

The Haymarket affair, one of the most famous incidents in the history of the anarchist movement, began on 3 May 1886, when the Chicago police fired into a crowd of strikers at the McCormick Reaper Works, killing and wounding several men. The following evening, the anarchists held a protest meeting near Haymarket Square. Towards the end of the meeting, which had proceeded without incident, rain began to fall and the crowd started to disperse. The last speaker, Samuel Fielden, was concluding his address when a contingent of police marched in and ordered the meeting to be closed. Fielden objected that the gathering was peaceful and that he was just finishing up. The police captain insisted. At that moment a bomb was thrown. One policeman was killed and nearly seventy were injured, six of whom later died. The police opened fire on the crowd, killing at least four persons and wounding many more.

Who threw the bomb has never been determined. What is certain, however, is that the eight men who were brought to trial; Albert Parsons, August Spies, George Engel, Adolph Fischer, Louis Lingg, Samuel Fielden, Oscar Neebe, and Michael Schwab, were not responsible. Six of them, in fact, were not even present when the explosion occurred, and the other two were demonstrably innocent of throwing the bomb. Moreover, no evidence was produced to connect the defendants with the bombthrower. Yet all eight were found guilty; seven were condemned to death and one (Neebe) to fifteen years in jail (the sentences of Schwab and Fielden were afterwards commuted to life imprisonment). The verdict was the product of perjured testimony, a packed jury, a biased judge, and public hysteria. On 10 November 1887, Lingg committed suicide in his cell with a cigar-shaped explosive smuggled to him by a fellow anarchist, Dyer D. Lum. The following day, 11 November, Parsons, Spies, Engel, and Fischer were hanged.

The five Chicago anarchists became martyrs. Their pictures were displayed at anarchist meetings; every year, 11 November was observed in their honor; and the last words of Parsons and Spies — ‘Let the voice of the people be heard!’ and ‘The time will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today!’ — were often quoted in anarchist speeches and writings. Six years later, in 1893, the imprisoned men; Fielden, Neebe, and Schwab,

were pardoned by Governor John P. Altgeld, who criticised the judge for conducting the trial 'with malicious ferocity' and found that the evidence had not shown that any of the eight anarchists were involved in the bombing.

The Haymarket affair — the unfairness of the trial, the savagery of the sentences, the character and bearing of the defendants — fired the imagination of many young idealists and won more than a few to the anarchist cause. Among them was Voltairine de Cleyre (1866-1912), a talented writer and speaker, whom Emma Goldman called 'the greatest woman Anarchist of America'. The fate of the Chicago anarchists haunted Voltairine de Cleyre's life. Nearly every November, from 1895 on, she delivered a memorial oration to her fallen comrades. Despite some inevitable repetition, they were among the most powerful speeches of her career, written with painstaking care and delivered with an intensity of feeling that moved her audiences profoundly. Most of the speeches were delivered in Chicago, the scene of the Haymarket episode, but she also spoke in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Detroit. Owing to illness, she does not seem to have spoken from 1902 through 1905. Of her dozen or so Haymarket addresses, I have been able to locate eight. Six of these appeared in various anarchist journals, while two apparently were never published (unfortunately, I have not been able to find her 1908 oration, which she considered her best to that date). Together they constitute a classic of anarchist literature, a remarkable group of essays on the theme which dominated her life.

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