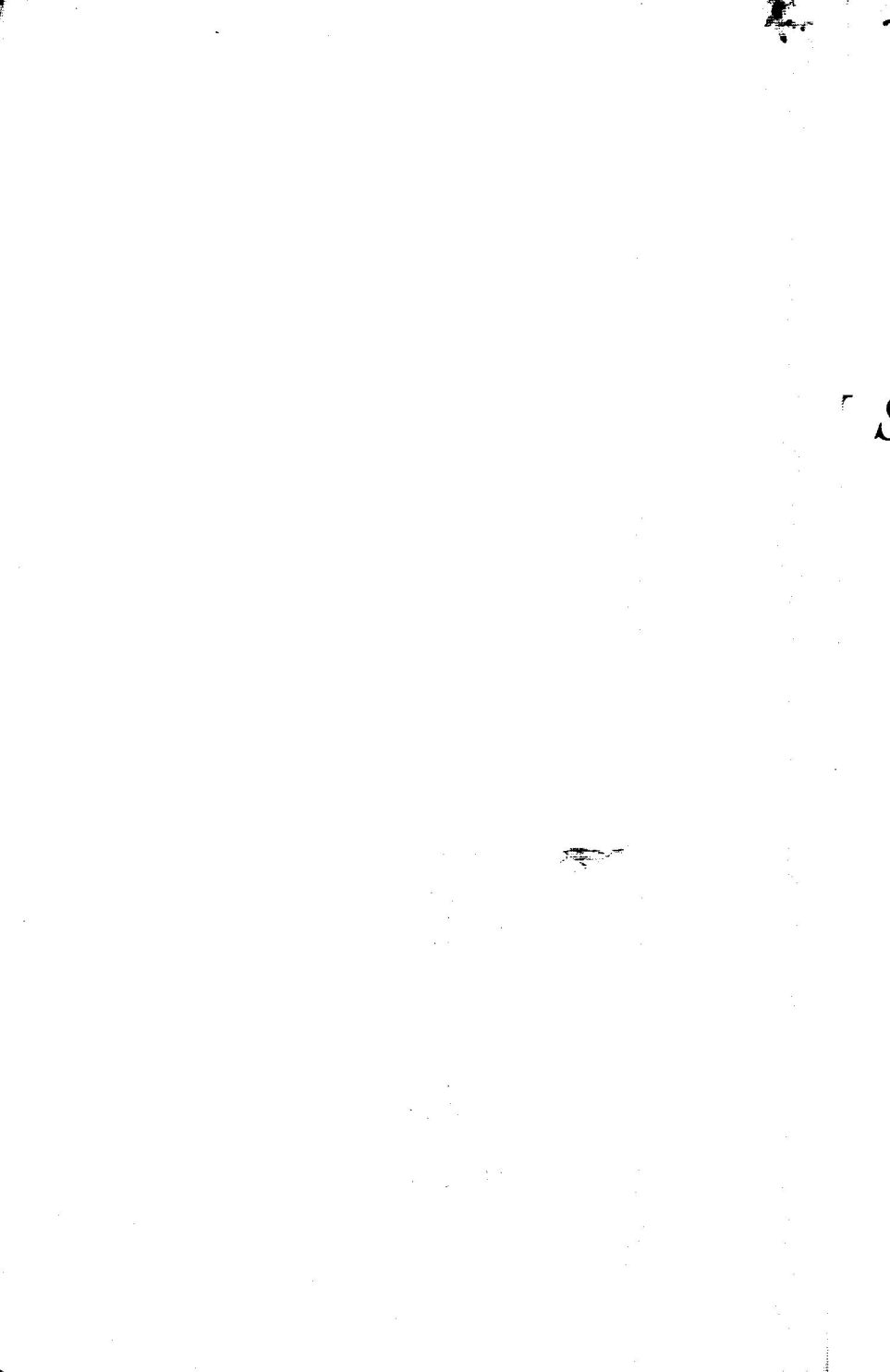
ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN

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I speak
my own piece

*Autobiography
of
"The Rebel Girl"*



I SPEAK MY OWN PIECE



I Speak My Own Piece

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
"The Rebel Girl"

By ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN

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Dedicated

To the ever living memory of my dearly beloved only son, Fred Flynn, who died March 29, 1940, at the age of 29. He was my friend and comrade—loving, encouraging, humorous, active in progressive labor politics—to whom I promised this book would be written, and to whom I consciously dedicated my life's work, before and after his death.

