The two Irish wives of Friedrich Engels

Recovering the narratives of Mary and Lizzie Burns

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Abstract

Friedrich Engels maintained close relations with two Irish women; Mary Burns (ca. 1822-1863), Engels' common law wife, and then her sister Lydia 'Lizzie' Burns (1827-1878), who formally married Engels just before her death. The history of women, like those of the working classes and racial minorities, is always bedevilled by what E.P. Thompson called 'the enormous condescension of posterity', in which illiterate peoples are erased from the historical record. Yet, it is rare to find illiterate women so close (and seemingly making a major determining impact) on the lives of literate men. Drawing on Marx and Engels' sprawling correspondence, as well as other contemporary records, this paper seeks to uncover how much we can ever truly know about these two women? How much of a role did they actually play in Engels' political and literary work? And how much have their real lives been covered up with a Marxist romanticising of two proletarian, illiterate factory workers?

Key words: Friedrich Engels, Lizzie Burns, Mary Burns, Irish Diaspora, Manchester

'I was born in Tipperary, and am now a slave at Ermen and Engels'.

A revelatory early scene in Raoul Peck's recent historical film, *The Young Karl Marx*, depicts the also young Friedrich Engels visiting his father's factory in Manchester. Friedrich Engels Sr. is attempting to identify the culprit for a recent act of industrial sabotage when a fiery, red-haired *cailín* steps forward and ostentatiously assails the wealthy industrialist for his callousness. Engels Sr., in language that confirms his status as a gouging capitalist, reminds her that 'You're lucky I don't sack the lot of you! Repairing machines is expensive, not like labour in Manchester'. The militant female

Irish worker then duly identifies herself: 'My name is Mary Burns. I was born in Tipperary, and am now a slave at the Ermen and Engels Spinning Mill in Manchester, England'.[1] Soon after, Engels Jr., already nursing grievances against his conservative pietist father, seeks out Burns in the Irish slums of Manchester and thereafter begins an affair with her.[2]

Fig. 1: 'Mary Burns' (Hannah Steele) and 'Friedrich Engels' (Stefan Konarske) in *The Young Karl Marx* (Raoul Peck, dir., 2017). Image © Kris Dewitte

The image imparted of Burns is an undeniably appealing one; a fierce Irish proletarian, uncowed in the face of her capitalist employer. And her encounter with Engels Jr. becomes a sort of origin-story for his studies of Irish migrant labourers in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Unsurprisingly, there are also some major problems with this image. Mary Burns was not born in Tipperary, or indeed anywhere in Ireland; she was born in England. There is no evidence that she ever worked at Ermen and Engels, the cotton mill in which Friedrich Engels Sr. held a partnership share (and at which Engels Jr. would work, with intermissions, for almost thirty years). How and when Engels first met her is unknown. And it is unclear what, if any, were her political or intellectual influences on the father of Scientific Socialism. Prior attempts to narrate her life story – generally written on the fringes of academia – have accepted the notion that

she *must* have influenced Engels, calling her his 'Irish muse'[3], who had a 'substantial influence'[4] on him and 'helped him father socialism'.[5]

This article seeks to recover, as much as is historiographically possible, the life story of both Mary Burns (ca.1822-1863) and of her younger sister, Lydia 'Lizzie' Burns (1827-1878), who also had a romantic relationship with Friedrich Engels and formally married Engels immediately before her death. The history of women, like those of the working classes and racial minorities, is always bedevilled by what E.P. Thompson famously called 'the enormous condescension of posterity',[6] in which illiterate peoples are erased from the historical record. Yet, it is rare to find illiterate women so close (and seemingly making a major determining impact) on the lives of two of the most literate men of the nineteenth century. Drawing on Marx and Engels' sprawling correspondence, this paper seeks to uncover how much we can ever truly know about these two women, rather than making unsubstantiated suppositions? And, secondarily, how much have their real lives been covered up with a Marxist romanticising of two proletarian, illiterate Irish factory workers?

