

Roger Bray: My great-great-grandfather, the rabble-rouser

By Patricia Roche, University of Manitoba employee & signed AESES member

My great-great-grandfather Roger Ernest Bray was once described by the Royal North West Mounted Police¹ as “the most dangerous person in the City.”² He wasn’t a gangster, or a murderer – he was a strike supporter in Winnipeg in 1919.

Born in Sheffield, England in 1874, Bray shared British heritage with most local strike leaders.² After six years as a Methodist lay preacher,¹ he left the church with the discovery that “Christianity was not the means of correcting social injustice”.² In 1903, Bray immigrated to Winnipeg, where he worked as a butcher until “pre-war depression made meat a luxury on workers’ tables.”³ Unemployed with eight children, Bray enlisted in the Canadian army.⁴ He was deployed to England in September 1916 and returned on New Years Eve of 1918 , with another discovery: “the war didn’t correct social injustices either.”³

Many Great War veterans returned home disillusioned, traumatized, and unemployed - “returned soldiers were a highly volatile and explosive force in the Winnipeg of 1919, a force not present a few months earlier.”² Those veterans split into anti- and pro-strike factions, with Bray and fellow British expat Arthur Moore leading the latter. In the final days of May 1919, thousands of pro-strike veterans marched through the streets of Winnipeg, many still in military uniforms. They stormed the Legislative building, City Hall (both Winnipeg and St. Boniface), and eventually the headquarters of the anti-strike Citizens’ Collective of One Thousand. As spokesman, Bray demanded legislation to mandate collective bargaining, and immediate withdrawal of the Province’s ultimatum to their employees - that, or the

¹ Masters, 1973

² Bumsted, 1994

³ Gutkin & Gutkin, 1994

⁴ Canadian Forces, 1916

government's resignation.^{2,3} Bray is quoted saying "the government itself should stop paying 'scab' wages and become a model employer."⁵

Bray spoke out vehemently against the Committee of One Thousand, as "men who have raised the rents on the boys since we have come home,"⁶ the "same bunch of boodlers who plundered this Province to the verge of bankruptcy."² Bray accused City Council of coercion by the Committee, and the Premier of siding with "this bunch of boodlers and shameless profiteers."⁵ Bray asserted there was a plot to plant bombs on strike leaders and arrest them.⁶ The Citizens' Committee claimed Bray was a "Bolshevik seeking Soviet government in Winnipeg."²

Bray also demanded an end to the press "campaign of vilification" and use of smear terms like "British anarchists". The *Chicago Tribune* accused pro-strike veterans of being 'Bolshevists' and 'revolutionists'.⁵ The *Winnipeg Citizen* described Bray as a notorious "Red" who "poses as a returned fighter, but... never saw the firing lines" (as was said about many veterans), and that he "told Premier Norris in cold blood on June 2, 1919, that he was a Bolshevik and out for the establishment of Soviet Government in Winnipeg."³ The *Toronto Telegram* described him as "coatless, pale-faced, receding chinned, leather belted, frail looking with baggy grey trousers, unpolished boots and droopy dark moustache... avowedly a Soviet advocate, looks the fanatic he is much more than the soldier he has been..."⁷ Rea⁵ writes "the role of the newspapers in the strike, both local and national, was almost uniformly hostile to the general strike" - and hostile to Bray himself.

Having had no hand in organizing Bray's marches, the Strike Committee feared the veterans' actions would result in eruption of violence - indeed, they had a "profound impact on the Winnipeg situation", driving it into "a new, more menacing phase."² Bray's trial defense recounted a group of 'thugs'

⁵ Winnipeg Defense Committee, 1920

⁶ Rea, 1973

attempting to assault Bray while speaking to veterans at Victoria Park.⁷ Bray himself was alleged to have said the strike would “end with a fight”, adding “don’t worry about guns, we’ll have them” - and was also alleged to have had thousands of men prepared to infiltrate Minto Barracks to obtain said guns.²

After their marches, public parades were banned, but soldiers continued meetings in Victoria Park - the “Soldiers’ Parliament.” A picture of Bray speaking at a June 13, 1919 meeting is an iconic image - shown below in a poster for a 2019 concert, now sporting an electric guitar.



From mfl.ca

The meetings didn’t go on for long, as Bray and seven other strike leaders were arrested June 17, 1919, their homes ransacked for seditious literature, and imprisoned in Stony Mountain Penitentiary.² Bail was arranged - much to the chagrin of the Citizens’ Committee - with the stipulation that none of the men were to have any continued involvement in the labour movement. The men retorted that they would not recognize this agreement, since “given the way [they] had been tried in the press and found guilty, they would not be able to receive fair trials.” Bail was set at \$8,000.² Following a month-long preliminary trial, the men were charged with seven charges of seditious conspiracy that took nearly an hour to read.² Bray was convicted only on the relatively petty charge of ‘conspiracy to commit a common nuisance’, sentenced to six months in prison, and released in August 1920.^{2, 3} He went on to become

⁷ Dupuis, 2014

vice-president of the Winnipeg Labour Council² and organizer for the Co-Operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF).³ He died in 1962 in North Vancouver at the age of 77.

Bray's eldest daughter, Kay MacKinnon, was my great-grandmother (Gigi, for short) and penpal for years. At the time of the Winnipeg General Strike, she had just turned eighteen and was furious that she had to care for her entire family herself, who were bedridden with the Spanish flu, while Bray sat in jail. She talked about the inequity of health services for working class people living in areas like the North End or St. Boniface, where she lived at the time. Like her father, Kay was also an active socialist, and ran as a CCF candidate for St. Boniface during the 1953 Manitoba provincial election. Her and Bray's views on politics, labour, and religion have lived on through the generations.

Bibliography:

Bumsted, JM. *Winnipeg General Strike of 1919: An Illustrated History*. Canada: Watson Dyer, 1994.

Canadian Forces Publication A-DH-267-003 Insignia and Lineages of the Canadian Forces. Volume 3:
Combat Arms Regiments.

Dupuis, Michael. *Winnipeg's General Strike: Reports from the Front Lines*. The History Press, 2014.

Gutkin, Harry & Gutkin, Mildred. *Profiles in Dissent: The Shaping of Radical Thought in the Canadian West*. Edmonton: Newest Publishers, 1997.

Masters, DC. *The Winnipeg General Strike*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973.

Rea, JE. *The Winnipeg General Strike*. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, 1973.

Winnipeg Defense Committee. *The Winnipeg General Sympathetic Strike: May - June 1919*. Winnipeg
Defense Committee, 1920.