

In Memoriam: William Francis Kelleher, Jr.

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Abstract: A consideration of the scholarly and personal influence of the scholar William Francis (Bill) Kelleher, Jr. Kelleher was a specialist in the ethnography of Northern Ireland who trained anthropology PhD students studying Eastern Europe and thus played a role in the development of the anthropology of postsocialism. His passions were areas of ethnicity and conflict, labor, class, gender, narrative, and social justice.



Bill Kelleher

William Francis (“Bill”) Kelleher, Jr., a scholar of Northern Ireland, was not formally an anthropologist of Eastern Europe. Yet Bill was deeply interested in the anthropology of postsocialism, and he was passionate about the issues of class, labor, economics, and social justice that are central to the field. Two of Bill’s closest friends were prominent scholars of postsocialism— sociologist David Stark, and the late anthropologist Daphne Berdahl, who first met Bill when she was an undergraduate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Bill applied the insights of the anthropology of postsocialism to his own research and writing, and he mentored a generation of East Europeanist PhD students, among them the current and former editors of the *Anthropology of East Europe Review* (Andrew Asher and Sarah D. Phillips). It is therefore fitting to recognize Bill and his contributions to the field in this *In Memoriam* article. Bill Kelleher died of melanoma on September 18, 2013 in Syracuse, New York.

Bill was a native of West Roxbury (Boston), Massachusetts. His father was a Boston firefighter, and he grew up in a working class Irish Catholic family. Bill graduated from Catholic Memorial High School and cherished his boyhood friendships throughout his life. He attended Colby College but took time off after his mother died of cancer to help care for his younger brother and sisters. He went on to earn a B.A. in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and a Ph.D. in Anthropology in 1990 from the University of Michigan, where he studied with Prof. Aram A. Yengoyan. During his years of study, Bill worked an array of odd jobs. As a boy, he caddied at country club golf courses. Later, on the

docks of Boston, he scoured the tanks of ships. He worked as a hospital orderly. As a graduate student, he cleaned the offices of the student newspaper at the University of Michigan. At the same time he was a head teaching fellow at the university, he was teaching inmates at Michigan's Jackson State Prison. From 1980 to 1982, he taught inner city high school students in Boston, then spent a year teaching Southeast Asian refugees in Washington, D. C. No doubt these experiences influenced Bill to reflect on the workings of class difference and discrimination, and informed his life-long interest in identity formation, particularly among the working class.

Bill's primary research and teaching interests were in labor and class relations, the anthropology of work, the effects of long term political violence on everyday life, the work of historical memory in reproducing such violent conflict (e.g. in Northern Ireland), and the ethnography of race in institutions of American higher education. Bill carried out several years of ethnographic research in Northern Ireland where he studied a factory shop floor, the historical narratives of opposed communities, the boundary making processes of those neighborhoods, the networks that result, and the sectarian practices that mobilize them. Bill published this work in his 2003 book, *The Troubles in Ballybogoin: Memory and Identity in Northern Ireland* (University of Michigan Press), and in a series of journal articles and book chapters (Kelleher 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2006).

Bill joined the faculty at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1990 as a postdoctoral teaching fellow in the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory, then joined the faculty as a member of the Department of Anthropology, where he taught until 2005. During the course of his dissertation research in Northern Ireland in 1985, he had met and married Jo Thomas, then a correspondent in the London Bureau of the *New York Times*. They and their daughters Susan and Kathleen lived in Urbana, Illinois, for 19 years. In 2005, a year after Jo took the position of Associate Chancellor and Professor of Journalism at Syracuse University, Bill followed Jo to SU, joining the Department of Anthropology in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. He taught there until January, 2013.

Bill was widely beloved by students at both UIUC and Syracuse, where he was recognized as an exceptionally gifted and dedicated teacher and mentor. Former student Matt Reilly (Syracuse) remembers, "I'll never forget his commitment to teaching and how much pride he took in it."¹ On April 24, 2014 Bill was posthumously awarded the 2014 Excellence in Graduate Education Faculty Recognition Award from Syracuse University. This award honors faculty members whose dedication to graduate students and commitment to excellence in graduate teaching and mentoring have made a significant contribution to graduate education at Syracuse University.



