



Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

***“I fell in love with my country—
its rivers, prairies, forests,
mountains, cities, and people.
No one can take my love of country
away from me...It could be a
paradise on earth if
it belonged to the people,
not to a small owning class.”***

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn



The Rebel Girl: Elizabeth Gurley Flynn



Although she died more than fifty years ago, the legacy of labor organizer, feminist, and civil rights activist [Elizabeth Gurley Flynn](#) is still hotly debated today.

Born in 1890 in Concord, New Hampshire, Flynn was always on the side of marginalized workers, immigrants, and women. But her iron-clad defense of the First Amendment and her hell-or-high-water approach, cost her an education, her freedom, and her health.

The daughter of an Irish immigrant and a laborer in a granite mine, Flynn's parents were ardent socialists who encouraged her to join in their

political activism. When she was ten years-old, the family moved to the South Bronx where Flynn attended public school and participated in socialist groups. Four years later, she had to drop out for six months because of an infection, but it proved to be a turning point in her life. An avid reader, Flynn [emerged](#) at age 15 as a devout feminist and socialist.

Soon after, Flynn gave her first political speech, "[What Socialism will do for Women](#)" in which she outlined the possibility of "industrializing all domestic tasks by collective kitchens, dining places, nurseries, laundries and the like." She also took to street corners making speeches on behalf of the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

Flynn's ability to ignite crowds earned her the nickname, Red Flame, and also Rebel Girl. Her oratory skills were so keen that her first arrest occurred because the crowd that had gathered to hear her speak, spilled into the streets and blocked traffic in New York's theater district. Novelist Theodore Dreiser likened Flynn to Joan of Arc. "She electrified her audience with her eloquence, her youth, and loveliness."

Flynn was driven by two things: defending the [First Amendment](#) which guarantees freedom of speech regardless of political or religious views, and the social and economic disparity that she witnessed around her. She later [reflected](#): "I hated poverty. I was determined to do something about the bad conditions under which our family and all around us suffered."

Flynn's activism resulted in her [expulsion](#) from high school in 1907. Although this thwarted her intention of becoming a Constitutional lawyer, it launched her into a full-time career with the [IWW](#) as a labor organizer. Alongside mostly male colleagues, she traveled across the country [organizing](#) unions and strikes for garment and restaurant workers, silk weavers, and miners. Their demands were always the same: better and safer conditions, higher wages, and shorter work days.

On one of her trips, Flynn fell [in love](#) with a miner and fellow organizer, John Jones. They married in 1908 and had a son, but within two years, the marriage collapsed. In her autobiography, [Rebel Girl: An Autobiography My First Life \(1906-1926\)](#), Flynn said: "I romanticized the life—so different from New York—and the organizer who lived and worked there, under conditions of hardship."

Returning to New York and her family who helped care for her son, Flynn became more active in the battle for women's suffrage, reproductive rights, and equal wages. Together with feminists [Mary Ware Dennett](#), Jessie Ashley, and Mabel Dodge, she joined [Heterodoxy](#), a secret society of leading women activists.

When WWI erupted in 1914, Flynn joined efforts to prevent U.S. involvement. She was [arrested](#) under the newly created Espionage Act which was commonly used as a political weapon to silence opponents of the war. The charges against Flynn were eventually dropped, but she then focused on defending others, mostly labor leaders and immigrants who were threatened with deportation for their pacifist views.

These experiences led Flynn to co-found the American Civil Liberties Union in 1920. By the end of the decade, suffering from heart disease, exhaustion, and a failed

relationship, Flynn [stepped aside](#) for much of the next ten years.

The economic collapse of the Great Depression pushed Flynn's views farther to the left. By the late 1930s when she returned to public life, she joined the Communist Party and became a columnist on feminist issues for its journal, the Daily Worker. Two years later, Flynn was elected to the party's U.S. committee.

At the time, America had a skeptical relationship with Communism and the still young Soviet Union. But in 1939, when the Soviets signed a treaty with Nazi Germany, overnight Communists became pariahs. In what is still regarded as one of its most controversial decisions, the ACLU [booted](#) Flynn and other Communist Party members from its ranks.

Flynn remained steadfast in Communist views. Believing in economic equality and political freedom, she supported America's entry into WWII and renewed her [efforts](#) for women's rights. She advocated for equal pay and establishing day care centers. Flynn also urged women to seek war-time jobs and to volunteer. In 1942, she ran for Congress as the representative from New York. She lost the election, but won 50,000 votes. She also stumped for the reelection of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1944.

When the war ended in 1945, a renewed fear of communism spread across the U.S. Flynn became ensnared in anti-communist propaganda. In 1951, she was convicted of advocating for the overthrow of the government, charges she fiercely [denied](#). Given a choice between prison or deportation to the Soviet Union, Flynn chose prison, arguing that her intention was to improve America, not desert it. She wrote about this in ["The Alderson Story: My Life as a Political Prisoner,"](#) and in a second autobiography, ["I Speak My Own Piece."](#)

Upon her release, at age 66, Flynn resumed her political activities. Although she had become critical of the Soviet Union, at the age of 71, Flynn became the first woman to lead the Communist Party of the United States. In 1964, she [accepted](#) an invitation to travel to Moscow. During her visit, she became ill and died. Flynn was honored by the Soviet government with a state funeral.

In his own [autobiography](#), journalist Eugene Lyons described Flynn as "the most brilliant woman I had ever met. A veteran of the front trenches in the labor struggle since fifteen, she was, at thirty, attractive, winsomely Irish in her wit and her savor of life, with a remarkably cool intelligence behind her fiery oratory and personality...her eloquence and courage and sweetness...won her tens of thousands of worshipful friends among the workers."

Although Flynn has been the subject of several biographies and documentaries, today her legacy still sparks debate. In the spring of 2023, Flynn's home state of New Hampshire erected a highway



IWW activist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was the inspiration for Joe Hill's song, "The Rebel Girl" (1915)



Photo by Cooljeanius

marker in her honor and it quickly prompted an outcry. One politician, Joseph Kenney, [remarked](#) that Flynn was "a devout communist. We are the Live Free or Die State. How can we possibly promote her propaganda?" Others, however, such as civil rights activist Arnie Alpert, believes that Flynn represents "a figure of great significance in terms of history. It makes sense for us to understand things that have happened in the past."

Note: I'd love to hear your insights, comments, and thoughts. [Email](#) me your responses to the questions below.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask Yourself: Elizabeth Gurley Flynn believed herself to be a true patriot, acting from love for her country. What do you think?

Ask a Friend: When have you stayed strong in the face of public pressure to conform to certain views?

Shout Outs!

Thank you, Helen Frink, for suggesting Elizabeth Gurley Flynn!

Cheers to **The Remarkable Women Book Club** of Alstead, NH. After a talk I gave last year at Chase's Mill, they formed this group to share about remarkable women. It was a treat to be with them in July.

On my reading list: [To Speak a Defiant Word: Sermons and Speeches on Justice and Transformation](#) by Pauli Murray and Anthony B. Pinn. Murray was the first African American woman ordained in the U.S. as an Episcopal priest. [Read](#) about Murray in a previous issue of this newsletter.



[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, when she married one of Dennett's great-grandsons. Today, she curates the family's archives.

Sharon has spent twelve years researching first-wave

feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her essays about Dennett have appeared in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), and [New Hampshire Magazine](#).

Sharon is a popular speaker at women's and civic groups, and also book clubs. She is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. [Schedule](#) a talk with your group!

Sharon lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs, Gus and Hank.

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Share the newsletter and invite others to subscribe. Follow me on social media. www.SharonSpaulding.com



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