



Memories of Jim Green

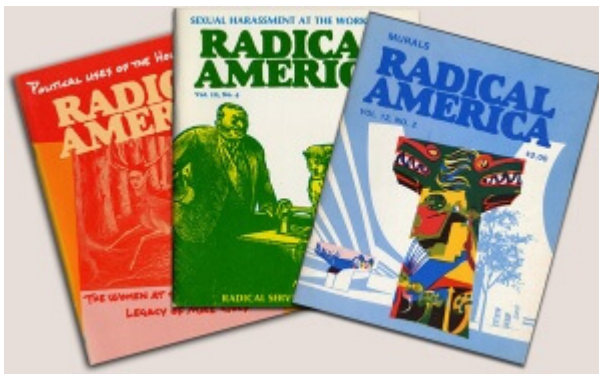
Posted on July 25, 2016 by Jim O'Brien

When I moved to Boston in the fall of 1971, one of the first people I set out to meet was Jim Green, then a second-year junior history professor at Brandeis University nearby. I think Paul Buhle of *Radical America* magazine, also new to Boston, tipped me off. Paul and I and other history grad students at the University of Wisconsin had shared a range of radical-history projects, certain that a new understanding of history was emerging from the 1960s New Left that we were part of. Jim was seen as a kindred spirit.

Jim at the time had his plate full. A sheep among senior wolves in the Brandeis history department, he was pouring energy into his teaching while scrambling to finish his lengthy Yale University dissertation, praised highly by his adviser, the legendary C. Vann Woodward. (The topic – populist and socialist movements in the American Southwest – bespoke a New Left historian's digging for what common people had striven for and accomplished in the past. It didn't bespeak good prospects for flourishing in the academic history world of the early '70s. As Jim recounted the conversation years later, David Hackett Fischer once approached him to say he had no chance for getting tenure and also would not be given the customary year's employment after tenure denial – "We're making an exception in your case.")

Busy as he was in commencing his academic career, he was determined not to be defined by it. When Jim and I met for lunch (at a Lebanese restaurant in Boston's South End, where he lived at the time), we almost immediately started speculating about a potential radical history conference, aimed at bringing together radical academics and community/labor organizers. (It was held the following spring at MIT with a good attendance.) We also began a friendship that enriched my life for just short of forty-five years.

This remembrance will be heavy on the 1970s and 1980s for two reasons. One is that the closer his story gets to the present, the higher the proportion of readers who already know at least the basics, most notably his fabulous books on Haymarket (2006) and the West Virginia mine wars (2015). The other reason is that the creative merger in his work between academia and engagement took shape in this early period and never really changed.

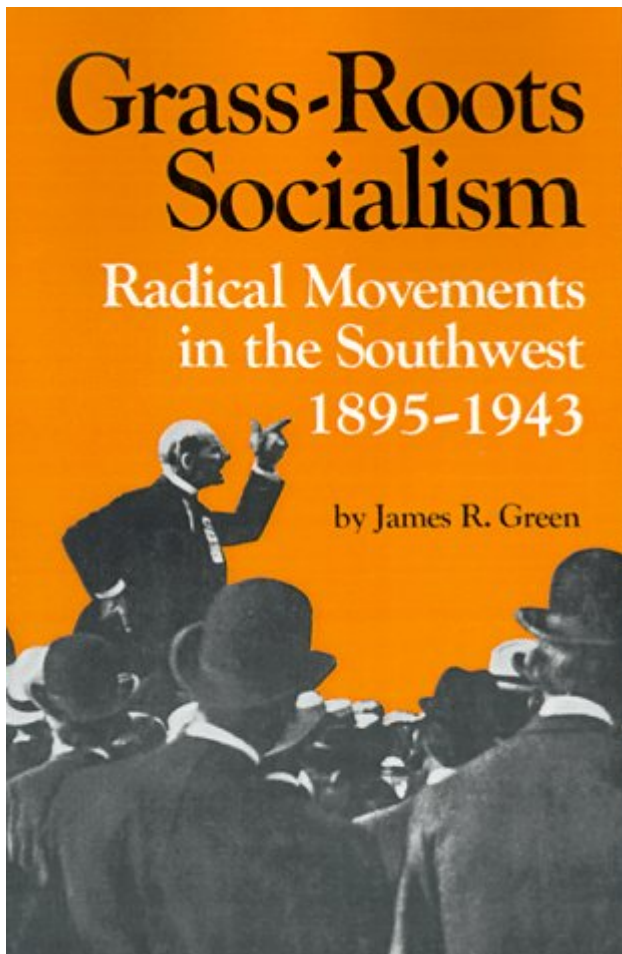


Radical America Magazine, whose editorial collective Jim joined in 1972

Even had his time at Brandeis gone better, Jim would have felt uncomfortable in a purely academic setting. But he never felt uncomfortable as a *historian*. His instincts nudged him toward exploring history in a way that enabled him to bring a nonacademic audience and readership along with him. The radical history conferences (one a year 1972-74) were an example of his desire for bridge building. So was his work on *Radical America* magazine, whose editorial collective Jim joined in 1972. RA offered a voice for activists, past and present, and sought to put the tools of academic research to present-day uses, with accessible language. Jim put together special issues on American labor in the 1930s and the 1940s, and with Allen Hunter he wrote a long, trenchant article on the background of Boston's school-integration crisis of 1974-75, "Racism and Busing in Boston." In a sophisticated but highly readable way, the article counterposed the black community's long struggle for better schooling to the Boston School Committee's populist racism.