Before Engels

The Burns family appear to have lived in the Deansgate area of Manchester from the 1820s. The only direct documentary evidence relating to the parentage of the Burns sisters is contained in Lydia's marriage certificate of 1878 which names her father as Michael Burns, dyer. This is probably the Michael Burns, dyer, listed in the Manchester Directory of 1829 at 32 Cotton Street and in the 1832 Directory at 76 Henry Street, Ancoats.[7] Michael Burns was born in Ireland around 1790 and married Mary Conroy in Manchester in 1821; they had four children, of whom only two (Mary and Lizzie) survived into adulthood.[8] Mary Burns was born sometime between April 1822 and January 1823.[9] Lizzie was born in 1827.[10] The family lived at various addresses in Deansgate and Mary Conroy died sometime after 1827. Michael remarried, to Mary Tuomey, in 1835 and they had three children, of whom only one, Thomas, survived to adulthood. It is likely that the children all grew up in slum conditions.

Manchester was becoming (in)famously Irish in this period, one of the most Irish cities in Britain along with Glasgow and Liverpool. In Manchester and Salford, 13.1% of the population was Irish-born according to the 1851 census, a figure that would rise exponentially if we also included second-generation Irish. Migrants were mainly rural in origin, but with a noticeable artisanal and even petit-bourgeois element. [11] Irish

migrants to the north of England and Midlands generally came from Connaught and Leinster, with migrants from Munster and South Leinster usually going to the south of England or to Wales, and those from Ulster and North Connaught migrating to Scotland; it is probable, but not certain, that Michael Burns had followed this pattern.[12]

The Manchester Irish tended to be poor, though not exclusively so, and they tended to be more dispersed across the city than the talk of a 'Little Ireland' ghetto would suggest. Only about 2,000 people lived in Little Ireland, versus 20,000 Irish in the New Town part of Manchester.[13] By 1853, Michael and Mary were living in the Workhouse for Sick and Infirm Poor in New Bridge Street, where Michael died in 1858. He was then buried at St Patrick's Roman Catholic Church in Miles Platting; as of the 1861 Census, his wife was still at the workhouse.[14]

Assuming the Burns sisters followed the standard pattern for first-generation Irish migrants in Manchester, they would have started their working life at about age nine, employed as 'scavengers', nimble children paid ultra-low wages to prevent cotton scraps from entering factory machinery.[15] Roy Whitfield has observed that if Mary Burns was indeed born in 1822, then she could very likely have been working in a factory by 1832. Lizzie would have entered the workforce by 1837.[16] Gearoid Ó Tuathaigh has argued that Irish communities in nineteenth-century Britain tended towards a kind of specific kind of habitational 'conservatism'; they maintained connections with other Irish people, preserving social and religious practices brought with them from Ireland. Though this claim is probably not quite true and perhaps points to a methodological bias; those who married within Irish communities, formed Irish sporting or religious *Landmannschaften* etc., generated 'Irish' documentation and thus reinforce the idea that Irish migrants remained conservatively Irish. Those like the Burns sisters who melted into the general population did not produce 'Irish' archival material.[17]

It is clear that Mary and Lizzie were no longer living with their father at the time of the 1841 census. It is possible that the girls also abandoned factory work and wretched living conditions in the hovels of the Deansgate area and became domestic servants in the homes of more affluent families. This area of Manchester included both impoverished Irish workers as well as those wealthy enough to hire live-in servants. Domestic service was by far the most common form of paid employment for Irish-born women in Victorian Britain, though they lacked the profile that 'Bridget', the archetypal Irish female servant, had in the contemporary United States and, as with 'domestic' women in general, they have generally been ignored by historians.[18] According to the 1841 census returns, a Mary Burn, aged

twenty, was employed as a female servant in the Deansgate house of George Chadfield, a master painter; and an Elizabeth Burns, aged fifteen, was acting as domestic servant to a family named Fothergill in Faulkner Street, near Piccadilly. 'This is not in itself conclusive evidence but if these are the Burns sisters, then the experience they gained in service would have equipped them for their positions in later years as keepers of the Engels' household'.[19] It is interesting to think that imagining the Burns sisters as factory workers can be incorporated into Marxist narratives, but that they were potentially servants (a form of labour about which Marx and Engels had little to say) has been ignored.

