

# Forgotten Legacies of Dr. Gertrude B. Kelly

BY GEOFFREY COBB



*Photo: Dr. Gertrude B. Kelly was born in Ireland in 1862 and came to America as an eleven-year-old. A graduate of Women's Medical College in New York, she devoted much of her professional time providing medical care to the poor. However, she never lost interest in Ireland or in working for its independence. During the early twentieth century she won prominence through her work and leadership on behalf of suffragism, labor and social justice, and freedom for Ireland. Courtesy of New York Times.*

Historical memory is both capricious and fickle. It often overlooks important figures whose achievements may be forgotten by subsequent generations. We often fail to appreciate historical figures as much as their contemporaries did. Such an overlooked, and now largely forgotten, figure in New York Irish history is Dr. Gertrude B. Kelly, a woman who not only became one of the first female surgeons in the United States, but also helped found many important Irish organizations and was instrumental in leading a female organized, vast anti-British strike on the New York waterfront that many claim was the first purely political strike in American history. Somehow, a woman who left these important legacies is today an obscure figure whom few recall. Why?

## POSSIBLE CAUSES

Perhaps gender and gender roles are factors in this case of historical amnesia. Male revolutionaries grab spotlights, while the important contributions of females get little recognition. Gertrude Kelly also did not fit the stereotypical role of an Irish Catholic woman. She never married or had children, but instead shared her life with her companion, Mary Walsh. Perhaps she was a lesbian, and anti-gay bias played a role in not recalling her important legacy. And in an Irish culture where religious faith played a huge role, Kelly was not only an atheist, but she also proudly described herself as an “unredeemed pagan.” (“Gertrude B. Kelly” in *Wikipedia*) Did Irish Catholic historians make a conscious decision not to research her achievements because of her defiant atheism?

Perhaps another factor in erasing Kelly's memory was her political views. In an Irish-American milieu, which revered loyalty to the

country and lauded the free-enterprise system, Kelly was an anti-government and anti-capitalist individualist anarchist who attacked the state and castigated its support of capitalism.

Although Dr. Kelly surely merits much historical research, there is still a pronounced paucity of studies of her life and work. At a time today when so many overlooked females are finally receiving long overdue attention, Kelly remains a scarcely investigated, poorly understood figure. Why don't today's historians write about this unique woman? Part of the answer stems from the scarcity of primary sources. She left few papers, but the real problem is more complex. Kelly's poorly understood individualist anarchist worldview is radically different than the perspectives of many of her Irish female contemporaries. Consequently, many researchers do not know how to approach this unique figure. Kelly defies easy characterization and remains truly *sui generis*, making biographical work about her especially challenging.

Today, anarchism has largely been relegated to the dust bin of history, but in Kelly's youth anarchism was an extremely popular ideology that seemed to offer an alternative to capitalist society. For Irish women like Kelly, it also offered a critique of the imperialism that was suffocating Ireland. I suspect that few historians working in the field of Irish-American studies are well versed in anarchist philosophy, another factor in perpetuating the lack of research on Dr. Kelly.

Making writing about Kelly even more demanding are the many seemingly contradictory views she held on political, economic, and social questions. In her article, "Dr. Gertrude B. Kelly: A Forgotten Feminist," Wendy McElroy summarizes the paradoxes in Dr. Kelly's worldview that make her a complex, seemingly contradictory figure:

*A labor radical who was deeply skeptical of unions, a medical doctor who opposed state licensing of medicine, a staunch anti-statist who broke with the most prominent individualist anarchists of her day, an ardent feminist who denied that there were "women's*

*rights" as distinct from "human rights."*  
(McElroy, "Gertrude B. Kelly")

Kelly's seemingly paradoxical and contradictory juxtapositions come into focus, though, in the light of her Irish birth and anarchist beliefs. Individual anarchists, like Kelly, were a group of anti-authoritarian radicals who regarded total individual autonomy and free labor as the answer to the social and economic problems of the day. Kelly believed that overthrowing power structures and maximizing individual autonomy and responsibility would create a truly free society, which would evolve organically once society had liquidated the oppressive state. Because individualist anarchists regarded labor as the source of value and exchanges of unequal values to be exploitative, they may be regarded as a part of the broader socialist movement. Kelly's views not only were highly uncommon and radical, but they also placed her in direct conflict with the establishment: the church, the state, and the capitalist order.