Preface

HERE IS the story of my life. This first book deals with my childhood and early youth; my becoming a Socialist at the age of sixteen; my activities as an I.W.W. agitator and strike leader up to 1918; and my subsequent work in defense of civil liberties and labor's rights in World War I and, during its aftermath, of the Palmer raids. It ends with the period of 1920 to 1927 and my close identification in those seven years with the struggle to free Sacco and Vanzetti. The second book will deal with my period of inactivity, due to illness, and my careful examination and evaluation of my twenty-one years of previous activities, which led me, to my mind logically and irrevocably, to join the Communist Party, in 1937. It will portray my life, as a Communist, for the ensuing eighteen years—up to the present day. Many have written as ex-Communists. This second book will be the story of an active American Communist and one who is proud of it. No matter what are the consequences, "I will never move from where I stand!"

I have tried to write this first book from the viewpoint and in the context of my experiences at the time, avoiding superimposing the viewpoint of the writer at the age of sixty-five, which will be fully developed in the second volume. I feel it is important for me to set down here my personal recollections of this earlier part of the century, a period full of heroic struggles on the part of the American working class, especially the foreign born. As the reader will see, the years 1906 to 1927 were full of "force and violence" used by the ruling class in America against the workers, who gave their lives, shed their blood, were beaten, jailed, blacklisted and framed up, as they fought for the right to organize, to strike and to picket. Struggles—for a few cents more an hour, for a few minutes less work a day—were long and bitterly fought. Nothing was handed to the American working class by employers on a silver platter. All their hard-won gains came through their own efforts and solidarity.

It was my privilege to be identified with many of these earlier labor struggles and the heroic men and women, particularly of the "Left," who made labor history in those days. They should never be forgotten. I feel I have a responsibility to share my memories of them with younger generations and to make available this record of their noble words and deeds. They were flesh and blood of the American working class. I hope this book will help to encourage and inspire others to follow in their footsteps, not only along the path they made wider, smoother and clearer for us today, but to travel far beyond, toward the horizons they glimpsed—peace on earth, and an America free from poverty, exploitation, greed and injustice—a Socialist America. To this I have happily dedicated my life.

ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN

Paddy the Rebel

BY BIRTH I am a New Englander, though not of Mayflower stock. My ancestors were "immigrants and revolutionists"—from the Emerald Isle. I was born in 1890, at the end of a most tragic century for "that most distressful country," which had suffered under British rule for over 700 years. There was an uprising in each generation in Ireland, and forefathers of mine were in every one of them. The awareness of being Irish came to us as small children, through plaintive song and heroic story. The Irish people fought to wrest their native soil from foreign landlords, to speak their native Gaelic tongue, to worship in the church of their choice, to have their own schools, to be independent and self-governing. As children, we drew in a burning hatred of British rule with our mother's milk. Until my father died, at over eighty, he never said *England* without adding, "God damn her!" Before I was ten I knew of the great heroes—Robert Emmet, Wolfe Tone, Michael Davitt, Parnell, and O'Donovan Rossa, who was chained hand and foot, like a dog, and had to eat from a tin plate on the floor of a British prison.

When the French army landed at Killalla Bay in 1798, on an expedition planned by Wolfe Tone, to help free Ireland, all four of my great grandfathers—Gurley, Flynn, Ryan and Conneran—joined them. They were members of the Society of United Irishmen, dedicated to set up an Irish Republic. Fired with enthusiasm over the French revolution and the success of the American colonies, they were determined to follow their examples. Young Irishmen for miles around dropped their potato digging when they heard "the French are in the Bay." The French armed the Irish, who had only pikes for weapons, and together they defeated the British garrison at Castlebar. The story is that Paddy Flynn of Mayo County, known far and wide as "Paddy the Rebel," led the French eighteen miles around through the mountains, to attack the British from the rear. The Irish revolution was finally crushed in a sea of blood by General Cornwallis, who had surrendered to George Washington at Yorktown.

A reign of horrible terror and reprisal against the Irish followed—floggings, executions, massacres, exile. Paddy Flynn lay in a ditch near his home all night till he heard that a baby was born. Then he was "On the run!" again with a price on his head,

fed and protected by the peasants, like hundreds of his countrymen. Others fled to France, some came to the Americas, others were shipped to Australian penal colonies. Irish songs reflect this period—"Who dares to speak of '98?" and "Here's a memory to the friends that are gone, boys—gone!" Paddy slipped around the hills he knew so well. Once he lay in the center of a ripe wheat-field, while the peasants, knowing he was there, slowly cut and reaped all around him, and the British soldiers rode past, looking for rebels. Finally he reached the home of his foster brother, who was a landlord, but one who had a loyalty to the son of his peasant wet-nurse, and with whom he grew up as a lad. So he hid him away safely in the barn.

But my bold adventurous great-grandfather-to-be had a gun, a blunderbuss it was called, that "shot a hatful of bullets." He couldn't resist taking aim at the wild geese as they flew over. A "loyal" (pro-British) weaver heard the shot and came after him with a shuttle board, demanding his surrender. "A fine challenge!" cried Paddy, and shot the king's spokesman. A neighbor digging peat nearby threw down his spade and rushed to town spreading the news: "Paddy Flynn is in the bog shooting yeomen!" All his friends rushed to his aid while the British sent out a searching party. But he was over the hills and far away again. After several years, pardons (amnesty) were granted, and he came home to live to a ripe old age. He had two wives and eighteen children, who later scattered as immigrants to all continents. When he was dying, his last words were—"I want to see the French land on this coast once more!"

