Elizabeth Gurley Flynn

Joe Hill, the legendary Industrial Workers of the World troubadour, was executed in Salt Lake City in 1915. One of the last songs he wrote was in honor of the woman who led the legal battle against his execution. “Rebel Girl” is not just proof of Hill’s immense talent. It is also a testament to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn’s indomitable radical spirit and remarkable historical significance. Lara Vapnek’s *Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: Modern American Revolutionary* rekindles scholarly attention on an individual whose trajectory truly encapsulates much of the history of radical America.

Born into a family of proud Irish nationalists, Flynn was a precocious star of the socialist-anarchist scene of the early twentieth century. An outstanding orator, she started her career on the stand at just sixteen years old in Lower East Side New York, rapidly earning the title of “East Side Joan of Arc.” Her skills took her across the entire United States to Europe and as far as the Red Square in the 1950s, where she spoke in front of thousands of Soviet citizens alongside the USSR leader Nikita Khrushchev. As Vapnek remarks, “Flynn devoted her life to two causes, workers’ empowerment and women’s equality” (p. 1). She was prominent within two radical organizations of her time, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). She was a highly innovative activist, promoting protest and litigation methods that would influence radical movements in the US throughout the twentieth century. She was one of the planners behind the decision to send the hungry children of Lawrence textile strikers to families in other parts of the country—a stroke of genius that tipped the strike in favor of the protesters. She also helped conceptualize and put into practice free speech protests that flooded county jails with volunteer arrestees, and thus forced local police to back off because of the cost. This earned several crucial court victories for the IWW. Flynn’s less-publicized contributions include civil rights activism in favor of radicals of all stripes during the first Red Scare and outspoken support for women’s rights from within the CPUSA during the 1930s and 1940s. Flynn was someone with multiple skills and multiple flaws, her most evident the uncritical support of the Soviet Union. For this, her standing within the Left suffered greatly.

Vapnek’s book joins a high-quality but limited literature focused on Flynn. The collection *Words on Fire: The Life and Writings of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn* (1987), edited by Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall, was the first work to establish Flynn’s historical
relevance. In a dense introduction that mixed personal insight and historical analysis, Baxandall explored not just Flynn’s political ideas but also her personal life, from her complicated love affair with anarchist activist Carlo Tresca to her friendship with the gay doctor Marie Equi. Helen C. Camp’s *Iron in Her Soul: Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and the American Left* (1995) stands out as Flynn’s ultimate biography. Deeply researched and artfully written, this is the go-to book to find information and critical analysis about Flynn’s long and eventful life.

Vapnek’s biography is part of the Westview Press series Lives of American Women, whose goal is to provide “accessible writing and compelling narratives, without sacrificing sound scholarship and academic integrity” (p. iii). Through the use of primary sources; up-to-date historiography about radicalism, immigration, and feminism; thematic coherence; multiple levels of investigation; and elegant but accessible prose, *Elizabeth Gurley Flynn* sheds light on an extraordinarily gifted woman. Despite its short length, the book covers the main periods of Flynn’s political activity from the 1900s to the early 1960s.

Vapnek’s analysis reveals that Flynn’s early political activism, discussed in chapters 2-5, focused on one overarching goal: ensuring that American radicals had their civil rights respected. From her free speech protests in the 1910s to her role in the founding of the American Civil Liberties Union in 1920 to the countless legal battles as head of the Workers Defense Union in the 1920s, the civil rights of workers and radicals were a constant focus of her political activism. Flynn’s political activism and own civil rights were also the focus of her legal battles with the FBI and the US government after World War II. Flynn maintained her allegiance to the CPUSA despite the intensified government persecution and mounting anticommunist hysteria. Vapnek highlights the absurdity of a government that crossed legal and moral lines in order to pursue its political goals in the form of a rabid anticommunism. Vapnek also emphasizes Flynn’s own double standard when it came to the Soviet (USSR) regime, during its Stalinist period and afterwards. Flynn was as adamant and unforgiving in denouncing civil rights violations in the US as she was blind toward the violations of basic civil liberties in the USSR.

There is a delicate intermixture of personal and political events that runs throughout Vapnek’s book. Flynn’s relationships with her parents, siblings, and son feature as prominently as her interactions with IWW and CPUSA leaders, as does her tumultuous relationship with Tresca and the ten-year stay in Oregon with Equi. Even Flynn’s physical appearance is contextualized within a broader understanding of her private and public persona: her striking physical presence during her youth and, later in life, weight fluctuations tied to the ups and downs of her private and public achievements and tribulations.

In a country at peace with its left-wing (and especially Communist) history, Flynn’s life would be an obvious subject for trade books, movies, and other popular culture media. Her’s is a fascinating story of success and failure, passion and betrayal, defeat and reinvention. Vapnek’s work is an excellent starting point in an effort to lift the silence that surrounds her legacy. This biography will be of interest to students and scholars interested in American feminism, radicalism, and labor history.
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