#### SHAPING KELLY'S PERSPECTIVES

In Kelly's eyes, Ireland was victim of both capitalism and the British state. Although she left Ireland at age eleven, the experiences and opinions of her parents profoundly shaped Kelly's perspectives. She was born into a family of Irish nationalist educators in 1862 in Carrick-on-Suir, Co. Tipperary (Co. Waterford identifies Kelly as being born in the same year but in Ballyneale, across the border from Tipperary). Her father was a schoolmaster apparently forced out of his job for his Fenian sympathies. He left Ireland in 1868, five years before Gertrude would join him in New Jersey in 1873. He would become a high school principal, but he and the whole family remained passionately devoted to Irish affairs.

Her older brother, John, played a huge role in shaping her anarchist worldview. Kelly was one of twelve children, but little is known about any of her other siblings except for John who had a profound influence on her attitudes towards Ireland and anarchism. John graduat-

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# Liberty

NOT THE DAUGHTER BUT THE MOTHER OF ORDER

Vol. I.

BOSTON, MASS., SATURDAY, AUGUST 6, 1861.

No. 1.

"For always in thine eyes, O Liberty,  
Shines that high light whereby the world is saved;  
And though thou slay us, we will trust in thee."  
JOHN HAY.

## On Picket Duty.

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, these three; but the greatest of these is Liberty.

Formerly the price of Liberty was eternal vigilance, but now it can be had for fifty cents a year.

Individuals on becoming adults gain their freedom. Are nations never to attain their majority?

The effect of one-half of our laws is to make criminals; the purpose of the other half is to punish them.

Holding a monopoly, the banker is the worst enemy of the human race, being its chief despoiler; without that monopoly, he is its best friend, being its greatest civilizer.

It is needless to call attention to the style of our lead. It was designed by Mr. Ipson, 18 Post Office Square, Boston, who, catching with artistic insight the true spirit of our purpose, has produced what every epicure in typography must pronounce a triumph of genius and a real work of art, remarkable for its originality, vigor, simplicity, and strange grace.

Liberty takes pleasure and pride in its ability to present to the readers of its first issue the first authentic likeness published in America of the most famous and heroic of that little Russian band styled by the "Pall Mall Gazette" an "army of avenging angels."



Sophie Perovskaya,  
LIBERTY'S MARTYRED HEROINE.  
HANGED APRIL 15, 1881.  
For helping to rid the world of a Tyrant.  
Down from her high estate she stoop,  
A maiden, gently born,  
And by the law's decree,  
Had watch, and watch of morn;  
And gentle way that where she slept  
The new moon dipped her hair.  
Yet on and on, through shrouded snows  
She stiched her way the great north pole,  
The foulest wrong the good God knows  
Had a dark room to rail,  
While never more for all these woes

## About Progressive People.

Henry George, the author of "Progress and Poverty," has returned to San Francisco.

With the death of his son, Sir Percy Shelley, the poet will, in common with Byron, have no descendant of his name.

Jefferson Davis denies that he ever uttered or indorsed the avowal that "slavery is the cornerstone of the Confederacy."

Wendell Phillips is called by the "Boston Post" "the white-haired instigator of assassination, who preaches anarchy even at a literary feast."

Mr. Patrick Egan has purchased the "Dublin Irishman," thus placing all the national journals in Ireland under the control of the Land League.

Mr. Charles Stewart Parnell has two brothers, one of whom is a cotton planter in Georgia and a Land Leaguer, while the other, who owns an estate in Kilkenny, Ireland, is a strong Conservative.

A life-size marble bust of Gerrit Smith has been presented to the Oneida Historical Society of Utica, the late philanthropist's birthplace, by his daughter, Mrs. Elizabeth S. Miller of Geneva, N. Y.

General Garibaldi has accepted the honorary presidency of the Cincinnati Unione e Fratellanza Italiana. He is eager for a world's fair in Rome, and almost daily writes a letter urging the project on influential friends.

Jefferson Davis is certainly under obligation to Mr. James F. Derby of Brooklyn, who suggested his history and went to New Orleans, for the *Times* of D. Appleton & Co., to negotiate with him for it. He will make out of it \$100,000.