Roy Whitfield states that Mary Burns and Engels met shortly after his first arrival in Manchester in 1842 and that she helped him with the investigations of housing and factory conditions in the city that eventually became *Condition of the Working Class in England*. There is little direct evidence of this and none of Engels' correspondence from 1842-44 has survived.[20] The Ermen & Engels mill was in Deansgate, though, so their meeting there is definitely plausible. And they may have attended meetings together at the Hall of Science in Manchester, founded by Robert Owen.[21] Yvonne Kapp says that Engels met Mary Burns, 'a mill-hand then aged 19', in Eccles in 1842.[22] Steven Marcus repeats the claim that Mary Burns acted as a guide for Engels as he explored proletarian Manchester. Marcus even goes so far as to suggest that Engels' discovery of 'the hidden regions and meanings of Manchester' coincided with his discovery of his own sexuality via Mary.[23] Needless to say there is no evidence for so intriguing a speculation.

In 1898, Eleanor Marx, who, as a child, knew Mary personally, described her to Karl Kautsky: as a 'Manchester (Irish) factory girl quite uneducated though she could read and write a little'.[24] Likewise, Edmund Wilson's description in his 1941 work *To the Finland Station*, rings psychologically true, even if some of it remains unsubstantiated:

> He [Engels] was having a love affair with an Irish girl named Mary Burns who worked in the factory of Ermen & Engels and had been promoted to run a new machine called a 'self-actor'. She seems to have been a woman of some independence of character, as she is said to have refused his offer to relieve her of the necessity of working. She had, however, allowed him to set up her and her sister in a little house in the suburb of Salford, where the coal-barges and chimneys of Manchester gave way to the woods and the fields. Mary Burns was a fierce Irish patriot and she fed Engels' revolutionary enthusiasm at the same time that she served him as guide to the infernal abysses of the city.[25]

Moreover, it is worth considering what Burns would have thought of Engels' first book. At one point in *The Condition of the Working Class*, he baldly declaimed that 'In the throstle room at the cotton mill at Manchester in which I was employed, I do not remember to have seen one single tall, well-built girl; they were all short, dumpy and badly-formed, decidedly ugly in the whole development of the figure'.[26] Likewise, the book employs a number of regular anti-Irish tropes about the unhygienic, drunken, lazy, racially inferior Irish, which presumably would not have appealed to Mary Burns.[27] It is probable, if they did meet in 1842, that their relationship dissipated but then was renewed when Engels returned to Britain in 1845.[28]

All of this is imaginatively explored in Frank McGuinness' 1989 play *Mary and Lizzie*, which reconstructs both women. At the end of the play, Lizzie accurately forecasts that 'you will be remembered, because you loved the earth … I will be remembered by a line in your life. Frederick Engels lived with two Irish women, Mary and Lizzie Burns. Little does that tell. Little do they know'. Nonetheless, Lizzie does also recount her and her sister's important role in Engels' life and career: 'Years ago in this country they say two women met a man and they went walking through Manchester. The women gave the man safe passage through the dangerous poor … They showed him the poor and they showed him their father and they showed their race and themselves to him'. Though the cautious register here – 'they say … ' – suggests the rumours and unknowable claims that swirl around Lizzie and Mary. In another scene, Jenny von Westphalen, Marx's wife, questions the Burns sisters' sexual propriety before reading some of the more overtly anti-Irish passages from *Condition of the Working Class* to the sisters; 'Shall I tell you what he's said … He's named your race … Do you think he loves you?'[29] Gavin McCrea's 2015 novel *Mrs Engels* rehearses a number of the romanticised rumours about the Burns Sisters – that they met Engels at his father's factory, that Lizzie gave material support to Fenians – while still providing a psychologically-accurate portrait of the sisters, 'tiny cog(s) in the Manchester machine'.[30] Belinda Webb's doctoral dissertation on Mary Burns, cited above, merges historical research with a conscious attempt to re-imagine her life so as to explore questions of Irish working-class identity in Manchester.

