

Book Review: Ted Grant: The Permanent Revolutionary

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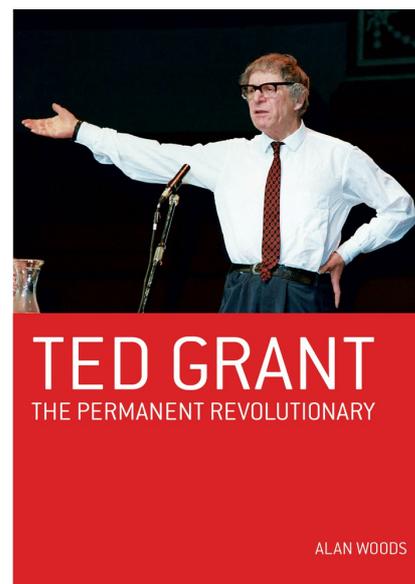
*This work aims to cover the life and ideas of Ted Grant, one of the most well known figures in the international Marxist movement. Author **Alan Woods** aims to outline Grant's important theoretical contribution to Marxism and provide insights into a subject that remains a closed book to most political analysts even now. **Gordon Bannerman** feels that the book fails to fully engage with its subject, but Woods' account does have some value in its often gritty portrayal of extra-parliamentary political movements.*



Ted Grant: The Permanent Revolutionary. Alan Woods. Wellred Publishing. April 2013.

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For most of his life until his death in 2006 aged 93, Ted Grant was a well-known figure on the British Left and within the international Marxist community. Grant was renowned as a rigid doctrinaire and anti-democratic Marxist primarily through his belief in democratic centralism and his dogmatic attachment to the fundamental tenets of Marxist theory. Grant was intimately involved in the internecine struggles of the inter-war period, and in the post-war period his attempts to construct a Trotskyite revolutionary group met with variable success. However, he was most famous as the founder and main theoretician of the [Militant tendency](#), the Trotskyite organisation which was particularly influential within the Labour Party in the 1980s. Despite his expulsion from Militant in 1992, Grant continued his involvement in revolutionary politics establishing the organisation Socialist Appeal which today remains committed to a Grantite interpretation of Trotskyism.



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There is therefore clear contemporary political relevance for the publication of Alan Woods' book *Ted Grant: The Permanent Revolutionary*. Claiming Grant's ideological legacy is an important concern for the author who remains committed to propagating Grant's version of Trotskyism. Equally important is the need to stress that he and Grant, long-time associates and collaborators, were correct in their political conduct and historical analysis of the crisis of capitalism and eventual victory of their brand of revolutionary socialism. Unfortunately, personal loyalties and ideological alignment colour the author's judgment, with the result that Grant's life as a revolutionary socialist and theorist is related in a somewhat hagiographic manner.

Fitfully charting the progress of revolutionary socialism in Britain, Woods presents an alternative narrative to primarily Westminster-based accounts of British politics. That virtue is largely negated by the methodological approach adopted. The dense text and small font size contain prose which is by turns effusive, turgid, and jargon-ridden. The methodology consists of a highly-selective use of often unsourced extracts and unverified conversations, unaccompanied by the scholarly authentication of footnotes and bibliography. There are also a considerable number of avoidable grammatical errors. With every chapter interspersed with praise for Grant alongside criticism of rivals, selecting three coherent, self-contained chapters is difficult, but those dealing with the growth of Militant from 1964 until Grant's expulsion from the movement in 1992 address themes and issues relevant to any assessment of Grant's influence on the revolutionary Left.

In the introductory chapters describing Grant's early life in South Africa, as the son of Lithuanian migrants, his conversion to Marxism is dealt with competently if rather cursorily. Charting Grant's move to Britain, the author misses the opportunity to examine the impact of migration on revolutionary movements, for other leading Trotskyists Gerry Healy and Tony Cliff were also migrants. Conversely, and perhaps somewhat inadvertently, the importance of personal relationships within the tiny Trotskyite groups is apparent, especially in relation to the numerous splits ostensibly over ideology, strategy, and tactics after 1945.

