

Victor Grayson: Britain's Lost Revolutionary

100 years ago today Victor Grayson – one of the most famous socialist politicians of his generation – left his London apartment and was never seen again. We explore his controversial life and the circumstances surrounding his disappearance.



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One hundred years ago this September, as dusk started to set in on a Saturday evening in the capital, one of the most infamous politicians of the Edwardian era was escorted by two unknown men out of his apartment block in Georgian House, Pimlico, never to be seen again. The building stands today and looks very much the same as it did then, only now it is a high-end hotel of the same name. It was an unlikely residence, perhaps, for a Liverpudlian that just thirteen years before had won a by-election so stunning that the British establishment and their lackey press feared the young man was the vanguard of a coming, bloody socialist revolution.

Albert Victor Grayson, better known as Victor Grayson, is the greatest working-class

political hero you've never heard of, and, if you have heard the name, then it's likely what you've heard is wrong. For a century since his disappearance, Grayson's political legacy has been neglected by historians while his personal life has suffered damaging press speculation and downright fabrication. The time has come to finally tell the real story of the man dubbed 'Britain's greatest mob orator.'

Victor Grayson was born into a Britain divided, a Britain whose leaders preoccupied themselves with building a mighty empire while many of those who manned the factories, mills, and docks which kept the nation running lived in abject poverty. It is one of the great conundrums that those who now glorify the British history of empire and the men who built it must answer. How could a country whose navy ruled the seas, whose army and imperialists possessed the whip-hand over a great empire on which the sun never set, not be able to feed, clothe, and house its people at home? The answer was class.

Grayson's family were not destitute but they were never far from the abyss. His father, William Dickenson, had joined the British Army as there was little work in Yorkshire. He was sent to Ireland and, just before being shipped to India, he absconded with a young Scottish woman, Elizabeth Craig, who had been sent to work in service as her own family could not afford to keep her. The two stowed away on a ship to Liverpool and, upon docking, William Dickenson became William Grayson and took on some carpentry work fitting out ships. The two also pretended to be married as a way of not attracting unwanted attention and to seem more respectable to landlords. They duly started a family, of which Victor Grayson was the third child to survive infancy, and the growing family moved around the working-class districts of Liverpool with a frequency that suggests they were always running from something.

Radical Beginnings

Victor didn't have the easiest start in life. He was born with a tongue-tie, and later developed a stammer which could only be cured by elocution lessons that the family could ill-afford. It appears his father developed a drinking habit and what we would now call depression, to the extent that he would only go in search of work when the family were close to homelessness. But unlike his older brothers and the majority of his class, Victor was to stay in school until 14. He was clearly a bright boy, if a little shy, and his mother clearly dreamed he would become *someone*. As the start-date of his apprenticeship at a local engineering firm approached, Grayson was troubled that he was destined to spend the rest of his life working in a factory. He didn't want to end up like his father and sought a way out.



Grayson addressing a demonstration against the execution of the Spanish anarchist Francisco Ferrer in 1909.

Despite not being able to read or write, Elizabeth had taught her favourite son the gospels and the life and message of Jesus contained within. Grayson did try to throw his full concentration into the work of the church — he was sent to the Unitarian College in Manchester in late 1904 to study to become a missionary to the poor. But before he'd left Liverpool he was already speaking on the socialist platforms of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) with other young working-class agitators like Jim Larkin. During his time with the church he realised that the problems of society could not be cured by organised religion, which merely tried to alleviate the gross inequalities caused by capitalism with charity and promises of salvation. It was politics that dictated the structure of society and only political action could sweep away the old system.

In Manchester, Grayson joined the Manchester Central ILP and became very close to the Pankhurst family. Emmeline treated him as something akin to a son. He studied public finance, political economy, Greek, and Latin at the University of Manchester and, while Christabel Pankhurst studied law, the two seemed to bounce off each other for a brief period. Together they established the University of Manchester Socialist Society, the first of its kind in the country.

It was on the streets of Manchester that Grayson first became a serious political figure when, within just a few months of his arrival, rising unemployment led to disturbances and demonstrations in the city. The workers needed leading and Grayson found himself as one of the heads of a movement which would eventually change government policy. His speaking ability, his booming voice, and biblical fervour captured the imagination of many of those seeking work. As one witness recorded in February 1905:

There was a goodly crowd, deeply interested. I soon discovered the reason, for ere I had listened five minutes, I was interested too. A young fellow was on the chair, with

a deep rich voice, just made for the open air — he told me afterwards that it was the open air that had made it! — and he was giving his audience plain, strong and richly-defined Socialism. Nothing petty or mean, no appeal to unworthy motives, or even to the misery of things, but an uplifting, elevating, manly propaganda speech, addressed to the crowd as men ... In Mr Victor Grayson, student, and orator, the Manchester men have found a prize indeed, and Socialism has gained another valuable asset. The Manchester men won their struggle for recognition. The lord mayor of the city set up relief kitchens and ordered the police to release the leaders who had been arrested on trumped-up charges of inciting violence and assault. Keir Hardie sent congratulations to them on their victory over authority with direct action. It was this struggle that forged Grayson's methods and also made his name in the socialist movement across the north of England.