While we have no direct evidence as to how Mary Burns and Friedrich Engels met, they certainly were in a relationship by 1845, when they travelled together to Brussels.[31] And in a letter from April of 1846 to his fellow communist, Emil Blank, Engels euphemistically referred to Mary as 'my wife'.[32] They were never formally married. A letter from January 1848 seems to be the first recorded example of Engels mentioning her to Marx,

though the context makes it clear that Marx knows of her already (the specific context is an accusation from Sibylle Hess, wife of the communist and proto-Zionist Moses Hess, that Engels had sexually assaulted her).[33] And certainly Marx knew of Burns as early as March 1846.[34]

Freddie and Mary

By May 1854 Engels and Mary Burns were living together. This apparently caused some scandals with unnamed 'Philistines' in Manchester, about whom Engels complained to Marx and as a result of whom he took on additional lodgings. But this appears to have been for show and Engels continued to live with Mary Burns.[35] Engels may have wished to placate the views of more socially conservative workers in Manchester, who might have balked at a factory owner's son pursuing a female mill hand.[36] And indeed, there were always class- and gender-based disparities in their relationship, with Engels using his wealth to rent apartments for the Burns sisters. While Engels would later critique the bourgeois morality of conventional romance and marriage in *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, it is rarely clear whether or not he overcame this bourgeois morality in his relationships with Mary and Lizzie. His correspondence with Marx does contain a number of references to affairs with other women; his relationship with Mary was not monogamous, but how much she knew of that is unknown. We know nothing of the intimate side of their sex life.

In an article for the *Manchester Guardian* on 10 October 1934, Moses Baritz, 'a well-known figure in political and musical circles in Manchester of that period', established a number of definite addresses at which Engels lived during his time in Manchester: 70 Great Ducie Street, Strangeways, 6 Thorncliffe Grove, Oxford Road (where Mary Burns lived) and 252 Hyde Road, Gorton, where both Mary and Lizzie Burns lived also and where Mary Burns died in January 1863.[37] The houses Engels did rent were often in newly built areas of Manchester, where there was less of a sense of community thus less chance of his relationship with Mary Burns being discovered.[38] When Marx died, Engels purged their collected correspondence of a large amount of letters that mentioned him (Engels). Their surviving letters from 1853 to 1863, now contain 403 letters from Marx but only 185 from Engels, suggesting that Engels destroyed over 200 of the letters he had written to Marx. 'It seems clear that Engels' purpose was to remove all references to his personal life with Mary Burns and to the methods he had employed to try to disguise his dual existence during those years'.[39]

In 1856, Engels visited Ireland with Mary Burns, taking a circular route:

Dublin to Galway, south to Kerry and looping back up to Dublin.[40] Engels also made use of Mary as a supposedly safe recipient for his mail; already in 1851 he was encouraging Marx to place any politically incriminating letters 'under seal with Mary', in case of his house being searched by the authorities.[41] Marx ended a letter of May 1862 by giving his greetings to 'Mrs Boardman and sister', a reference to the fact that Engels was renting accommodation on Hyde Road in Manchester under the assumed name of Frederick Boardman (the surname being a pun on *boarding-man*), with Mary Burns as Mary Boardman and presumably Lizzie Burns also taking an assumed name.[42] An economic downturn caused by the US Civil War had forced Engels to economise his living expenses and 'I'm living with Mary nearly all the time now so as to spend as little money as possible'.[43] 'Mary Boardman' and her sister 'Elizabeth Byrne' are listed in 1861 census for 7 Rial Street; these are probably the Burns sisters. Engels was listed in the same census as living a half mile away at 6 Thorncliffe Grove.[44] Mary Burns died in 1863, apparently from a long-term health issue. She remains a cipher; there are no known images of her and we do not even know where she was buried.