A movement is on foot in England to raise a fund by which Johann Most may be compensated for his imprisonment. The testimonial is to be presented at a banquet on the day the prisoner leaves jail. A portrait of Most was one of the prizes

*Photo:*  
The bi-weekly newspaper, Liberty, was begun by Benjamin Tucker in 1861. Until 1908, it was a platform for discussion of anarchist philosophy and issues through its essays and articles. Gerrude Kelly was a contributor to Liberty, and the quality of her articles won praise from Tucker.  
Courtesy of Wikipedia.

ed from Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken and went on to earn a Ph.D. at age twenty-two in electrical engineering. An assistant for a time to Thomas Edison, Kelly became one of the world's foremost experts in using dynamos to transmit telephone signals. During Kelly's lifetime he held over seventy electrical related patents and pioneered high-voltage electricity generating and transmission systems. However, he was not just a man of science; he was also devoted to Ireland and used his considerable wealth generously to advance the cause of Irish freedom. In the 1880s, he wrote articles for individualist anarchist publications including *Liberty*, *Alarm*, and *Lucifer*, which must have greatly influenced his sister.

John Kelly spent the last years of his life supporting Irish causes, working closely with his sister. From 1916–18, he served as the president of the Massachusetts State Council for Friends of Irish Freedom. From 1920–21, he wrote a third of the *Irish World's* anonymous political commentaries, and in 1921,

from July to December, he and his young sister agitated for a nationwide boycott of British goods.

Despite being in America, Kelly still remained keenly interested in events within Ireland. Although she was busy with her medical studies she followed Ireland from articles in the *Irish World*, published in New York, and the *Boston Pilot*. Both newspapers featured several stories on the failure of the Irish Land Act of 1870 to improve the lot of tenant farmers, the formation of the Irish Land League in 1879, the subsequent Land Wars, the No-Rent movement, and the indiscriminate evictions of Irish tenant farmers from their land by agents of absentee English landlords. These stories cemented Kelly's rejection of British imperialism and private ownership of land.

In 1879, John Devoy of *Clan na Gael* in the United States forged a broad-based coalition called the "New Departure," with Michael Davitt of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and Charles Stewart Parnell of the Home Rule League to create a joint front

that united believers in physical force, agrarian agitation, and constitutional nationalism to aid the suffering Irish tenant farmer and demand Irish Home Rule from England. Parnell and Davitt were also members of the Irish National Land League. In support of that initiative Fanny and Anna Parnell founded the Ladies Land League in America in 1880 with branches in Hoboken, Jersey City, Newark, and Patterson. Young Gertrude Kelly became an active member of the League and a vocal supporter of a No-Rent Manifesto published by the National Land League in 1881. Kelly's understanding of individualistic anarchist philosophy was strengthened by the columns of "Honorius" in the *Irish World*, an organ of the Irish No-Rent movement. Honorius was, in fact, a pseudonym for the American natural-rights advocate Henry Appleton, who contributed frequently to the early issues of *Liberty*, both under his own name and under the pen name of "X." (McElroy, "Gertude B. Kelly")

#### PROLIFIC WRITER AND FEMINIST

Anger at how British imperialist government had subverted its proper role in Ireland shaped Kelly's anti-authoritarian worldview. Kelly was not only a dedicated Irish-Nationalist, but she was also a prolific writer and insightful social and political commentator. In articles published in the individualist periodical *Liberty* and the *Irish World* she expressed her indignation and abhorrence at the lack of fairness empathy or sense of humanity inherent in the attitude of the ruling elite towards the poor of Ireland. She contributed a number of other well-received articles for *Liberty* whose founder and editor, Benjamin Tucker, said of her "Gertrude B. Kelly...by her articles in *Liberty*, has placed herself at a single bound among the finest writers of this or any other country." (McElroy, "Gertrude B. Kelly") Kelly, however, would later break with Tucker and cease writing for *Liberty*, a sign of her fiery independence.

Kelly was more than a mere analyst of Irish anti-imperialism. She was also an avant-garde feminist who understood the struggles that women faced, especially poor women,



with whom the doctor had a lifelong affinity and her articles for *Liberty* reflect a keen understanding of the special problems females faced.

In one of her articles for *Liberty* she developed a highly controversial argument about prostitution. Instead of seeing prostitutes as "fallen women," Kelly saw them as economic victims. Her first article in *Liberty*, "The Root of Prostitution," claimed that women's inability to earn enough money through respectable forms of labor was the root cause of sex work. She wrote:

*We find all sorts of schemes for making men moral and women religious, but no scheme which proposes to give woman the fruits of her labor.*

In her writing, she railed against men forcing women to conform to paternalistic codes of behavior.