His employment took a giant leap in 1977 – downward as measured by academic prestige,

upward as measured by his own kind of history. His Brandeis stay had been extended by a year's leave in 1975-76 to teach at Warwick University in the U.K., but the spring semester of 1977 was unmistakably the end of the road. Happily, an opening emerged just then at the University of Massachusetts Boston, specifically in UMass Boston's New Left-inspired College of Public and Community Service (CPCS). He taught in CPCS for thirty years until transferring to the History Department and then (in 2014) retiring.

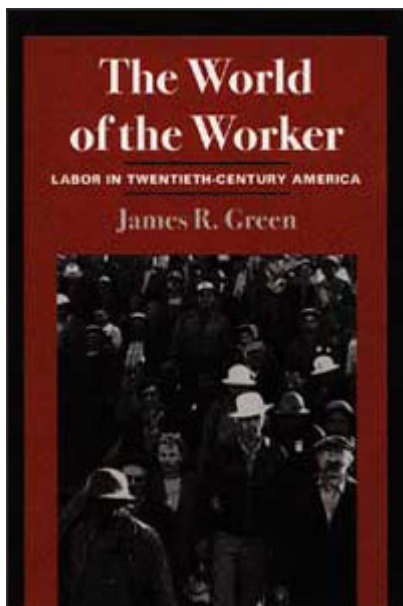


Jim's dissertation-turned book, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, published in 1979

CPCS, created in 1973, was aimed at mid-career social service and public service workers, many of whom had some college experience but not bachelor's degrees. Many were union members, and not a few were hungry for a broadened understanding of the union movement and its history. The Labor Studies degree program which he soon started was a wonderful fit for a significant part of CPCS's nearly unique student population. CPCS, and UMass Boston more generally, also encouraged and cherished his research. In 1979, the year after

his revised dissertation emerged in book form as *Grassroots Socialism*, he won the campus-wide Chancellor's Award for Distinguished Scholarship.

I'm struck by the memory that in the mid-1970s, when Jim and Paul Faler and I, along with several young Canadian historians, put together an annotated guide to North American working class history, only a small minority of the U.S. entries were academic history books. They were crowded-out by novels, memoirs, and films, which we saw as better ways of conveying a feel for the past. For Jim, I think this posed a dilemma, since he felt an affinity for the growing number of young academic historians influenced (as he was, especially during his year at Warwick) by British historians such as E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm. His first major book project after *Grassroots Socialism* was a conscious effort to incorporate much of the new research into a narrative history. At Eric Foner's invitation, he wrote a book that Hill and Wang published in 1980 as *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth-Century America*, still in demand today. He never lost the fellow-feeling with other academic labor historians of his generation (and subsequently younger generations) even as he aimed his own writing and speaking at a nonacademic audience.

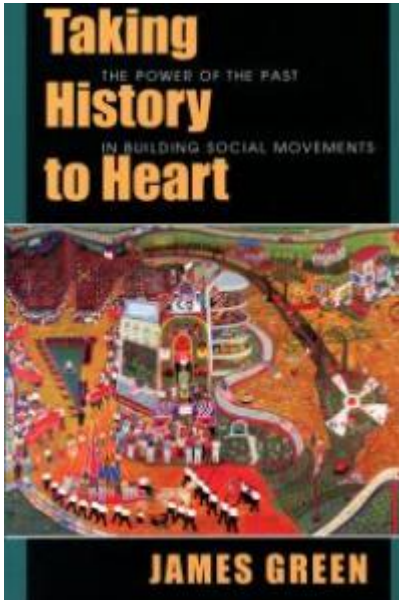


*The World of the Worker:
Labor in Twentieth-
Century America*, 1980

The British historians who most influenced Jim's practical work were Anna Davin, Raphael Samuel, and others in the History Workshop that flourished at Ruskin College, London. As he later wrote, "They had created a popular history movement through which they shared radical history with working people in countless venues from Aberdeen to Kentish Town and

from Manchester to Colchester.” In 1978 he and two fellow Boston-area historians, Marty Blatt and Susan Reverby, formed the Massachusetts History Workshop, whose story is very well told in Chapters 2 and 4 of Jim’s partly autobiographical book *Taking History to Heart*. The most successful of the Workshop’s early programs brought two hundred current and former clerical workers, overwhelmingly women, together with historians of women’s work; a follow-up oral history project on office work involved upwards of a hundred people. The Workshop also initiated two major commemorative events at Boston’s Faneuil Hall (one in 1983 honoring the 1903 founding of the Women’s Trade Union League and one in 1986 for the hundredth anniversary of the original eight-hour strike) that involved elements of the official trade union movement. Arthur Osborn, president of the state AFL-CIO, scorned the Workshop as a leftist “front group,” but ended up speaking at both events because influential groups within his federation (notably the building trades in the case of the 1986 event) had jumped in with enthusiasm.

