

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.

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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

*E*mpire 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

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)

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 *E p r e s n g* 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 *E p r e s n g* 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 *E p r e s n g*.

As noted, the novel is poorly written.⁴ 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 *C s n c* . 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.⁵ 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 *E p r e s n g* 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

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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.

²Cp. 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).

³Fyodor Gladkov's Cement is also a relevant text here. But as a product of