One calamity is a distraction from the other

The death of Mary Burns was almost the occasion for a split in Engels' longstanding collaboration with Marx. Writing to the 'Moor' on 7 January 1863, Engels informed him that

> Mary is dead. Last night she went to bed early and, when Lizzy wanted to go to bed shortly before midnight, she found she had already died. Quite suddenly. Heart failure or an apoplectic stroke. I wasn't told till this morning; on Monday evening she was still quite well. I simply can't convey what I feel. The poor girl loved me with all her heart.[45]

Engels was presumably maintaining a separate residence at this time. Marx's response was less than sympathetic, to say the least. The news of Burns' death 'surprised no less than it dismayed me' and Marx proceeded to compare Burns' death and Engels' grief to his own financial woes: 'The devil alone knows why nothing but ill-luck should dog everyone in our circle just now'. Marx went on to detail his bills with the butcher and baker and with his children's schools. 'It is dreadfully selfish of me to tell you about these *horreurs* at this time. But it's a homeopathic remedy. One calamity is a distraction from the other'.[46] The obvious inference was that Marx was

seeking cash from his patron. In a clipped letter five days later (an unusual pause in their otherwise almost daily correspondence), Engels bristled at the 'frosty view' that Marx had taken. Even 'philistine acquaintances' had shown better sympathies than his old friend. He bluntly suggested Marx take out a loan to cover his bills.[47] Marx may have been reflecting the frostiness of his wife, Jenny Marx, who once referred to Mary Burns as 'Lady Macbeth' and clearly saw in her an unwelcome addition to their lives.[48] On 24 January, after a yawning eleven-day gap in their correspondence, Marx wrote a long letter to apologise for his 'heartlessness', though most of the letter was still taken up with his own financial problems and a plan to declare himself insolvent. He now claimed that the death of Mary Burns had affected him 'as if my nearest and dearest had died'.[49] Two days later, Engels wrote to thank him for his 'candid' apology.

> You yourself have now realized what sort of impression your last letter but one had made on me. One can't live with a woman for years on end without being fearfully affected by her death. I felt as though with her, I was burying the last vestige of my youth. When your letter arrived she had not yet been buried. That letter, I tell you, obsessed me for a whole week; I couldn't get it out of my head. NEVER MIND. Your last letter made up for it and I'm glad that, in losing Mary, I didn't also lose my oldest and best friend.[50]

The issue was put to bed, and importantly Engels included specific details as to how he would soon secure funds for Marx. Just over a year later, by April 1864, Marx was including his 'Kindest regards' to Lizzie Burns in his letters, suggesting that her relationship with Engels was now firmly in place.[51]

'My wife is a revolutionary Irishwoman'

We have far greater details about Lizzie, including, importantly, a photograph and a sketch by Engels (see Figure 2). Marx ended a letter of September 1864 with his 'Regards to Madame Liz' and also called her Engels' '"Irish" lady-friend', suggesting more familiarity and even affection and playfulness.[52] Perhaps he was keen to avoid a repeat of their almost-schism of January 1863. Conversely, would it be too much to interpret a veiled meaning in Marx's closing message of a letter of August 1865?: 'Kindest regards to you from the whole family, and from me to Mrs Lizzy'.[53] Was it still clear that the Marx family, if not Marx himself, continued to look askance at Engels' Irish wives?

Fig. 2: Sketch of Lizzie Burns by Engels, ca. 1869

For almost the entirety of their relationship, Engels and Lizzie Burns were never formerly married though he did refer to her as his wife, describing her to the socialist activist Ludwig Kugelmann as 'my dear spouse'.[54] Discussing her in 1870 with Natalie Liebknecht, wife of the SPD founder Wilhelm Liebknecht and mother of the Spartacist Karl Liebknecht, Engels said quite simply: 'My wife is a revolutionary Irishwoman'.[55] There is certainly some evidence that she was an ardent nationalist, influencing Marx's daughter Eleanor who briefly became known within their family as 'the poor neglected nation', such were her Fenian sympathies.[56] Eleanor also signed letters to Burns with the sobriquet 'Eleanor, F.S.' (Fenian Sister).[57] Lizzie knew various Irish songs from her youth, which she relearned after Jenny Marx, another of Marx's daughters, gave her a copy of Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies* in August 1869.[58] Engels, Lizzie and Eleanor Marx all visited Ireland together in September 1869, visiting Dublin, Wicklow, Cork, and Killarney. Engels described the trip as a success and sarcastically noted that Eleanor Marx and Lizzie Burns both 'returned even *hiberniores* [more Irish] than when they departed'.[59] When various members of Marx and Engels' circle published pro-Fenian articles, Lizzie was apparently 'grateful' and 'absolutely enthusiastic'.[60] There were 'rejoicings' in the Engels-Burns household in December 1870 when convicted Fenians received amnesties.[61] On the other hand, the claim that Marx's son-in-law

