



Kathleen Lynn: converted to republicanism through suffrage



A pioneering doctor and a devout Protestant, Lynn brought a feminist, socialist slant to the campaign for independence, writes **Mary E Daly**

Kathleen Lynn was one of a number of atypical women who played an active role in both 1916 and the campaign for independence. She was a devout member of the Church of Ireland, a committed socialist and feminist and a pioneering doctor.

She was born in 1874 and in 1894 became a student at the Catholic University Medical School, the forerunner of UCD School of Medicine. While this might seem an unusual choice for the daughter of a Church of Ireland clergyman, Trinity College Dublin did not admit women at that time. There were six women in UCD's medical school and four were Protestants.

After qualifying as a doctor in 1899, Lynn spent several years in the United States, where women-only medical schools and hospitals that were run entirely by women doctors were not uncommon.

Following her return to Ireland, in 1909 she became a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland — the third woman to achieve that distinction. She found it difficult as a woman to secure residency positions in Dublin hospitals, so she set up practice at her home in Belgrave Road, Rathmines, combining this with a post in the Eye and Ear Hospital.

Lynn's political involvement began around 1913. Her mentor was Helena Molony, the Abbey actress, socialist and feminist. They met when Molony was staying in the home of Constance Markievicz and became Lynn's patient. Through Molony and Markievicz, Lynn met James Connolly. She worked in Liberty Hall during the 1913 lockout, an experience that made her conscious of Dublin working-class families' acute poverty and ill-health.

She was also active in suffragist circles — a member of both the moderate National Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association and the radical Women's Socialist and Political Union, which brought her into contact with Sylvia Pankhurst, the British suffragist leader.

The campaign for women's right to vote was at its peak in 1910-14, and Ireland played a central role. John Redmond's Irish Party held the balance of power at Westminster. If the party had supported female suffrage, it might have been carried, but

She was released soon after her arrest, however, because her medical skills were needed to fight the flu pandemic

Redmond insisted that Irish MPs (many of whom had previously voted for the measure) should support the government and oppose it to ensure Home Rule. He also rejected demands to include a clause giving votes to women in the Home Rule Bill.

Lynn later said she "was converted to republicanism through suffrage". In the heady years of 1914-16, she was a member of the Irish Citizen Army and Cumann na mBan, teaching first aid to both groups.

She was one of the few who had advance knowledge of the 1916 Rising, though she didn't know the details. Lynn owned a car and drove Connolly to a number of meetings. In Easter Week 1916, she was a captain of the Irish Citizen Army, based at the City Hall, and she was one of 90 women arrested after the Rising. She was held in Dublin Castle, Kilmainham Gaol and Mountjoy Prison before being deported to England but she soon returned to Ireland — apparently unchallenged — to care for a sick sister.

By the end of 1916, she had resumed her medical practice, though she had lost many of her patients and her post at the Eye and Ear Hospital because of her involvement in the Rising. She was also estranged from her father and unable to join her family at Christmas.

Friends:
Countess
Markiewicz
and
Kathleen
Lynn



'May England repent of her evil ways'

Letter to the Editor from Kathleen Lynn to the Irish Independent on November 9, 1920

Prayer for England

Sir — May I suggest to my fellow-countrymen and women that Nov. 11th, Armistice Day, be observed throughout the country by united prayer for England. That on that day, as England remembers the dead who died for freedom of small nations, her eyes may be opened to the iniquities

being perpetrated daily in Ireland by her armed forces. That she may repent of her evil ways, and by divine mercy be shown what is right, and given grace to follow it.

Our ecclesiastical leaders are unanimous in declaring that only prayer now can avail to bring peace to our persecuted country: therefore, let us join together in prayer for our persecutors and those who hate us, and assuredly a great blessing will come to our beloved country.

KATHLEEN LYNN (Dublin)

Irish Independent

The following wrote associating themselves with Dr Kathleen Lynn's suggestion:

Kathleen Clarke, Aine Bean Eamonn Ceannt, Lillie Connolly, Mary O'Hanrahan, Mary Barry, Margaret Daly, Margaret Pearse, Mary S Kettle, Una Mallin, N Bean Uí Gathgaille, Maud Gonne MacBride (inset), Mary MacSwiney and Annie MacSwiney, the sisters of the late Lord Mayor of Cork.