*Bill Kelleher (center) with the author, Sarah D. Phillips (left) and Sandra Hamid (right)
May 2002, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign graduation.*

Throughout his career Bill taught undergraduate and graduate courses on Anthropological Theory; Work, Class, and Culture; Anthropology of Neoliberalism; Colonialism/Postcolonialism; Anthropological Perspectives on Ethnicity; Race and Racism; Critical Issues for the U.S.; Modern Europe; Anthropology of Ireland; Anthropology of Violence; Culture, Ethnicity, and Conflict; Ethnography of the University; and others. At UIUC and Syracuse, Bill made enormous contributions to raising awareness among students, faculty, and the community about the politics of exclusion and its detrimental effects for the marginalized and dispossessed. As a teacher, educator, and community activist he drew attention to the injustices perpetuated by racial, class, and gender inequalities on college campuses and the surrounding communities. For instance, at UIUC Bill co-founded the Ethnography of the University Project, which involved undergraduate students in researching the institutions that surround them with a focus on dynamics of racial discrimination.² As part of an interdisciplinary group of undergraduate students and faculty members, he completed a year-long ethnography of an intensive effort by the University of Illinois to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. The project examined what types of educational events and cultural performances worked to get undergraduates to engage each other on the subject of race and what activities reproduced social distancing.

The Ethnography of the University Project is just one example of what Bill's good friend and colleague Alejandro Lugo (UIUC Anthropology) called his "genuine search for social justice in peoples' lives and his politically and socially committed anthropology." Bill's second book, *A Death on the Irish Border: A Critical Event and Transforming Subjects in War and Peace*, was under contract with the University of California Press. The project examined peacemaking and healing among Irish nationalists in the borderlands of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Bill's study took account of the suffering that past political violence engendered and the processes by which both victims and perpetrators of violence attempt to heal, reestablish themselves as citizens, and construct civil society.

In Syracuse Bill did research among “diaspora” Catholics, people whose churches have been shut down. This project connected politics and religion in the story of a displaced progressive community of senior citizens, and highlighted conflicts within Catholicism and the politics of caring in Syracuse. This research was part of Bill’s long-term interest in dispossessed people’s social movements, and he was hoping to do comparative work on this topic in Dublin, Ireland. In Syracuse, Bill was a member of the Peace and Justice Committee at Saint Andrew’s Parish, and he was a member of the parish council at Saint Lucy’s Church, in Syracuse’s economically-depressed near-west side. Bill was on the board of the Syracuse Model Neighborhood Facility, Inc., the non-profit organization that manages the Southwest Community Center and works to respond to the educational, social, cultural, health, employment, legal, and recreational needs of residents of the city. Bill also was active in providing support to released inmates transitioning to life after prison—he was a visitor advocate making weekly visits to inmates at the Justice Center in Syracuse, and he had plans to engage more actively in jail ministry.

In his research, his teaching, and his service work, Bill unfailingly spoke truth to power and challenged others to do the same. In the words of former student Carolina Vargas (Syracuse), “Whether it was about political theories or current political events, Bill’s knowledge and commitment never failed to amaze and motivate his students.”³ In fact, he showed by example that, as articulated by former student Katie Wiegele (UIUC), “values, passions, and commitments can and must be part of one’s intellectual work and teaching.” Put another way, Bill encouraged his students to “build their academic commitments out of their passions” (Carolina Vargas). Alejandro Lugo called this “Bill’s way of inhabiting the world,” and noted that it “became a bit contagious, particularly his generosity, integrity, and his belief in social justice in everything he did.” In other words, Bill hated inequality. He sought to name it, and call it out (however gently and with that special mischievous smile of his).

Bill appeared mild-mannered and quiet, but he was also fierce: “When he cared about something, or someone, he did it fiercely. When he took a stand, he usually did it based on principle. And when he took a stand, he held to it. For Bill was about justice, about what was fair, whether it was in the realm of politics, religion, treatment of students, treatment by colleagues, friendship—it was about caring for and about others, especially those who could not always care for themselves,” observed Bill’s colleague at Syracuse, anthropologist Deborah Pellow. That is probably why so many who knew Bill recall his *integrity*: he practiced what he preached. As Katie Wiegele remembered, Bill’s philosophy was “that there is nothing worth more than your humanity and your integrity. Not a job, not a publication, not academic accolades and respect. We are humans in relationships with other humans first.” Former student Marsha Brofka-Berends (UIUC) similarly reflected: “More than most scholars I’ve met, Bill genuinely connected with *people*.” Indeed, Bill pushed his students and colleagues to appreciate and *really try to understand* “people’s complexities and contradictions,” in the words of former student Jonathan Jackson (Syracuse).