Paul Lafargue made in 1905, that Lizzie Burns used her residence as a safe-house for Fenians, including some of the (in)famous 'Manchester Martyrs', is almost certainly false.[62] (Though tantalisingly, Engels and Mary Burns did live at one point at 252 Hyde Road in Manchester, the street where the 'Manchester Martyrs' carried out their failed jailbreak).[63] Such activities are mentioned neither in any of the contemporary correspondence between Marx and Engels, nor in any subsequent histories of Fenianism. The claim that she was an active Fenian is not only a way to (mis)remember Lizzie Burns but to romanticise her as a politically-committed Irish republican. As Mary Hickman has cautioned, evidence of Irish ethnic identity, even a strongly felt one, should not be taken to mean that those holding that sense of identity will automatically become politically active in nationalism.[64]

On the other hand, that Marx encouraged Lizzie's membership in the International Working Men's Association does point to where her political sympathies lay.[65] Her illiteracy presumably prevented her from reading communist texts, but this should not be taken as meaning that she could not have understood communist ideas. She was clearly comfortable enough with communism to be willing to join a communist movement. At the very least, she was tolerant of communism! Conversely, certain hints of condescension towards her can be heard in Engels and Marx's letters; Engels made fun of her pronouncing of Henri Rochefort, a French left-wing journalist as 'Rushforth'[66] and disdainfully called her friend, Mrs Chorlton, 'the fatty'.[67] When the French communard Eugène Dupont arrived in Manchester in July 1870, Marx sought to have Lizzie hired as his maid, perhaps telegraphing how Marx continued to view Lizzie Burns, both in terms of her gender and her social background.[68] Engels' response was that 'a reliable housemaid is damned difficult to drum up in a hurry' but 'Lizzie cannot leave the house because of her knee which, as a result of her unrest and impatience, is not getting better as quickly as it should'.[69] Like Marx, Engels presumably also viewed Lizzie as a suitable candidate for domestic labour. Stuart Hall has observed that Marx's writings are often defined by a masculinist bias, in which 'Man' is assumed to be the productive agent of social change, while women are ignored.[70] Such assumptions were prevalent throughout nineteenth-century European socialism, a gendered division of labour in which it was assumed that men were the producers of value and women were naturally suited to working in the home.[71] How both Marx and Engels viewed Lizzie Burns in terms of her suitability for domestic labour definitely seems to be of a piece with this. Terrell Carver has built on this to suggest that masculinist 'great man' biographers have reinforced this, finding 'the marginalizing and patronizing discourse of helpmeet domesticity easy to repeat'.[72]

In November 1868, Lizzie Burns used a trip to friends in Lincolnshire as a political-anthropological fact-finding mission, reporting back to Engels about the gang system used by 'patriarchal' farm labourers there.[73] She travelled widely with Engels, visiting Hamburg, Schleswig and Copenhagen in the summer of 1867, but apparently suffering terribly from seasickness.[74] This seasickness may also have been something more serious. By November 1868, Engels was writing to Marx about her health, which would soon become a regular theme. Initially he described this as 'congestions to the head', but early the following year he was more specific: 'Lizzie gets violent gastric catarrh, which I treated for a long while, and scarcely is this over, and she gets, as the result of an injury to her toe, an inflammation of the lymph ducts in her foot and leg, which could have become very unpleasant, but is now nearly over'.[75] She recovered in late January 1869 but by March she was bedridden again with what Engels variously described as 'bronchitis', 'a bad cold', 'pleurisy', 'exudation on the right lung' and 'catarrh in the lungs'.[76] She was slowly recovering and 'on a strengthening diet'.[77]

