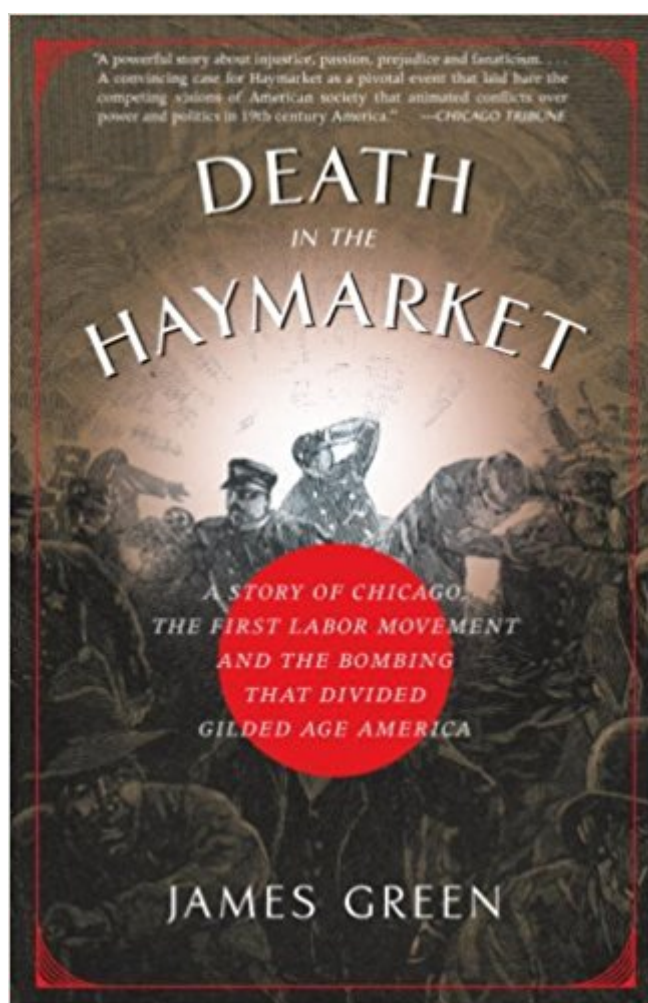


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# Death In The Haymarket: A Story Of Chicago, The First Labor Movement And The Bombing That Divided Gilded Age America



## Synopsis

On May 4, 1886, a bomb exploded at a Chicago labor rally, wounding dozens of policemen, seven of whom eventually died. A wave of mass hysteria swept the country, leading to a sensational trial, that culminated in four controversial executions, and dealt a blow to the labor movement from which it would take decades to recover. Historian James Green recounts the rise of the first great labor movement in the wake of the Civil War and brings to life an epic twenty-year struggle for the eight-hour workday. Blending a gripping narrative, outsized characters and a panoramic portrait of a major social movement, *Death in the Haymarket* is an important addition to the history of American capitalism and a moving story about the class tensions at the heart of Gilded Age America.

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## Customer Reviews

As Green thoroughly documents, the bloody Haymarket riot of May 4, 1886, changed the history of American labor and created a panic among Americans about (often foreign-born) "radicals and reformers" and union activists. The Haymarket demonstration, to protest police brutality during labor unrest in Chicago, remained peaceful until police moved in, whereupon a bomb was thrown by an individual never positively identified, killing seven policemen and wounding 60 others. Shortly after, labor leaders August Spies and Albert Parsons, along with six more alleged anarchists, stood convicted of murder on sparse evidence. Four of them went to the gallows in 1887; another committed suicide. The surviving three received pardons in 1893. The Knights of Labor, at that time