Irish Independent

'She did not want to be an alarmist, but the disease had spread very rapidly in America'

Published in the Irish Independent, February 5, 1920 under the heading 'Influenza menace'

Dr Kathleen Lynn's warning

Dr Kathleen Lynn, at a meeting of the Rathmines Council yesterday, urged the importance of having steps taken to combat an outbreak of influenza: and, on the motion of the chairman (Mr Benson, JP), it was decided that Dr Lynn, Dr Goulding, Dr Jackson and the chairman of the Public Health Committee should consider this matter.

In pointing out that she had some cases of influenza in Rathmines, Dr Lynn said that her experience was that artisans' dwellings and dwellings of the poorer classes were not the only places that were not to be found in a sanitary condition.

Last year's experience

When they had an influenza outbreak last year, the death rate in Rathmines was much higher than was to be expected in an outlying township like it.

She did not want to be an alarmist, but the disease had spread very rapidly in America and other places. Much could be done in the way of prevention by inoculation.

Dr Goulding said if they were to take precautions against all the extraordinary things they heard about in America they would be very busy. His experience was that they were more free from influenza [in] the present year than they had been for many years past. They always had influenza in the country since the first visitation in 1889, when it was more severe than last year.

He thought the case would be met by the adoption of Dr Lynn's suggestion that all places be inspected by the sanitary officers.

Reports from doctors indicate that a large number of influenza cases are arriving at English ports from overseas, and the British Health Committee are preventing overcrowding in places of entertainment and in tramway cars.

A Reuter's Wellington cablegram states that cases of influenza with pneumonia have considerably increased there, and all the schools were closed.



An American policeman wearing a 'flu mask' to protect himself from the outbreak of 'Spanish' flu following World War I

She was with Thomas Ashe when he died in the Mater Hospital, following a botched attempt to force-feed him during his hunger strike.

When Sinn Féin was reorganised in 1917, she was one of the four women on the party executive. She was the prime mover behind a resolution passed at the 1917 party's ard fheis affirming the equality of women and men within the party.

Her prominent political role meant that she was on the list of Sinn Féin members to be arrested early in 1918 over Britain's invented 'German plot', and for a time she was on the run. She was released soon after her arrest, however, because her medical skills were needed to fight the 'Spanish' flu pandemic.

Lynn opposed the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, as did the overwhelming majority of women active in Sinn Féin. Although she remained a member of the party, serving as a councillor in Rathmines, her involvement in politics dwindled, as she concentrated on medical matters.

She remained a dogged socialist, uncritically sympathetic towards Soviet Russia and a supporter of the republican side in the Spanish Civil War.

She also remained a committed feminist, opposing the 1935 Conditions of Employment Act, which gave the minister for industry and commerce the authority to restrict the number of women in various occupations (it was never implemented). She also campaigned against Article 41.2 of the 1937 Constitution, the clause that refers to women's domestic role.

Her greatest contribution to Irish society was to found St Ultan's Hospital in Dublin, with her partner Madeleine French-Mullen. It was a hospital run by women that cared for sick children, especially infants. Infant mortality in Dublin was appallingly high, a consequence of poverty, overcrowded tenement housing and lack of sanitation.

St Ultan's was initially opened to treat infants affected by sexually transmitted diseases. Although such diseases had long been common in Dublin, Sinn Féin claimed that they were transmitted by former British soldiers.

The hospital treated children during the flu pandemic, when they were at much greater risk of dying than adults; in later years many of the children were suffering from gastroenteritis or malnutrition. Lynn claimed that her ambition was to make St Ultan's a "university for mothers", teaching them about hygiene and child nutrition — but it was difficult to enforce hygiene in Dublin tenements and many women were too malnourished to breastfeed.

As a member of Rathmines Urban District Council she concentrated her energies on efforts to improve housing and public health, including a campaign to provide school meals to needy children. St Ultan's afforded careers to many pioneering women doctors who would have found it difficult to secure positions in other hospitals, and it was a leader in the development of paediatrics in Ireland.

Dorothy Stopford Price, who worked there, pioneered the introduction of BCG vaccine against tuberculosis, which was a major killer of adults and children in Dublin. The hospital became a national BCG centre. At a time when Dublin hospital medicine was divided by religion, the women doctors at St Ultan's straddled the denominational divide.

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