*Men...have always denied to women the opportunity to think; and, if some women have had courage enough to dare*

#### Photo:

Fanny (Frances) Parnell was born in Co. Wicklow in 1848 and was a founder of the Ladies Land League in the United States. This was an American branch of the Ladies Land League in Ireland which provided support and an alternative administration group for the Irish National Land League. Gertrude Kelly became a vocal and active member of the American organization. Courtesy of History Ireland.

*public opinion, and insist upon thinking for themselves, they have been so beaten by that most powerful weapon in society's arsenal, ridicule, that it has effectively prevented the great majority from making any attempt to come out of slavery. (McElroy, "Gertrude B. Kelly")*

Despite Kelly's sincere feminism, she could make the following statement that must have alienated her from many of the leading feminists of her day: "There is,

her efforts. She also accepted the popular radical belief that capitalism was an alliance between business and government, in which the state guaranteed the rich their privileged position. Kelly considered all forms of capitalism to be what individualist anarchists called "state capitalism." In Irish-America, where so many fellow immigrants had climbed the ladder by joining the civil service, her anti-government stance was especially incendiary.



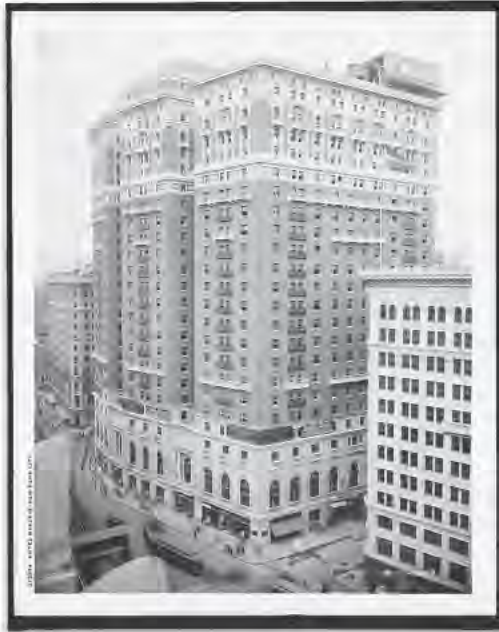
**Photo:**  
Patrick Ford was the influential founder of The Irish World newspaper which was first published in New York in 1870. Gertrude Kelly and her older brother, John, were contributors. The paper strongly supported goals of the Land League in Ireland and established a successful fund to collect money for its activities. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

properly speaking, no woman question, as apart from the question of human right and human liberty." She added: "The woman's cause is man's—they rise or sink/ Together—dwarfed or god-like-bond or free." She saw women's struggles in the wider context of humanity's struggle against all forms of coercion. Women would gain their deserved social status only when all of society had also liberated itself. Kelly also became a militant suffragette, believing that women with the power to vote could solve many of the issues they faced. (McElroy, "Gertrude B. Kelly")

In Kelly's eyes both women and men were in fact the victims of a coercive capitalist society. Radical individualists of nineteenth-century America, like Kelly, saw capitalism as the root cause of poverty and social injustice. Kelly subscribed to the labor theory of value espoused by the anarchist individualist theoretician Josiah Warren who posited that capitalists stole the fruits of labor by underpaying the worker for his or

#### KELLY'S WORK AS A DOCTOR

Kelly's becoming a physician is an extraordinary story in itself. She became one of the very few women to study medicine and become a doctor thanks to two English sisters, Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell who set up the first school to grant women licenses to practice medicine, the Women's Medical College of New York. Kelly graduated from Blackwell's school in 1884 with an M.D. degree and became an accomplished surgeon. If Kelly is recalled today in New York City, it is not for her important role in agitating for Ireland, but in helping the city's poor through her work as a doctor. Although she campaigned for many deserving causes during her lifetime, her primary focus was on treating the downtrodden and poor working women and their families in the clinics she worked in. She set up such a clinic in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood where she became legendary for surreptitiously leaving cash under her dinner plate when she made house calls at the homes of impoverished patients. Kelly



was also a renowned surgeon who, in addition to her work at the clinic, was a member of the surgical staff at the New York Infirmary for Women and Children, the institution where she had received training. During her medical career she authored and co-authored papers on abdominal surgical procedures and other medical and health-care related issues.

#### KELLY AND THE RISING

Kelly would play an oversized role in the events before and after the 1916 Easter Rising. In 1901, John Redmond, who assumed leadership of the reunited Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), established the United Irish League of America to raise funds for the IPP and promote its Home Rule agenda in the United States. Dr. Kelly supported the United Irish League, even though its acceptance of continued British sovereignty over Ireland disturbed her. In accepting home rule, she reasoned that it could serve as an intermediary step before launching a nonviolent, anti-British, grassroots campaign that would lead to an independent Irish Republic.