America's largest and most energetic union, received the blame for the riot, despite a lack of conclusive evidence, and many Knights locals migrated to the less radical American Federation of Labor. Labor historian Green (*Taking History to Heart*) eloquently chronicles all this, producing what will surely be the definitive word on the Haymarket affair for this generation. Green is particularly strong in documenting the episode's long aftermath, especially the decades-long efforts of the white Parsons's black wife to exonerate her husband. B&w illus. (Mar. 7) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Green, an academic, offers a narrative history of Chicago's Haymarket bombing in 1886, the infamous trial that followed, and the hanging of subsequently determined innocent men. Chicago was then at the heart of the labor struggle for the eight-hour day, and we learn that "workers' struggles had often been met with shocking repression, and that when violence bred violence, when powerless laboring people struck back in anger, they often paid with their lives." The Haymarket episode became a seminal moment for the American labor movement, and Green takes us inside the personal, social, and cultural elements of this tragic event. Evaluation of Haymarket includes the contention that a conservative bias against radicals, labor organizers, immigrants, and minorities was fundamental to the conflict as well as the view that execution of the anarchists saved the country from anarchy and was a moral and political victory for law and order. The author notes that after Haymarket, social peace among the various classes in Chicago was impossible, and grudges continued for decades. Mary Whaley Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The tragic events of May 4, 1886 and in the Haymarket in Chicago and the aftermath of those events have left more questions than answers for historians. Who threw the bomb that killed six policemen? Was there a conspiracy to commit violent acts that night or was the protest truly peaceful? Were the right men arrested for the crime or were they scapegoated because of their affiliations with radical organizations? Did they receive a fair trial or were they doomed by a biased press, judge, and jury? Were the men that went to the gallows "the foulest of murderers" as described by Teddy Roosevelt years later or were they martyrs, heroes to working class people everywhere? These are the questions that historians still debate today. These are the questions that UMass-Boston professor James Green attempts to answer in this book. Green starts with a look at the growing labor movement at the end of the Civil War and details the major events and leaders of

that movement up through the Haymarket bombing. In covering over twenty years of labor history (a topic I have never found to be very interesting), Green writes fluidly and in a manner that makes the history come alive for the reader. He does an excellent job of detailing the growth and divisions within the labor movement locally, nationally, and internationally. Chicago becomes a flashpoint for the labor struggle not just because of its rapid emergence as the commercial heart of the United States but also because of its diverse immigrant population. In describing Chicago's different ethnic neighborhoods and their populations like the Bohemians in Pilsen, the Irish in Bridgeport, and the Germans on the North Side, Green brings the reader into the melting pot aspect of the labor movement while at the same time explaining one of the reasons why the labor movement had such difficulty unifying against big business. Interspersed within struggles between labor and capital that emerge in the Gilded Age, Green includes brief biographies of all the major labor leaders in Haymarket. Organizing the book in this manner effectively draws the reader into the story and makes them feel as though they know men like August Spies and Albert Parsons. Green is at his strongest when detailing the lives of the labor leaders involved directly and indirectly with Haymarket and the workers themselves. The story of Albert and Lucy Parsons is especially fascinating. Albert, a Confederate veteran turned Southern Republican who moves to Chicago to escape violence in Texas, and Lucy, a Mexican/African/Native American?? beauty who joins Albert rallying for workers rights in Chicago even while pregnant, both come across as heroes in the struggle between labor and business. The story of the Parsons' radicalization, particularly Albert, mirrors that of the labor movement. At first, he was optimistic about the prospects of organizing laborers and accomplish change via political channels. However, as he became increasingly more aware of the political power of the big business owners he recognized this path was futile. The key event of this radicalization occurred when he lost his job as a printer and was summoned into the Rookery by the Chicago Board of Trade. The scene is brilliantly described by Green as Albert is led into this dark room with suits all around threatening to kill him if he does not stop organizing laborers. Green then describes Albert being tossed out of the room into a dark, dingy hallway, alone, not knowing how to get out. The whole episode plays out like a movie scene. It is noteworthy, however, to point out the fact that villains in Green's interpretation of Haymarket do not get the same detailed biographical treatment. Instead, men like Inspector John Bonfield emerge as evil, power-hungry xenophobes who target the working class in an effort to elevate their own status. Aside from the fact that he was a "failed businessman" and "humiliated" by an earlier run-in with workers, the reader knows nothing of Bonfield's background. By contrast, Parsons' radicalization and inflammatory rhetoric advocating the use of violence is tempered by Green's portrait of him as a man who fought his entire life for

people's rights even when it was unpopular to do so. Thus, Parsons emerges as a complex individual who ultimately only wanted to make things right while Bonfield is a simple minded bully who cared nothing for anyone but himself. Green's research is extensively cited and an examination of the sources in the notes section at the back of the book reveals a heavy reliance on sources sympathetic to the plight of the Haymarket defendants. One source heavily cited throughout the book is John Peter Altgeld's *Reasons for Pardoning the Haymarket Anarchists*. Altgeld was the Democratic governor of Illinois who pardoned three of the Haymarket defendants. The motivations for Altgeld's pardon have come under scrutiny in recent years due to the efforts of historian Timothy Messer-Kruse who points out that Altgeld published *Reasons* during an election year and had a personal grudge against the judge who presided over the Haymarket Trial. It is Green's depiction of that trial as a sham and the subsequent appeals that mark the weakest part of the book. Here, the Haymarket defendants receive reverent treatment from Green who buys into their own beliefs that they followed in the footsteps of men like Patrick Henry and Thomas Paine. A more critical assessment of their role, even indirectly, in inciting violent action would have given the book a more balanced feel at the end. Despite its shortcomings, Green's *Death in the Haymarket* is a fast-paced book that makes labor history interesting. It brings to life the violent struggle between labor and capital at a time when the United States was growing at a pace that few seemed to be able to handle. The book reads like a movie script with fascinating characters and heart pounding action scenes. This movie-like feel is at once the strength and weakness of *Death in the Haymarket*. All great movies have heroes and villains, good guys and bad guys and Green's book certainly has that. However, in real life controversial events rarely play out in black and white. It is the shades of grey that Green fails to convey when dealing with the trial and its aftermath that is the book's biggest shortfall.

This book was excellent at bringing to life an incident I knew little about: the Haymarket bombing in 1886. My love of history has centered on wars, diplomacy and technology. This book is about economic growth and social history so it added to my knowledge. *The Growth of Chicago* As the book points out in its early chapters, the setting for the Haymarket incident was the astounding growth of the city of Chicago. Several newly emerging technologies resonated with creating a big city at the south end of Lake Michigan: steel, railroads, lumber and meat packing were the most spectacular. These industries created a lot of new companies, jobs and wealth. The new companies entered all the above listed areas, and the new jobs they created were available to all comers. The new wealth that all this industrializing created was used to create even more new companies, hire

more new workers and create one of the first large-scale wealthy classes of Americans. Sadly, many of the workers coming to this booming Chicago felt they weren't getting their fair share of this prosperity, so there was lots of labor unrest mixed in with all the other excitement of this rapidly growing Chicago social scene. The Great Chicago Fire Chapter Three talks about the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. The fire was the result of freaky weather conditions mixing with a lot of hasty building in the city using lots of lumber. Much of the city burned to a crisp. But the foundations for why the city had been growing were not shaken, so the city rebuilt quickly. One surprising fallout of this natural disaster was to bring together various immigrant worker groups into a larger sense of cooperation. As the city rebuilt these groups unified in their efforts to get better working conditions for the workers and in November 1871 the Reform Ticket won the mayoral election. For years thereafter these cooperating workers remained a potent force in Chicago politics and protesting. Things Keep Changing But this was a time of change, and the change didn't stop with the Great Fire. The city kept booming and business groups and the new wealthy got back in charge a few years later. The next cycle of worker-inspired uproar was the one in 1886 of which Haymarket was a part. Haymarket: The 9-11 Of Its Day The final chapters of the book talk about the bombing itself and its aftermath. Haymarket bombing was an act of violence at a public rally. This part was nothing new for the period. What made it distinctive from other acts of that time was it strongly resonated with the emotional social worries of its day. Policemen were killed, foreigners were involved, and new technology was used. (this was the first use of a home-made bomb filled with dynamite, something which had been invented only twenty years previously.)

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dynamite>) As a result of the deep fearful resonance much that happened in the aftermath was driven by fearful emotions, not facts. People were arrested, tried and convicted because they fit what people of Chicago feared, not what the facts supported. The Anarchist and the 8-hour day movements got tarred with an image of being supported by dangerous, sneaky and violent people. The Anarchist movement never recovered, the 8-hour day movement was delayed for decades. The Style of the Book James Green has a nice narrative style in this book. In the first half he does a nice job of describing the big trends, such as Chicago's growth. In the second half he does a nice job of describing the day-to-day details of how those who would be accused spent their time. I also found his newspaper quotes interesting, mostly because they reveal that freedom of speech in that era seemed to allow a lot more... enthusiasm... in expressing emotions about the current events of the day.

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