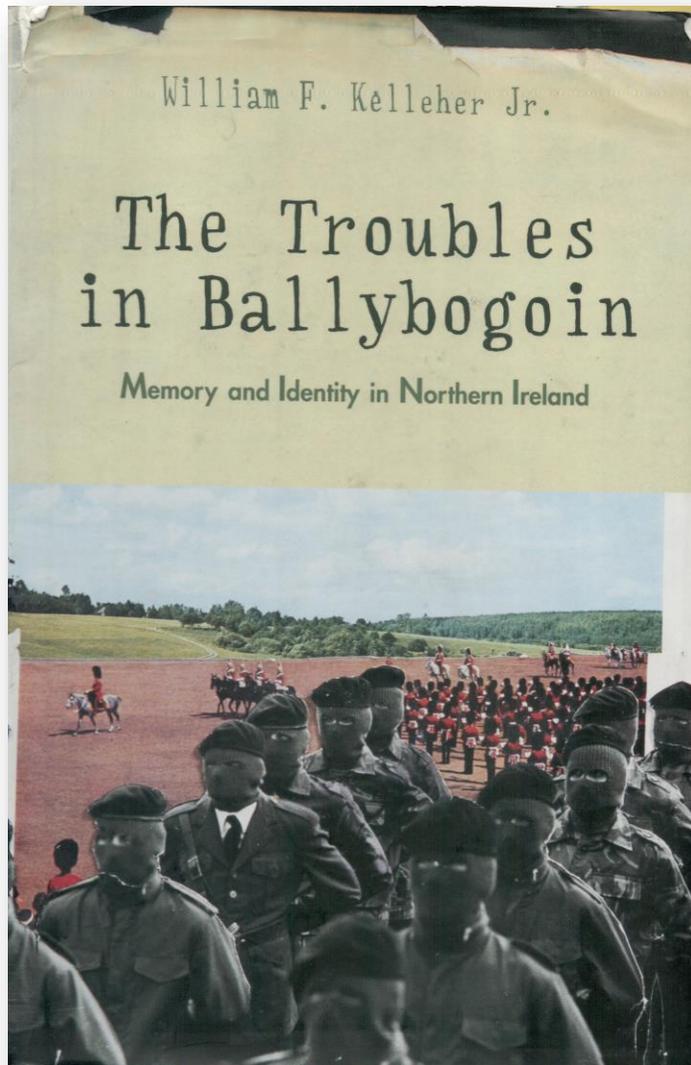
Indeed, those who knew Bill describe him as a wonderful listener and an insightful observer. He cared deeply about his fellow humans and their stories. These qualities are all abundantly evident in his book, *The Troubles in Ballybogoin: Memory and Identity in Northern Ireland* (2003). The following is how Bill’s good friend and colleague, sociologist David Stark (Columbia U), described Bill’s book:

Bill went to Northern Ireland at the height of The Troubles. It was dangerous. There was violence all around, and some of his informants were killed. Bill was courageous. He disguised the name of the town where he did the research to protect his respondents, and he thought deeply about the ethical challenges of the research and writing. But, however dramatic and troubling its setting, the book is not war reportage. It is a work of innovative social science.

Bill's account of memory and identity in Northern Ireland hinges on the notion of *Telling*. Bill considered titling the book, *Telling Identities*. It asks the question: How do you tell? As we learn, Bill asks that question in different ways and in multiple registers. Part of the book is about "Talk." To be a member of this particular community of Northern Ireland Catholics one needs to be able to talk – to narrate a story, to get a laugh, to have a comeback line. But telling is different from talking. In fact, it might be entirely nonverbal. This was Bill's insight.

How do you tell? Bill observed that this was a key, often unspoken, question that was on people's minds and could be a matter of life or death. How do you tell whether someone is Protestant or Catholic? And how do you tell that at 100 yards or more away? About this, Bill makes detailed observations – the turn of a collar, the cuff of the pants, the speed or length of a stride, depending on differences in locale sometimes from only one block to the next. Correspondingly, there is another How do you tell? How do *you* tell others, whether you are Catholic or Protestant, and under what conditions and precisely when and exactly where might you want to make it now difficult and then obvious to tell. Telling is not talking. It's a reading of bodies.

To understand what was going on, Bill asked people to give him tours of Ballybogoin. "Take me around and show me what's interesting," he would say. And he recorded what they showed him and how they talked about it. These tours were his way of mapping memories. Bill shows, for example, how the route of the typical Protestant's tour is different from that of the Catholic's tour. Or how, when both include the same spot, the memory and the meaning of it can be different. And how, also *among* Catholics, the memories and meanings of these moving narratives can differ. Bill understood a tour as a moving narrative – a story told while in motion. Because there is meaning in that motion, it is a moving narrative. And because Bill's gift as a writer is to grasp that meaning and to express the emotion in that motion, his book is a moving narrative.⁴



Bill Kelleher's *The Troubles in Ballybogoin* (University of Michigan Press, 2003)

As former student Sascha Goluboff (UIUC) noted, Bill's methodological and ethical commitments influenced his students and colleagues profoundly, and in our own scholarship we often ask ourselves: "How can I make other worlds intelligible to myself and my readers?" In his writing, his teaching, and everyday conversations, Bill compelled us (read: he sometimes forced us, uncomfortably) to consider the workings of power. He wrote and said, explicitly, that differences in power matter – they make it more difficult for some people to tell their stories. He told us that this was an injustice.