Grant's Revolutionary Communist Party was dissolved in 1949, and he was outmanoeuvred in securing the British 'franchise' to the Trotskyite Fourth International but Chapter 7 'The Tide Turns' relates the origins and philosophy of Militant. As early as 1959 Grant advocated 'entryist' tactics of penetration and membership of working-class organisations, the trade unions and Labour Party, as a means of transforming a Trotskyite cadre grouping into a larger organisation. At its formation Militant possessed few resources and its limited support was highly geographically-concentrated, but by the early 1970s it enjoyed particular influence within constituency organisations and especially the youth movement of the Labour Party. Grant's role in this process, largely as a theorist, could have been more clearly delineated to support Woods' claim that his ideas, tactics, and methods were largely responsible for this success. Though purportedly concerned with 'The Militant Tendency', Chapter 8 mostly relates to international connections, as a means of promoting Grant's internationalist credentials, with Militant often compared to Trotsky's Left Opposition.

Domestic growth is dealt with more fully in Chapter 9 'How Militant was destroyed'. Militant's role in local government in Liverpool, its confrontational stance towards cuts in public services, and the conflict with the Labour Party over 'entryism' provide the basis for an account of the 'golden years' of influence and expansion between 1984 and 1988. Militant's history is recounted in a way which identifies Grant, as political editor and ideologue, with its successes but the influx of new members eventually led to a rejection of entryism, and the expulsion of Grant and Woods. The 1991 'Scottish turn' provoked by the anti-Poll Tax campaign, and creation of a new organisation by younger, more dynamic elements around Tommy Sheridan represented a sharp break. Grant viewed these developments as an abandonment of orthodox Trotskyism, which would inevitably lead to the 'swamp of opportunism or the dead-end of ultra-leftism'. Refusing to accept Grant's expulsion as a defeat, Woods compares it 'heroically' with Trotsky's experience, and citing Grant's prediction, expresses satisfaction at the difficulties encountered by the successor groups to Militant.

In the final chapters, Woods promotes the idea that Grant made a theoretical contribution to Marxist theory but provides no credible evidence to validate this claim. Woods' statement that Grant 'was not prepared to tolerate even the slightest deviation in theory' is hardly evidence of original or innovative thought. Grant is nevertheless absurdly cited alongside the founders of Marxism-Leninism as the last representative of a 'generation of giants'. Moreover, in a text dominated by factional and doctrinal conflicts, it is surprising that Grant does not appear to have instigated or perpetuated any of them. The terminology and analytical framework adopted by Woods, albeit appropriate to the subject matter, appears old-fashioned, static, and ideologically at odds with the New Left, tellingly dismissed by the author as motivated by 'petty-bourgeois' concerns, a position consistent with Militant's earlier stance towards CND, gay rights, and feminism.

Despite being wordy, polemical, and careless in many respects, Woods' account does have some value in its often gritty portrayal of extra-parliamentary political movements. Grant's commitment to revolutionary socialism, especially his interest in developing Marxist and Trotskyite theory, is fascinating not least because it appears so un-British an activity. Woods also cites some interesting anecdotal evidence. Indeed, some of the better parts of the book are 'non-political' in describing Grant's relationship with his elder sister, and his brief employment as a brush salesman and switchboard operator. While Woods' work does not qualify as historical scholarship it can be read alongside recent biographies of Tony Cliff and Tommy Sheridan, and even Crick's older work on Militant, to provide a fuller, more balanced assessment of Grant's role within the broader spectrum of the revolutionary Left.

Ultimately, the book fails to fully engage with its subject. Despite hinting that Grant was an increasingly solitary and rather dull person, with few friends, family, or interests, we learn little of his personality, motivations, or ambitions. Those elements required a deeper insight and understanding of the man as well as a more critical approach towards his political activism and theory. Woods did not deem his remit to extend that far, and by producing a primarily propagandist and polemical work he has underplayed and obfuscated many elements important in the production of a critical political biography.

Dr Gordon Bannerman is a private tutor, researcher, writer, and author based in Dundee. He received his Ph.D. from King's College London in 2005, having previously studied medieval and modern history at the London School of Economics and King's College London (BA: LSE, 1997; MA: KCL & LSE, 1998). He has previously taught Modern British History at the University of Dundee, King's College London, and the London School of Economics, and has worked on many historical research projects, including, as Research Associate, *The Letters of Richard Cobden* project at the University of East Anglia, and as Research Assistant to Dr Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey at the LSE. [Read more reviews by Gordon.](#)