In 1870, Engels and Burns left Manchester for London; the immediate reason was the ending of Engels' much hated tenure at his family's factory. Some tensions, due to unnamed causes, between Burns and her family also played a role: 'My move to London late in summer has now been decided. Lizzie has told me that she would like to leave Manchester, the sooner the better; she has had some rows with relations, and she is fed up with the whole business here'.[78] It is quite plausible that her unmarried cohabitation with a German communist had irked her family. On their arrival in London they resided at 122 Regent's Park – then, as now, an up-market locale – and Engels continued his practice of using Burns as a safe recipient for his politically sensitive correspondence.[79] 'If you write to Miss Burns you need neither an inside envelope, nor to make any mention of my name whatever. I open everything myself'.[80] He continued to refer to her as his wife and in a letter of 1872 he even began to call her 'Mrs Engels'.[81]

The move to London may have helped her health in the short-term, but by March 1877 her health declined, necessitating recuperative trips to Brighton.[82] A trip to Ramsgate in July 1877 failed to have the desired positive effect; her appetite remained weak. Engels was 'beginning to get seriously alarmed'.[83] She had a 'serious crisis' in her health on 22 July after which she slowly recovered.[84] Her lingering health problems prevented Engels from completing a French translation of the Communist Manifesto.[85] On 12 September 1878, at 1:30am, she 'died peacefully after a long illness'.[86] She and Engels had been legally wed the previous evening;

they were married according to the rites of the Church of England by Rev. W.B. Galloway of St Mark's Church, close to their home at 122 Regent's Park Road.[87] A marriage right before Lizzie's certain death meant that she would not be eligible to inherit any of Engels' wealth, and thus would not cause a scandal for his bourgeois family in Germany, a family she never met because she had never accompanied Engels on his trips home.[88] Burns was buried in St Mary's Cemetery, a Catholic graveyard, in Kensal Green in London. Her grave (see Figure 3) was marked with a Celtic cross, a suitably Irish touch, as well as the epitaph:

> In memory of
> Lydia
> wife of Frederick Engels
> born August 6th 1827 died September 12th 1878
> R.I.P.

The gravestone is currently in shabby condition but appears to have had its engraving recently retouched (see Figure 3).

Fig. 3: The Grave of Lizzie Burns, Photo courtesy of Joe Dwyer / @JoeEDwyer

Pumps Burns

After Lizzie's death, Engels continued to have contact with her niece, Mary Ellen Burns (1860-1928), generally referred to, for unclear reasons, as 'Pumps'. Pumps was the daughter of the Burns sisters' half-brother, Thomas, who owned a fish shop in Manchester.[89] Engels' support seems to have been as much out of duty as affection, though prior to Lizzie Burns' death Engels did refer to her in terms that suggested he had informally adopted her.[90]

There are references in Marx's letters from 1881 and 1882 that speak to his irritability around Pumps. She flirted with various visitors to the Engels house, leading one émigré socialist, Leo Hartmann, to ask Engels' permission to marry her in June 1881, not realising that her flirtations with him had apparently been intended to make another visitor, Karl Kautsky, jealous.[91] By 1882 she had married a hapless accountant, Percy Rosher, becoming Mary Ellen Rosher and giving birth to a baby named Lilian.[92] Marx would later tell his daughter, Laura Lafargue, that he found the baby to have a livelier intellect than the mother.[93] Their second surviving child, Charles, was born at the start of 1885 and baptised in the Church of England.[94] Engels regularly gave subventions to Percy Rosher's luckless business adventures and bequeathed the couple the handsome sum of £2,300 in his will.[95] With the death of Engels in 1895 and thus perhaps their financial lifeline gone also, they sailed from Liverpool to Boston, via Queenstown (Cobh) in May 1898, settling in Norfolk, Massachusetts. Pumps died there in 1928.[96]

Why does this matter?