In October of 1914, Kelly issued a call to “women of Irish blood” to join the first chapter of *Cumann na mBan* formed in the United States. Hundreds of women met at the Hotel

McAlpin, where Kelly, Mary Colum, and Sidney Gifford a recently arrived émigré from Dublin outlined the aims of the organization. Their chapter would follow the lead of *Cumann na mBan* in Ireland by raising funds and garnering support for the Irish Volunteers formed in 1913 in response to the formation of the anti-independence Ulster Volunteer Force the previous year. The declared aim of the Irish Volunteers was “to secure and maintain the rights and liberties common to the whole people of Ireland.” (“Dr. Gertrude B. Kelly” in *Feniangraves.net*) Chosen as president of the organization, Kelly helped set-up other branches and arranged for speakers from Ireland to address its members, conduct lecture tours and help in fundraising efforts.

When Redmond in a speech called on young Irishmen to enlist and fight in the British Army, it was too much for the anti-imperialist Kelly, who issued the following statement:

*May I, as a woman, an Irishwoman and physician, spokeswoman of hundred, thousands of my sisters at home and abroad ask our leaders what it is they propose to Ireland to do—commit suicide? Admitting for the moment that this is “a most righteous war” not—“a war of iron and coal”—a war between titans for commercial supremacy—why should little Ireland have to do what the United States, Switzerland, etc., do not. Is Home Rule to be secured for the cattle and sheep when the young men of Ireland are slaughtered, the old men and old women left sonless, the young women obliged to emigrate to bring up sons for men of other climes.* (“Dr. Gertrude B. Kelly” in *Feniangraves.net*)

After the Easter Rising, *Cumann na mBan*'s fundraising efforts were redirected to the support of the thousands of families of imprisoned Volunteers. Kelly and other Irish women activists including Margaret Moore, a Land League veteran and labor leader Lenora

#### Photo:

Following Gertrude Kelly's call for “women of Irish blood” to join an American auxiliary of *Cumann na mBan*, hundreds of women met in December, 1914 to create the organization. Kelly selected New York's posh Hotel McAlpin as the meeting place. The newly opened hotel was, at that time, the largest hotel in the world and was to become a historic building. Still in existence at Broadway and Thirty-fourth Street, it is currently an apartment complex. Courtesy of *Ephemeralnewyork.wordpress.com*.



a New York *Sun* report it was "...the first purely political strike of workingmen in the history of the United States. The strike became famous and spread to Brooklyn, New Jersey, and Boston. When reporters asked who exactly was behind these protests, Dr. Kelly responded "American women." ("Gertrude B. Kelly" in *Irish Echo*)

By the end of 1920, many thought the only prospect for an independent Ireland was an acceptance of partition. Dr. Kelly was a fiery opponent of division and expressed her views on Ireland being divided:

*The thing itself is absolutely unthinkable. We have always been slaves, but unwilling slaves. Now we are subscribing to our slavery. I cannot believe that the Irish people will do this. The whole thing is a fake from start to finish. Summed up I would say that after 750 years we have given England moral standing in the world when she has none: it's a tremendous defeat.* ("Gertrude B. Kelly" in Feniagraves.net)

Nevertheless, partition did take place, much to Kelly's dismay. Bitterly disappointed, she continued her work treating the poor of the city. In the first quarter of the twentieth century she was on the "must meet" list of every Irish political and literary figure who came to the United States. Kelly passed away on February 16, 1934. The poor of Chelsea mourned her and remembered her acts of kindness. In 1936, Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia named the Dr. Gertrude B. Kelly Playground located in Chelsea west of Ninth Avenue between Sixteenth and Seventeenth Streets in her honor. It was one of five model playgrounds developed in New York City during the mid-1930s. ("Gertrude B. Kelly Playground" in NYCgovparks.org) The playground is perhaps the only public tribute to a woman who made an outsized contribution to Irish independence and to the City of New York. Perhaps in the future Dr. Kelly will garner more.



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### Photo:

*Some of the children assembled for opening of the Gertrude B. Kelly Playground in the same neighborhood where she had worked. Named in honor of Kelly and her efforts providing medical care for the poor, it was considered a "model playground." It was constructed on the site of a former school. In the 1850s the land had been donated by private owners to the city's Public School Society. Courtesy of the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation*