

## *Class, Crime and Politics in New York's Construction: A Review of Thomas Kelly's Empire Rising*

Thomas Kelly, *Empire Rising*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2005.

reviewed by Russell Harrison

They raised up their gigantic buildings with  
incomparable waste  
Of the best human material. Quite openly, before the  
whole world  
They squeezed from their workers all that was in them . . .  
– Brecht

*Empire Rising*, a new novel by Thomas Kelly, intrigues more by its absences and displacements than it does by its ostensible topic, New York City and its Irish-American working and political classes after the 1929 Stock Market crash and during the building of the Empire State Building. In different ways it is reminiscent of Dos Passos' *USA* trilogy and Dashiell Hammet's *Red Harvest* and in a minor way, acts as something of a foil to Gene Fowler's *Beau James: The Life and Times of Jimmie Walker*.

The novel focuses on two fictional characters, Irish immigrants Michael Briody, gunrunner for the IRA and iron worker and riveter on the Empire State building and Grace Masterson, a woman of a complicated past, in the novel a painter and mistress of Tammany Hall official, Johnny Farrell and eventually Briody's lover. Historical characters make, (for the most part brief) appearances: Mayor Jimmie Walker, Al Smith, FDR, the photographer Lewis Hines and transit union official, Mike Quill (via his apartment), for example.

While the novel is readable, there is a cartoonish quality to it and it is flawed by linguistic anachronisms and a plodding, repetitive and at times clichéd prose. These problems seem to me to result less from a lack of authorial skill than from an erroneous concept of history and a questionable worldview. Ultimately, the novel is something of an ahistorical historical novel. To the extent that it possesses any kind of real historicity, this lies more in what it indicates about the present era than in its depiction of the past.

In addition to the two main characters, the novel comprises another 15-20 figures of varying significance, many of whom have connections with each other. These fall into three main categories: workers (mostly Irish-American), politicians (mostly Irish-American) and lastly members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Other ethnic groups play a part, but not a large one. This narrow focus sometimes results in a rather claustrophobic feel to the novel, something akin to those Woody Allen's films that present the New York of Upper West Side Jews as New York, *tout simple*. Though the working class and the political "class" were more substantially Irish-American then, than now, they were by no means completely so. The fact that Jimmie Walker was replaced by the half-Italian, half-Jewish Fiorello LaGuardia suggests as much. But this is perhaps a minor point.

The problem with the novel is its idealist worldview. This is shown in two ways. First, there is the idea that history is subject to the manipulation of the individual or at most, a group of individuals. It is an example of the "Great Man" theory of history.<sup>1</sup> Second, and most problematic about a novel about labor and workers is Kelly's failure to acknowledge the alienated labor and the class conflict that results from it in a capitalist society.

For much of the novel the plot structure is the rising superstructure of the Empire State building to be. Time and again we see Briody at his job as a riveter with the other members of his crew and in the course of the novel as that job begins to have more and more meaning for him, his ties to the IRA loosen. Truly, Briody comes to love his job. At times he even offers up paeans to relative exploitation, the so-called "speed-up." With distressing regularity we get passages in which the idea of working on what will be the tallest building in the world--and something like its eighth wonder--trumps the increase in relative exploitation that results from the constant pressure to work harder and faster though some recognize that in doing so the workers are just working themselves into early unemployment. I cite a number of such passages because it is this attitude that seems to me crucial to the problematic nature of the novel:

"Sheehan showed up every morning fully alert, wired like a man halfway through his day, while the others were still trying to shrug off the night's sleep. "Ten million bricks, boys. Ten million. I was talking to my engineer cousin. This ain't just another skyscraper. It's the eighth wonder of the world." (60)

Further on:

"He [Briody] loved his job, looked forward to waking every morning and coming down to this place and rising into the air, higher each day. Days like this he wished it would never end, that they would rise forever, never topping off." (183)

When asked by his lover, Grace Masterson, whether he's happy, Briody replies:

"Actually I'm truly happy when I'm on the job. There's nothing like it really. Most people might think it's crazy, but I love the work, the men. Climbing up there in the sky, making something that will last long after you're gone, turning empty space into something real and concrete." (189)

And finally:

"Nothing was going to stop this job. Because the men loved the idea of it as much as the bosses did" (210).

To think "the idea" of working on what will be the world's tallest building would trump all the conflicts and complexities of the alienated work relationship is wishful thinking. What the workers appreciate is the decent, steady work. To me there is far more truth regarding the work relationship in the ten pages of Studs Terkel's interview with steelworker Mike LeFevre than in the close to 400 pages of Kelly's novel.<sup>2</sup>

After all, Briody gets no more money for working harder; he is only creating more profit for his employer and it seems to me highly unlikely that Briody was typical; rather that the average buildings trades worker of the 1930s had an attitude closer to that of Lefevre or Ben Hamper (*Rivthead: Tales from the Assembly Line*). Alienation, both economic and psychological would have had to be present during the construction of the Empire State Building. For all the violence of Kelly's novel, since much of it deals with feuding criminal factions and the politicians complicit with these, the novel has, at least with respect to its presentation of work, something of the fairy tale about it. Indeed, Kelly's depiction of such labor bears a striking resemblance to the 1930s Stalinist myth derived from the over-producing coal miner, Alexei Stakhanov, who became the center of a propaganda campaign,<sup>3</sup> or some of the literature later produced in the East Block.

Politics poses another problem for Kelly and represents a glaring lacuna because for Kelly this is merely the manipulation and/or bribery of the registered voter into pulling a voting booth lever once every four years. There would seem to be two political groups in the novel: the corrupt Tammany Hall and the "Googooos," "Good Government" types who in the end brought down Walker through Judge Seabury and the Hofstadter Committee hearings of the early 1930s. However, these latter make relatively infrequent appearances in the novel, though they are necessary for the novel to end as it does, with a suggestion of possible reform. But, to judge by the picture of the working class, one would never guess that the U.S. was heading into its most difficult decade with respect to labor/management relations since the 1890s and that with the sit-down strikes and factory occupations in the auto industry and the passage of the Wagner act in 1937 labor's power was soon to be at its peak. The relative impotence and lack of militancy of the American working class in the novel, again, would rather seem to reflect the era of the novel's composition.

Early in the novel we do see some strikers being brutally beaten up by anti-labor goons (one of them dies as a result of the assault) and there is a pointless mention of Mike Quill (or rather his apartment), later in the book (and as one of the most important New York City union leaders through the early 1960s, and someone

influential in organizing the city's transit workers, he was a figure that one might think would, were he to be mentioned at all, deserve more space).

Everyone in *Empire Rising* would seem to be corrupt, with the possible exception of Jack Egan, the police captain secretly working for FDR. But here again, Egan's position is hardly a progressive one. When asked by FDR why he is willing to work against his own (the Irish-Americans), Egan replies, "One reason is I think Tammany has lost its way. Like most successful people, they have become what they once hated--fat and happy" (44). Almost all the politicians seem to be connected to one or another of the various gangsters who populate the novel, whether "Tough Tommy" Touhey who controls the Mott Haven section of the Bronx or at the end, Valmonte, the rising mob chieftain. It is in this respect that *Empire Rising* bears a distinct resemblance to Hammet's *Red Harvest* of 1929. But that novel includes a moral agent, "the Op," who is not beholden to either side, and in fact manipulates the two sides into massacring each other. There is no such moral agent in *Empire Rising*.

As noted, the novel is poorly written.<sup>4</sup> Kelly tends to overwrite, sensitive at some level to the fact that he is not making his point. Moreover, the novel does not seem to have been edited, either for wordiness or for anachronisms, some of which prove quite telling. Kelly gives his characters of 1930 words and phrases that stem from a much later period. For example: at another interview with FDR, Egan is giving the Governor a rundown on Mayor Walker's complicity with the rampant corruption. Egan responds to a query of FDR's about who's profiting:

"It's more that he allows others to plunder . . ."

"Others?"

"His Tammany cronies. The usual suspects . . ." (43)

Now the phrase, "the usual suspects" comes from the 1943 film *Casablanca*. I even suspect that its currency comes not from the film's original era but from a later revival of its popularity. In any event, it is certainly anachronistic in this novel about 1930. At one point, the word "wired" is used in its sense of (politically) connected. Again this usage (not even given in a 1990 Random house unabridged dictionary) is of a later provenance. And the problem with such errors is that one begins to have less and less faith in Kelly's novel. "Trust me," one of his characters says--in what seems yet another anachronistic usage--but we don't. It seems to me that such failings lend support to the view that the novel has more to say about the period (more or less) of its composition than it does about the early 1930s.

Authorial lack of confidence also causes Kelly to resort to placing in his novel scenes which clearly stem from iconic images of the era. One such scene describes Briody and the other three members of his work gang sitting on a steel beam attached to the end of a derrick cable and, at least for me, this immediately brought to mind the famous Lewis W. Hine photos of some real workers of the period doing just that; later there is a description of a lightning storm which seems to be taken from a Weegie photo of such an event.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, that photo is so well known that it is the back cover photograph of a standard collection of Weegie's photos. It is as if by describing a photograph of the period Kelly is trying to co-opt that photograph's undeniable authenticity for his own work, a silent acknowledgement of his own work's failure to convince.

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The book jacket of *Empire Rising* shows the completed Empire State Building viewed through an opening of the steel superstructure of another building, some distance away from the Empire State. The Empire State is slightly off center to the left and is bathed in light, except for one of its two visible faces whose mid section is in grayish shadows. There are no other high-rises, let alone skyscrapers visible. The picture and the title would seem to implicate the events of September 11 2001 and it seems to me that the novel (as how could it not be?) is shaped by and connected to the historical complex that 9/11 has become.

The novel's title, for example, is marked. Referentially, it hovers somewhere between the concreteness (no pun intended) of the building and a somewhat more abstract reference to the rise of the American Empire. It was only after World War I that the United States achieved its "rightful" place in the world, i.e., a place

commensurate with its tremendous industrial wealth and military power. It was an age when the first wave of American pop culture began its long globalizing trend and generated an antagonistic resistance which, in Germany, for example, came to be covered with the derogatory term, "Amerikanismus." Yet even in this sense the title is a little off in that the novel takes place in the early Thirties, a time when capitalism, especially in the U.S., where the Depression was worse than in Europe, encountered its worst crisis. To term this period one of a "rising" power is at the least somewhat awkward. In fact, Brecht's poem, "Late Lamented Fame of the Giant City of New York" (written in direct response to the Stock Market Crash of 1929) would seem to be a more historically accurate picture.<sup>6</sup>

But strictly accurate or not, the image of the Empire State Building (once again the tallest building in New York) sandwiched between the two words of the title inevitably becomes associated with the familiar images of the collapse of the Twin Towers and the subsequent meditations on the whole complex of indicia (balance of payments, off-shoring, decline/stagnation of the average wage, worker insecurity [and not only in the traditionally insecure waged assembly-line work also in the white-collar middle-class sector] heretofore thought impregnable to the business cycle) that suggest that the American Empire has entered a new, and not necessarily positive stage, one viewed with anxiety and trepidation even, one can assume, by its proselytes and defenders. Surely, when we look at the Manhattan skyline, it is a good question as to whether we first look at the Empire State Building or note the absence of the destroyed towers.

And here we come to a kind of hyperlink in the novel's relationship to 9/11, the Irish Republican Army. Fiction has many kinds of relations to the reality about which it says something and when I suggest that the IRA in the novel functions as a kind of stand-in for Al Qaeda, I certainly don't mean that this is something that Kelly had in mind. Yet the connections are there; they are not connections of identity, but they are connections nonetheless. At the time of the novel the Irish Free State has been established and the six counties of Northern Ireland have remained with Britain. Yet a part of the IRA has not accepted this. Mike Briody is involved in running guns for the IRA and at one point in the novel we see him murder a half-dead opponent who has been tortured almost to death (by others) and who is tied to a chair. He murders without remorse. And we learn later that he has murdered a number of times for the IRA in Ireland (before the time of the novel). Later on, he refuses to murder another opponent, as he has come to feel less and less for the IRA cause and his refusal leads, eventually to his own death. These, though are political assassinations and not the full-fledged terrorism that inevitably involves the death of innocent people. But Grace Masterson, with whom Briody is in love, later tells him that her own father, a supporter of a free Ireland was killed by IRA gunmen. And this knowledge, we can plausibly assume, is part of what leads Briody to break with the IRA; the IRA are thus depicted as terrorists, "dead-enders," as some might call them, not ready to accept the reality of politics and thus to be excluded from politics.

There is one final link to 9/11 and its aftermath that the novel suggests and it is connected to the most successful (intended or not) aspect of the novel. This lies in the atmosphere of fear that runs through the book. People don't just die, they die horribly. And while it is true that these are rarely innocent bystanders, there is nevertheless an aura of menace that, *mutatis mutandis*, feels familiar to New Yorkers in the post 9/11 era.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Cp. early in the novel, FDR's musing on why Al Smith lost the 1928 presidential election: "If Smith possessed a tenth of Walker's flair and charm and good looks he would be President, Catholicism or no Catholicism" (42). The idea that it is the individual's "gift" as opposed to material forces

that move history while occasionally locally correct, ultimately reflects a failure of historical analysis. It's the view that the problems that American imperialism generates (for the United States) would have been precluded had Bin Laden died in the 1998 missile attack designed to assassinate him.

<sup>2</sup>Cp. LeFevre on intra-class conflict, indeed violence: " 'Cause all day I wanted to tell my foreman to go fuck himself, but I can't.

"So I find a guy in a tavern. To tell him that. And he tells me too. I've been in brawls. He's punching me and I'm punching him, because we actually want to punch somebody else. The most that'll happen is the bartender will bar us from the tavern. But at work, you lose your job" (3).

<sup>3</sup>Fyodor Gladkov's Cement is also a relevant text here. But as a product of pre-Stalinist 1920s Russia one might argue that during this earliest period of socialist construction, the proletariat was objectively less alienated (though this, of course, soon changed.)

<sup>4</sup>According to the publisher, Kelly's first novel, Payback, "has been adapted by David Mamet for a feature film" and his second, The Rackets is "being adapted by ABC for a television series." One might thus legitimately infer that this novel is headed in the same direction and thus less attention was given to stylistic and other infelicities.

<sup>5</sup>The photo is titled: "New York at Night" and was taken around 1940. In the book it appears on page 114.

<sup>6</sup> Pp 167-174 of Poems 1913-1956. The first stanza runs: "Who is there still remembers/The fame of the giant city of New York/In the decade after the Great War?"