It's not surprising that Grayson's studies were sidelined as invitations came daily for paid speaking events across Lancashire, Yorkshire, and the Midlands. He earned a precarious living this way, and by editing a short-lived socialist journal and providing copy for pamphleteers. In the summer of 1906 the Unitarian authorities finally had enough of Grayson's wayward activities, and he was unceremoniously expelled. The young man did not mind, he was a rising star in the ILP and found lodgings close to Manchester's Piccadilly station which was convenient for trips to the West Yorkshire constituency of Colne Valley. Grayson made a considerable impression on local activists there and, with rumours of their Liberal MP being elevated to the House of Lords, the locals wanted a strong candidate to put up a challenge.

Political Career

The Colne Valley had been a hotbed of political and religious radicalism for decades. Its people embraced the Methodist message of John Wesley, were accused of Luddism, and sent delegations to Peterloo. In this mix of dissenting religious fervour and the yearning for socialism, Grayson captivated whole communities. When a by-election was eventually called for July 1907 the Colne Valley Labour League wanted to run Grayson as the candidate. He passed through a formal selection procedure but the National Administrative Council (the equivalent of today's NEC) did not want to run a candidate — it was a time when Labour leaders were unsure that candidates could win in a three-cornered contest against both a Liberal and a Tory.

In fact, at that time, Labour only had the numbers it did in Parliament thanks to a secret deal between Ramsay MacDonald and the Liberals not to run candidates against each other in certain seats. If Grayson stood in Colne Valley, MacDonald, and others discussed, it would result in a Tory victory, damaging the electoral pact with the Liberals. It didn't help either that there was a degree of envy, particularly from conservative trade union leaders, that Grayson should be given such a chance so early in his political life. MacDonald played both sides; he offered soothing words to Grayson yet did not speak up in his favour at key moments that could have made a difference. Grayson would not be the official Labour candidate and MacDonald banned MPs and senior activists from supporting his campaign.

COLNE VALLEY FOR SOCIALISM



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Printed and Published by the Worker Socialist Newspaper Society, Ltd., Market Street, Huddersfield

Election materials for Victor Grayson's 1907 campaign.

The Colne Valley party were resolute and Grayson, though considerably hurt by the actions of those he had looked up to, persevered. He stood independently as the 'Labour and Socialist' candidate and the campaign became a cause celebre. Socialists and nonconformist churchmen from across the country came to campaign, sent good wishes, and gave small donations. The Suffragettes set up a campaign centre there as Hannah Mitchell, Annie Kenney, and his friends Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst

campaigning for the vote. Grayson was the only candidate standing on a platform of 'Votes for Women'. His manifesto was largely the Labour manifesto, but as polling day neared, it was clear that there was a growing thirst for radicalism. Grayson's final leaflet read:

To the Electors in the Colne Valley. I am appealing to you as one of your own class. I want emancipation from the wage-slavery of Capitalism. I do not believe that we are divinely destined to be drudges. Through the centuries we have been the serfs of an arrogant aristocracy. We have toiled in the factories and workshops to grind profits with which to glut the greedy Man of the Capitalist class ... The time for our emancipation has come ... The other classes have had their day. It is our turn now! On a sunny polling day there was an incredible turnout of 88.1%. The crowd roared with renditions of 'The Red Flag' and 'England Arise' as a red handkerchief was waved from the window of the count, indicating that Grayson was victorious. This was despite the fact that none of Grayson's female supporters, nor a significant proportion of working-class men, could vote. The victorious candidate was carried aloft by his supporters and outside a nearby pub he told the swelling crowd, 'This epoch-making victory has been won for pure revolutionary Socialism. We have not trimmed our sails to get a half-hearted vote. We have proclaimed our Socialism on every platform.'

The result was reported in the newspapers across the globe and the British tabloids predicted an imminent and bloody socialist uprising. The result also inspired a genre of literary paranoia as novels appeared describing a post-apocalyptic socialist Britain. The Labour leaders who had spurned Grayson attributed the result not to the candidate or the heroic campaigning of his supporters, but to a dip in support for the Liberal Party.