My grandfather, Tom Flynn, was one of the many sons of Paddy the Rebel. He was arrested in Ireland as a boy of sixteen, when caught fishing for salmon on a Sunday morning, at an hour when everybody was expected to be in church. The river was considered the private property of the landlord. Enraged because hungry people could not have the fish for food in a famine year, Tom Flynn threw lime in the water so the fish floated bellies up, dead, to greet the gentry. Then he ran away to America. His widowed mother, with her other children, followed during the '40's. The widow Conneran, with her large family had come earlier in the '30's. They travelled on small sailing vessels that took three months, carrying their own pots and pans and doing their cooking on board. The ships were crowded and unsanitary. Cholera

would break out and some were to be held in quarantine in St. John's, New Brunswick. Tom, who was there to meet his family, hired a row boat and rescued a brother and sister and as many others as he could load in the boat. He laid them in the bottom, covered them over and started away. A guard shouted, "What have ye there?" Tom boldly replied, "Fish, do you want some?" The guard replied, "No, just keep away from here!" which Tom gladly did, with a hearty "Go to Hell!" which was ever on his lips for a British uniform.

Life was hard and primitive for these early Irish immigrants in isolated settlements in the state of Maine. Grandfather Tom Flynn worked in lumber camps, on building railroads, as an expert river man driving logs, and in granite quarries of Maine and New Hampshire. The climate was more rigorous than their own mild country. The work was harder than agriculture in Ireland. So many died from tuberculosis that it was called "the Irish disease."

Undoubtedly "stonecutter's consumption" was what we know today as silicosis. Grandfather Flynn had an obsession against living in another man's house. He built a new cabin wherever he moved, by setting up a keg of whiskey and inviting all hands to help him. He became an American citizen in 1856. He voted for Abraham Lincoln in 1860. He married my grandmother at Machias, Maine, where my father was born in 1859. She was little and pretty and had a violent temper. (That's where we get it, Sister Kathie says.)

Grandfather died of consumption in 1877 at Pennacook, New Hampshire, then Fisherville, where he is buried. He was only forty-nine years old. He was ever a fighter for freedom, in the spirit of his father. Dissatisfied with the bad living and working conditions, the lack of education for his children, and the prejudice and discrimination against the Irish, he at one time joined with others in an expedition to overthrow the Canadian government and set up a republic there. They captured an armory from the surprised Canadian militia and then got drunk to celebrate. But when they had to return across the border for lack of supplies, their leaders were arrested by the American authorities. Again in 1870 and '71 my father remembered that similar attempted raids were made on Canada. Gay, fighting old Paddy the Rebel has lived on, even unto the third generation.

The Name "Gurley"

MY MOTHER, Annie Gurley, landed in Boston in 1877, at the age of seventeen. She was very beautiful, with blue-black hair, deep blue eyes, a soft white skin and regular features. She had a clear and cameo-like profile. She came from Galway on the west coast of Ireland, where it is reported the people have "Spanish blood," flowing from the shipwrecked sailors of the defeated Spanish Armada, who settled there in the 16th century. To this is attributed our black hair. The first of the Gurleys, her aunt Bina and later her uncles James and Mike, had come to Concord, New Hampshire, before the Civil War, in the migration which took a million men and women, from 1847 to 1861, away from Irish famine and political persecution. My mother was the oldest girl of thirteen children, but she was brought up away from home by her Gurley grandparents and spoke only Gaelic in her childhood. She had a faint trace of it in her speech.

Her childhood in Loughrea was a happy one. The Gurleys in Galway, where they say, "God bless us!" were much more prosperous than the Flynns in Mayo, where they say, "God help us!" She lived on a farm, where there were all sorts of domestic animals. She was taught at home by her uncles, because they boycotted the National (British) schools. Her grandmother, kind to all others, would give nothing to a "uniform." She refused food, milk, or even water to British soldiers, who had to go seven miles further to town for supplies. When the Irish labor leader, James Larkin, once criticized American women for smoking, my mother said smilingly: "Well, Jim, I used to light my grandmother's pipe with a live coal from the hearth!" When another Irish friend turned up his nose at "the garlic-eating Italians," she told him that her grandmother used to pull up garlic in her garden like radishes and eat it raw. She had a theory that the Irish were "the lost tribes of Israel" and told us how her grandfather killed animals for food in the same manner as the Jewish people, and that Saturday began the Sabbath and all work closed on his farm. Mama did not deny the faults or glorify the virtues of the Irish, as our father did. We were amused at this and often said, "Papa is more Irish than Mama and he never saw Ireland!"