



Clodagh Finn: Lynn diaries reveal private life of a very public woman



Kathleen Lynn and Madeleine French-Mullen with infants at St Ultan's Hospital in Dublin, in 1920. Picture: courtesy of Courtesy of Royal College of Physicians of Ireland

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Clodagh Finn

On May 10, 1916, Kathleen Lynn, pioneering doctor, independent thinker and political activist, wrote in her diary: “Mtjoy [Mountjoy prison] clean & comfortable, but I’d give £10,000 for Kilmainham and Madel[e]ine”.

Her Easter Rising lasted just one day before she was arrested, with several others, and held in appalling conditions at Ship Street barracks. She complained about the cold, the lice-infested bedding and the lack of food



and sanitation, but was told it was good enough for the prisoners: “Lice, fleas & typhoid should content us,” the soldiers said.

One officer, however, was “quite civil” and had the toilets cleaned. Prisoners were then given the same dinner as the officers.

Days later, she was transferred to Kilmainham jail where the horror of Ship Street and the fear that heavy firing would bring the barracks down around them, receded when she found herself in the same cell as Madeleine French-Mullen, the woman with whom she shared every aspect of her life over three decades.

“Saw M. French-Mullen early this mg [morning]. Greatest joy. Emer [Helena Molony], she and I have cell together, such joy, cheerfully we do with one basin of water for washings, hog wash of cocoa & dog biscuits for b.fast,” she wrote on May 2.

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Dr Lynn remarked that Countess Markievicz was there too; in solitary confinement. “We had loan of her comb & soap.”

Madeleine French-Mullen, who had been at the Royal College of Surgeons during the Rising, was also delighted to see her partner as she feared she would not see her again.

In her diary, she wrote: “Met the Doctor going for water, had her to breakfast hip, hip.”

The couple were separated again a few days later, prompting Dr Lynn to write that she would give the vast sum of £10,000 to be reunited. That reunion came a few



months later when the couple were back in their home in Dublin.



A portrait of Kathleen Lynn by Lily Williams. Lynn paid a heavy price for her participation in the Easter Rising. Picture: Courtesy of Royal College of Physicians of Ireland

Yet, the latter half of 1916 was an exceptionally difficult time for Kathleen Lynn. She paid a very heavy price for her participation in the Rising. Her father and sister visited her in jail on “a very black Friday... so reproachful, they wouldn’t listen to me & looked as if they would cast me off for ever.”

It took several years to heal that relationship.

She also lost her job at the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear hospital, but she still had her GP practice at her home on 9 Belgrave Road in Rathmines. And, of course, she had Madeleine. They were rarely apart, professionally or personally, after that. Dr Lynn’s account of the Rising is contained in *The Diaries of Kathleen Lynn*, co-edited by Dr



Mary McAuliffe and Harriet Wheelock which has just been published by UCD Press.

There is so much to savour in this exceptional book. It gives us an insight into life in Ireland over several decades through the eyes of Dr Kathleen Lynn, one of “the most remarkable women” of the 20th century, to quote an appreciation in *The Irish Times* in 1955.

It also illustrates how a woman born into an upper middle-class Protestant Anglo-Irish family became a radical revolutionary and feminist, but kept her deep faith in the process.

The diary contains entries from 1916 to 1955, taking in the breathtaking sweep of Dr Lynn’s life from her involvement in the 1916 Rising, to her work as a TD and councillor and as co-founder of the pioneering children’s hospital St Ultan’s.

Each entry is short, yet the diarist manages to squeeze in not just the personal but the local, national and international. To pick one example from this time of year: on Tuesday, November 14, 1933, she noted the rejoicing in Germany over Hitler’s victory: “Hitler has commanded clergy to throw out all Jews but D.V. [‘Deo volente, God willing] some pastors won’t have this unXristianity [un-Christianity].” Then, she commented on the border of yellow auriculas in full bloom in Ormond Road and how all was well at St Ultan’s hospital DG [Dei gratia, by the grace of God].

Her diary casts new light on many of the political and social concerns of three decades of Irish life. For that alone, this volume is a significant addition to Irish history.

For me, though, *The Diaries of Kathleen Lynn* is a book about the human condition and how love sustains us.

Stitched into the weave of her entries is her deep love for Madeleine French-Mullen. The foreword tells us that the couple met at the Cumann na mBan hall in 1914 where Kathleen was conducting a First Aid course. May Cummins,



who knew both of them, recounted how Madeleine fell off a chair and had collapsed with laughter. Kathleen helped her up and the “two became great friends”.

They set up St Ultan’s children’s hospital together, fought for better social housing together and went together to meet Archbishop John Charles McQuaid — he was “domineering without reason” — to argue that medical care should be based on health needs rather than morality.

In the private sphere, they lived together in Rathmines and regularly holidayed in Wicklow. When Madeleine died in 1944, Dr Kathleen Lynn was treated by all as the bereaved widow. On May 27, she wrote: “Saw my darling M surrounded with lovely flowers & looking so serenely happy D.G... V. nice appreciation in papers & not too terrible picture.”

It is so heartening to see that this love between two women was not only accepted, but celebrated, in the couple’s immediate circle at least. At the funeral, “Lily Reilly said they were relations but [Madeleine] belonged to me,” the diary entry for May 31, 1944 reads.



Kathleen Lynn and Madeleine ffrench-Mullen on holidays in Glencormack, Co Wicklow. Picture: courtesy of the Military Archives, Ireland

Finally, a note on the herculean work that went into producing this singular book. The first bow must be taken



by archivist Margaret Connolly who transcribed all 900,000 words of Dr Lynn's diaries, donated by the Wynnes to the Royal College of Physicians in 1997. It was akin to unpicking stitches in knitting, untangling one stitch at a time, she said. Co-editors Dr Mary McAuliffe and Harriet Wheelock then sifted through that vast body of work to bring us a readable representation which, as they put it, allows "us a window into the private life of a very public woman".

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The work involved explains the cover price of €45 (or €40.50 from UCD Press online), but it is absolutely worth it. This is a book to return to again and again; I'll be doing that over the course of the coming year, comparing what is happening now with the years covered by Dr Lynn.

The publication of the diaries should also give new impetus to the campaign to name the new children's hospital after Kathleen Lynn, although she would be horrified at the runaway budget and delays. All the same, it is entirely fitting that a medical facility designed to give children the best and most modern healthcare should carry her name.

It feels entirely wrong, though, to exclude her lifetime partner in life and work, Madeleine French-Mullen. Perhaps we can come up with a portmanteau name to honour them both. What about the Lynn-Mullen Hospital?

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