A short-lived and riotous parliamentary career followed: Grayson was expelled from the House of Commons for trying to raise the issue of unemployment against the permitted running order of business two days in succession. As he was escorted out, he shouted back into the chamber, 'This House is a house of murderers!' He had told the Labour MPs, 'I leave the House with pleasure. You are traitors to your class. You will not stand up for your class. You traitors!' Grayson was greeted as a hero outside of Westminster and socialists of all shades flocked to his banner.

Two biographies were written of him in 1910 and, at a time when pictures in newspapers were rare, Grayson's profile appeared across the globe. For three years Grayson did battle with the leaders of the ILP to adopt a definite socialist policy. When this failed he campaigned for a new party and formed the British Socialist Party (BSP) in 1911, which briefly carried up to a third of ILP constituency parties with it. He was quickly outwitted and sidelined by those wily Old Left operators of the Social Democratic Federation. They destroyed any promise the BSP had and, in August 1920, it morphed into the Communist Party of Great Britain. Dispirited, Grayson sought solace in alcohol.

Personal Strife

From his break with the BSP until the beginning of the First World War, Grayson's

personal life overshadowed his political work. He married a young actress, Ruth Norreys, who was said to enjoy the finer things in life. This move surprised many of Grayson's friends, not least because those closest to him knew that he was gay. For years he had covered his homosexuality by encouraging gossip about his womanising, which was not difficult given the countless women that found him a subject of interest. There are stories of his female followers pawning wedding rings to fund Grayson's campaigns, and others who moved to the Colne Valley just to be able to say he was their MP.

On reflection, it seems that Grayson was attracted to Ruth's father's money, though he undoubtedly did love her and was distraught when she died in childbirth along with their second daughter, Elise, who was premature. Their married life had been one of frequent travel and financial insecurity. Grayson had desperately tried to leave politics behind but found little work apart from occasional journalism. He even wrote a play which starred his wife in the lead role, but despite favourable reviews it was not a great success.

Instead he found himself in the pay of the British government who needed a pro-war socialist voice to calm industrial unrest in the Commonwealth. Grayson was dispatched to Australia and then New Zealand, and ended up on a recruitment drive for more men for the war effort. It was in New Zealand that Grayson signed up for the infantry and joined the ANZAC forces which travelled back to Europe. Private Grayson found himself in the trenches at the Battle of Passchendaele. He was wounded by shrapnel and after spending many rain-sodden hours under torrential rain and German rifle fire, he was rescued, shipped back to England and discharged.



Victor Grayson speaks after his 1907 electoral victory.

From here on Grayson's life becomes shadowy and secretive. From living in near-destitution before the war, Grayson now lived in fine surroundings in Pimlico. He had been employed by the British government's National War Aims Committee to write

pro-war propaganda directed at socialists and tour industrial constituencies to ensure the supply of men and munitions kept up demand. Why? Grayson said it would be far easier to build socialism in Britain after the working class played such a significant role in winning the war than it would be under the jackboot of the Kaiser.

He began to write his memoirs and toured the country on a solo speaking tour, even attending some local Labour meetings again. But just as he appeared to be building up to a political comeback, he suddenly retreated from public view to spend the next year of his life almost always in his apartment, according to his landlady, writing. He received only a few visitors, all men, which included some notorious characters, like Horatio Bottomley, who would later be exposed as a swindler and crook. It was in these circumstances that Grayson disappeared on 28 September 1920.

Mystery and fabrication have always clouded Grayson's life. In 1942, as bombs still rained down on London in the midst of the Second World War, officers from Scotland Yard received orders from 'the highest office' to find Grayson. The search extended nationwide and everything from Grayson's school records to personal letters were collected up and never seen again. It appears as though someone senior in the government had ordered a sweep of information relating to Grayson to be found and destroyed, as if he had never existed. By this point he had been missing for twenty-two years.

What we do know is that the oft-repeated story of Grayson's murder in 1920 were later fabricated by a Tory journalist. I have also discovered that letters between Grayson and one of his male lovers were found amongst the personal papers of a senior Labour MP and trade unionist close to Ramsay MacDonald. Could these have been used to blackmail Grayson to stay out of Labour politics after the war?

We know that most credible sightings of Grayson after his disappearance centre around Maidstone, Kent, and there is a strong suspicion that he settled here under an assumed name. I am convinced that somewhere in a file under lock and key lies the definitive answer to Grayson's fate. As we reach the centenary of his disappearance, we must demand to know the truth and finally lay the ghost of Victor Grayson, Britain's lost revolutionary, to rest.

Harry Taylor's 'Victor Grayson: In Search of Britain's Lost Revolutionary' is forthcoming in 2021 from Pluto Books.