Looking back, 1986 marked a turning point in Jim’s ability to dialogue with the mainstream labor movement. The same year that brought five hundred unionists to Faneuil Hall for the eight-hour commemoration was the first of thirty years in which Jim led a half-dozen lecture/discussion sessions each winter in the Harvard Trade Union Program. Through them he met a great variety of midlevel union officers and staffers from across the US as well as other countries. The United Mine Workers, under the new reform leadership of Rich Trumka, was especially well represented in the Harvard sessions. Trumka soon recruited Jim to make labor-history presentations to West Virginia activists and to the UMW’s Executive Board, and Jim later organized Boston-area support for the union’s bitter and ultimately successful strike against Pittston Coal in 1989-90.



*Taking History to Heart:
The Power of the Past in
Building Social Movements*
(U. of Massachusetts
Press, 2000)

His next major book project didn't come to fruition until exactly twenty years after *The World of the Worker*. *Taking History to Heart: The Power of the Past in Building Social Movements* (U. of Massachusetts Press, 2000) reflected the way of presenting history that had moved to the center of his life. The heart of the book was a thoughtful recounting of his own mixed successes and partial failures in what he called "movement history," primarily about the past struggles of working people. Besides the History Workshop and his teaching at UMass and at Harvard, he was able to describe films, walking tours, television (notably as research coordinator for the seven-part "Great Depression" documentary shown by PBS in 1993), and National Park Service consulting. That was a partial list. The book ended on a hopeful note, with chapters on the Pittston Strike and the rank-and-file ferment that led to new reform-minded leadership to the national AFL-CIO.

One chapter of *Taking History to Heart* gave a third-person account of how memories of the 1886 Haymarket tragedy, and the eight-hour movement that formed its background, had been kept alive over the generations, with ebbs and flows that reflected the changing fortunes of radical movements here and abroad. I think already in Jim's mind was the idea of telling the story of Haymarket himself, which he did in his 2007 book *Death in the Haymarket* (Pantheon Books, 2007). He was very conscious of trying to write a coherent, engaging story for a broad public. What struck me as we talked about it and I read drafts

was his willingness to keep polishing, to make the story as accessible as it could be. In fact, more than any of his earlier writing, this book drew mainstream reviewers and readers.

The year after that book was published, he escaped from the now-shrinking College of Public and Community Service to UMass Boston's History Department. His specific mission in this new setting, true to his abiding interests, was to create and direct a master's program in public history. He brought all his experiences to bear in setting up the program, which is still flourishing two years after his 2014 retirement.

He had one more book in him, inspired by his connections with coal mine unionists. *The Devil Is Here in These Hills* (Grove Atlantic, 2015) told the story of industrial conflict in southern West Virginia in the early twentieth century. He consulted on last winter's PBS documentary *The Mine Wars*, and was proud that it had drawn four million viewers. Toward the very end of his life he was amused and intrigued to correspond with a group that wants to make the story into a musical.



"The Mine Wars,"
based on Jim
Green's book, *The
Devil is Here in
These Hills*, airs on
January 26, 2016.

By the time the book appeared, and as the PBS film was taking shape, Jim was sick. In August of 2014 he came back from a week in Ireland – a family vacation during which he gave the keynote speech for the [Cork Mother Jones Festival](#) – suffering from maladies that pointed tragically to leukemia. Complications from a partially successful bone marrow transplant in November kept him going in and out of the hospital for over a year and a half.

Even when he was at home he had to make frequent hospital trips for testing and for transfusions. His public appearances were few and iffy. One that he particularly cherished was coming to the Organization of American Historians convention in Providence for a few hours, seeing old friends and attending the LAWCHA luncheon where he received a lifetime achievement award. Another was to travel to Washington DC for a talk on labor history at the AFL-CIO headquarters and a follow-up question period in which he and now AFL-CIO president Rich Trumka shared the stage.

His mind kept going through it all. On Monday of the week before he died, he asked me to look something up for an article he hoped to write for *West Virginia History* on the experience of writing the mine wars book. On Tuesday, he said that he didn't think he had the strength to keep struggling against his illness. (But he still called our mutual friend Phil Chassler that night to give advice on a Labor Studies class Phil was to teach.) On Wednesday, we said goodbye, me through tears and him with a firm handshake and the words, "My best friend," which he was for me also. Thursday was for family, and at the end of that afternoon, Thursday, June 23, he passed away. He did what he could to make a better world, not only for untold millions whom he knew only as part of humanity, but for many hundreds of us who were fortunate to know him as the gentle, generous soul that he was.

Author



• [Jim O'Brien](#)