The Burns sisters can clearly be placed in broader histories of the Irish diaspora, where women often gained newfound freedoms denied them 'at home' whilst continuing to face regular gendered (and intersectional) stereotypes as Irish women. Clearly both Mary and Lizzie were freethinking and willing to forge their own lifestyles, ones that certainly did not align with standard mid-Victorian Irish or British codes of social propriety. What we know of both sisters' politics is also telling; in Engels' or Marx's letters they are always assumed to be Fenian sympathisers, yet these descriptions seem to lack content or three-dimensionality: 'Fenian' was perhaps an identity placed upon them, rather than a positive descriptor of complicated viewpoints or entangled political activism. The trajectories of both women's lives confirm the observation of Mary Hickman that a binary opposition of 'segregation' or 'assimilation' as the only options supposedly open to Irish migrants, closes down our understanding of

diasporic communities; very broadly speaking, diasporic ethnic minorities will engage in both assimilation *and* segregation simultaneously.[97]

We can assume that both sisters were communists, or at the very least that they were comfortable enough with communism to have long-term relationships with a committed foreign-born communist. And yet there is the tantalising piece of evidence of Lizzie Burns' marriage and burial; certain 'traditional' social niceties and norms clearly mattered to her, and indeed these niceties probably mattered to Irish women in general, who tended to retain a Catholic identity at a higher rate than male Irish migrants.[98] Whether or not Engels wanted to overcome all the pieties of 'the family, private property and the state', Lizzie Burns clearly preferred to die a wife than a 'woman living in sin'. And Irish-inflected Catholicism remained of a piece with all that.[99] Both sisters' lives illustrate all the contradictions and complexities that existed just below the surface of the simple label of 'Irish woman' in Victorian Britain.

Notes

1 Georg Weerth, a friend of Engels, wrote a poem called *Mary* which references Tipperary ('I should like the clover of Tipperary/To grow over and choke the rose of England'), which is perhaps the source of the idea that she was from Tipperary. Roy Whitfield, *Frederick Engels in Manchester: The Search for a Shadow*, Salford, 1988, p21.
2 Raoul Peck, (dir.), *The Young Karl Marx*, Paris, 2017, Agat Films.
3 Mike Dash, 'Friedrich Engels' Irish Muse' (August 2013), mikedashhistory.com, accessed 7 July 2021.
4 Brian Maye, 'Heart of Class: An Irishman's Diary on Friedrich Engels and Mary Burns', *Irish Times*, 4 November 2020.
5 Mike Dash, 'How Friedrich Engels' Radical Lover Helped Him Father Socialism', smithsonianmag.com (August 2013), accessed 7 July 2021. This piece is largely the same as the earlier cited Mike Dash article; I include it here because of its suggestive title.
6 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, New York, 1966, p12.
7 Whitfield, *Frederick Engels in Manchester*, p69.
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34 Letter 3 [Appendix], Letter from Jenny Marx to Karl Marx, 24 March 1846, *MECW* 38.
35 Letter 222, Engels to Marx, 1 May 1854, *MECW* 39.
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48 Letter 3 [Appendix], Letter from Jenny Marx to Karl Marx, 24 March 1846, *MECW* 38.
49 Letter 269, Marx to Engels, 24 January 1863, *MECW* 41.
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51 Letter 310, Marx to Engels, 19 April 1864, *MECW* 41. A letter from later that year ends with 'Regards to Madame Liz', suggesting even more familiarity and playfulness; Letter 339, Marx to Engels, 7 September 1864, *MECW* 41.
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75 Letter 143, Engels to Marx, 19 January 1869, *MECW* 43.
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78 Letter 294, Engels to Marx, 22 February 1870, *MECW* 43.
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86 Letter 227, Engels to Rudolf Engels, 12 September 1878, *MECW* 45.
87 Kapp, *Eleanor Marx*, I, p191; Hunt, *Marx's General*, p265.
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93 Letter 188, Marx to Laura Lafargue [Laura Marx], 9 October 1882, *MECW* 46.
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