Bill studied talk, probably because he was such an attentive and critically-engaged listener. (The best ethnographers are often quiet extroverts, which describes Bill to a T). He believed that talk matters, and he did not let students or colleagues forget it. Not only did he teach us to be attentive to the narratives of others, he taught us to watch our own talk, and reminded us to speak respectfully of others in the world and their situations. If Bill did not like

how you were talking about others, he would let you know. I recall once I mentioned to Bill that some “big wigs” would be on a conference panel in which I was participating. Bill paused, and corrected me, “Do you mean prominent, respected anthropologists?” Yes Bill, that’s what I meant. Words matter.

In addition to talk, Bill also studied memory, gender, class, work, social worth, citizenship, and embodiment, and how power moves through all of these. Bill was an astute observer of the effects of neoliberalism locally and globally, and his critical insights about neoliberalism benefitted not only his students whose research focused on postsocialist Eastern Europe, but those studying other world regions as well. As former student Jesook Song (UIUC) reflected, “I’m indebted to Bill’s intellectual input and training... Although my dissertation on the South Korean national debt crisis during the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s and early 2000s was not directly connected to “postsocialist” contexts, Bill was so insightful and right to point out the similarity of drastic political economic changes between late developing countries, such as South Korea, and former socialist countries such as China and Vietnam as well as many Eastern European countries.” At UIUC and Syracuse, Bill was a member of PhD dissertation committees for students studying diverse topics across the world. At the time of his death he was the primary advisor for several PhD students at the University of Syracuse. Bill was the primary advisor for five students who received their PhDs in Anthropology at UIUC during 1999-2005:

Sascha L. Goluboff (1999). *Jewish multi-ethnicities in post-soviet Russia: An eventful ethnography of the Moscow choral synagogue.*

Sarah D. Phillips (2002). *"Civil" societies and "evil" states: Ambiguities of women's NGO organizing and patriarchy in post-soviet Ukraine.*

William H. Leggett (2003). *Culture, power, difference: Managing ambivalence and producing identity in the transnational corporate offices of Jakarta, Indonesia.*

Sandra M. Hamid (2005). *Engaging the center: On being Indonesian citizens in Lombok, eastern Indonesia.*

Margarita A. Chaves Chamorro (2005). *"?Que va a pasar con los indios cuando todos seamos indios?" Ethnic rights and reindianization in southwestern Colombian Amazonia.*

Bill was extremely intellectually curious, almost insatiably so. His close friend and colleague, anthropologist Nancy Abelmann, described how, even during Bill’s last, uncomfortable days, “The world of ideas continued to grab him.” A couple of weeks before he passed away, Nancy traveled from Urbana to Syracuse for a final visit with Bill, where she found him at home on a sunny porch in a hospital bed reading two academic books. His breadth of ethnographic and theoretical knowledge was astounding. As former student Jonathan Jackson recalled, Bill’s students learned to visit his office with an empty backpack, because chances are they would leave his office with a backpack full of books Bill wanted them to read. I still have three of Bill’s books on my shelf, which he loaned me about 15 years ago (I sheepishly admit that now I am glad I irresponsibly never returned them). They are, *Occasions of Faith: An Anthropology of Irish Catholics* (Taylor 1995); *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (Willis 1981); and *Class* (Joyce 1995). Faith, work, and class. That, in a nutshell, was Bill Kelleher.

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¹ I am grateful to Jo Thomas for sharing with me materials to assist with this article, including correspondence from Matt Reilly.

² <http://www.eui.illinois.edu/>, accessed April 25, 2014.

³ Quotations from Carolina Vargas, Jonathan Jackson, and Deborah Pellow, as well as other details about Bill's history, are taken from a video recording of his February 28, 2014 memorial service in Syracuse, NY. The video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSsWG4HELPA>, accessed April 25, 2014.

⁴ I am grateful to David Stark for sharing with me the remarks he made at Bill's memorial service in Syracuse. This description of *The Troubles in Ballybogoin* is extracted from those remarks.

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