

## Gordon Park: under review

In the light of the latest failed appeal against the conviction of Gordon Park for his wife's murder, Jon Robins reviews the evidence

Some 23 years ago last month the body of Carol Park was discovered by amateur scuba divers in a large bag at the bottom of Coniston Water in the Lake District.

The grim find took place more than two decades after the 33-year old schoolteacher unexpectedly disappeared having missed a family day trip to Blackpool. Her corpse was trussed up with 20 feet of rope and string in a foetal position and then wrapped in a bin liner, rucksack and a sack made out of a dress. This was all weighed down by lead pipe.

Just before the summer break, appeal judges dismissed a posthumous attempt to overturn the 2005 conviction of her husband for her murder. Supported by the couple's children, Gordon Park had always insisted that he was wrongly convicted. Little over a year after a failed appeal in 2008, the former teacher took his own life in prison on his 66th birthday.

The latest unsuccessful appeal followed a referral by the Criminal Cases Review Commission in October 2018 as a result of an application by his son made a decade ago. The couple had three children: Vanessa, Jeremy and Rachel. The eldest (Vanessa) was adopted after Carol's sister had been strangled by her then boyfriend who was sentenced to life for her murder.

The case became known as 'the lady in the lake' murder. The salacious details fired the imaginations of the press who after his trial portrayed Park a 'cold, calculating murderer', 'arrogant, selfish and devoid of remorse', who had 'taunted' the police.

### Investigation

The late investigative journalist Bob Woffinden didn't buy the prosecution case. Instead, he saw Gordon Park as a victim of a 'media-made mountain of prejudice'. There were numerous documentaries and Jimmy McGovern's BBC drama series 'The Lakes' set in the Lake District even featured a plotline where a husband murdered his wife and bound up her body before dumping it in a lake.

In 2005 Woffinden interviewed the couple's two children for *The Daily Mail*. 'He had to be a mum and dad rolled into one,' Jeremy told the journalist. 'He's given us, his children, a lifetime of support and this is just the start of our support for him. We might never know the truth about what happened to Mum. But Dad's innocent, so there's no conflict between supporting him, and continuing to feel love for Mum.'

His family were represented by Maslen Merchant of the Birmingham firm Hadgkiss, Hughes & Beale Solicitors. A statement issued on behalf of Park's family after the Court of Appeal's ruling in May said: 'The family, friends and supporters of Gordon Park, and Carol Park's children, are disappointed with today's decision. Having exhausted all options, we are now left without the closure we were all hoping for. The judgment marks the end of our fight to clear his name.'

The prosecution case was that Gordon Park had murdered his wife, wrapped and bound the body and used his local knowledge and boating skills to deposit her in Coniston. Two prisoners claimed

that Gordon Parks had confessed to them while he was doing time at HMP Preston. One contacted the police the day after a Channel 4 documentary mentioning the possibility of a £5,000 reward.

The Criminal Cases Review Commission often criticised for its desk-bound approach to investigations referred the case after what it described as 'a painstaking and detailed review' including 'several visits to Cumbria, interviews with multiple witnesses old and new, the use of cutting edge DNA testing and the investigation of multiple potential alternative suspects'. Its application highlighted failures in disclosure at the original trial including the extent of the drug addiction of the prisoner who first contacted the police. He was attempting to come off heroin at the time.

### Contentious

Woffinden saw the contentious prison cell confession as another illustration of the inherently problematic role of (his phrase) 'jailhouse snitches'. He argued there was no evidence the first man who contacted the police had even met Gordon Park and that the second man's evidence was 'patently fabricated'. The miscarriage watchdog also argued that forensic evidence taken from the ropes pointed to the presence of another man's DNA; as well as expert evidence undermining the assertion made at the trial that a rock found near the body matched rocks from 'Bluestones', the family home.

Gordon Park's barrister, Henry Blaxland QC, challenged the prosecution case that Carol could have been killed by her husband at home which ignored the logistical problems presented by the presence of their three children. The children's bedroom was next to their parents and Carol would have been likely to have screamed. However, Mr Justice Sweeney ruled that the evidence in the case was 'very strong' and rejected the appeal. 'We have no doubt as to the safety of the conviction,' he added.

In his brilliant 2016 book, 'The Nicholas Cases: Casualties of Justice', Bob Woffinden quoted Gordon Park's daughter Rachel attacking the 'barbarity of sensationalism'. 'The "Lady in the Lake" label was very upsetting,' she told the journalist. 'It seems to dehumanise the whole thing. I just wanted to get into their heads: it's not the lady in the lake. It's my mother.'

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