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Book review

# More than a Left Foot

- Reviews section -

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*More than a Left Foot* by Bob Williams-Findlay, [Resistance Books](#), 2020.

Bob Findlay's final sentence in his book hopes that "it has provided an insight into an array of historical events, socio-political issues and personal narratives worthy of your time". It certainly does and is in fact several books for the price of one.

It is a moving and insightful account of growing up with his family and his life at different segregated boarding schools from the age of five and half. Then it tells the story of one of the key student struggles of the 1970s, at Essex University - which I was also involved in for a period alongside Bob. Finally it gives us an inside view of the struggle of the Disabled Peoples' Movement; showing how his commitment to a radical social model view of disability regularly brought him into conflict with the institutions he worked in professionally.

He does not flinch from brutal honesty about his personal relationships and difficulties at times in his life. Certainly for me it was like seeing a different side to him altogether. Alongside these narratives there are three chapters that explain clearly and in some detail the theoretical debates about disablement in capitalist society. The three periods in his life are woven together with the red thread of this political theory - he really does relate the political to the personal. He is no academic theorist. The radical left has been playing catch up with these important debates about how capitalist domination reproduces disability. This book is a valuable tool for getting up to speed.

## Growing up apart

His childhood and school day memories are not just a blow by blow narrative but peppered with insights and comments about how disabled children and young people were treated. For instance he remarks on how 'Western cultural attitudes to death, illness and impairment are socially oppressive and deeply harmful'. Kids like him were expected to deal with impairment but issues around the actual impairment were not discussed openly.

The text is lively and put together well, you want to know what happened next as you read through it. A theme that runs right through the book was already present then - Bob was smart and often rebellious. He was selected for the Spastics Society (now Scope) elite grammar school in Tonbridge which did provide a good academic education but did not tolerate too many signs of individuality. Probably explains why he was not awarded a prefect's badge.

As someone who also went to board, in my case in a religious training school for the Christian Brothers, I recognise the descriptions of the intense relationships and conflicts. He is both critical and grateful for the support of his parents. One day a social worker comes to visit worrying about his 'sexual development' and she is shown the door by his mum, who had also stood up against earlier attempts to say he had learning difficulties. Dad was different and Bob reveals how he was 'paraded' occasionally such as when he was put up to play dominos and beat one of his father's work colleagues. At the same time he movingly describes how deeply his Dad's death affected him.

## Red Essex

Essex University was already a centre for political protest as a new university in 1968 and by the early 1970s it was

one of the most radical campuses. Our student body was actively involved in the successful 1972 miners' strike and hosted miners picketing the local coal ports. Even then occupations were used. Campaigns on grants, fees and rents broke out from 1973. Victimisations arising from occupations and then a picket of the site led to further mobilisations.

Throughout these events, Bob played a leading role and as an International Marxist Group (IMG) member he was relentlessly targeted as a red agitator. In Lord Annan's report on the crisis it was slanderously stated that "when support waned in a meeting it was a tactic to ask a cruelly crippled student who was a militant to speak and gather sympathy" (p 205). In one sentence, he expresses both a stereotyped view of disability and denies both Bob and also the mass of students any real independent political agency. On another occasion, he is rendered invisible - almost certainly because of his disability - when a national newspaper cut him out of a photo and report when he went down to London to a Court of Appeal session. The woman International Socialist comrade was considered to fit the newspaper's narrative more neatly.

The stakes involved in these protests led by Bob were quite serious. Along with Will, another IMG comrade, he was accused of criminal damage, smashing the windows of the university bookshop. This was a serious offence and when they were late back to one of the sessions the judge refused bail and they were handcuffed and taken to jail for the rest of the week. I attended the second trial and will never forget Michael Mansfield (now the well-known progressive barrister) getting up and stating calmly - there are 19 contradictions in the Crown's case. Mind you he was helped by Bob spotting that two of his accusers could not have seen through the wall from where they were to identify him. We won the case and celebrated as Bob says by a drunken meal and singing the Internationale much to the bemusement of the Indian waiters. As he says, the heady atmosphere of Essex with the student struggles and the continuous political debate there definitely shaped our lifelong political development.

## A turn to the Disabled Peoples' Movement

As Bob himself states he did not really focus that much on his disabled identity in a political sense at Essex. He was accepted by students as a political activist defending students and involved in campaigns like Troops out of Ireland, against Private Medical Practice or supporting Grunwick women strikers. After a period at the Contemporary Cultural Studies Centre in Birmingham under the direction of the late Stuart Hall, where he developed understanding of racism in Britain, he began to take up the struggle of disabled people more and more both professionally and politically.

After working on the Youth Opportunities Programme and resigning over an agency's anti-trade union position he threw himself in developing the Birmingham Disability Resource Centre. His concern was to win support for the radical social model of disability. The key for changing disabled people's lives was to move from the medical, individual or 'success against odds' models of disability towards an understanding of how capitalist society has historically produced disablement. Once disabled people were not considered as useful labour power they had to be segregated, controlled and/or cared for on an individual basis. There are liberal or reformist variants of this.

I remember working as a Community Service Volunteer in a Spastics Society care home in Croydon in 1969. We were mostly radical types and made great play of taking 'residents' out to the pubs and places, often being deliberately provocative against places that did not welcome them. So if a place was not welcoming we would go down the next night with more 'residents'. We were well intentioned but we were still doing stuff for the 'residents'. We were not facilitating self-organisation or awareness at all.

As Bob describes in repeated clashes within institutions he was continually fighting variants of this same battle - getting them to change their structures, to use resources to remove obstacles and to give disabled people control

over those resources. Unsurprisingly the non-disabled professionals often were the real obstacle but he also shows that even within the Disabled People's movement there are big differences between the reformists- limiting the fight to individual rights - and the more radical transformers like him. His conflicts with the council superiors about Day Centre and respite care show how difficult it is to operate as a radical within the local state. Solutions are not simple, just closing down Day Centres may address the segregation issue but as he says there is no use just throwing people back on the community if the support is not there.

Bob could quite easily have compromised and ensured himself a steady well paid career in the local state, but time and time again he refused and had to move on. But his example and influence at a national level provides an ongoing critical voice that asks the fundamental questions.

## Bob the creative writer

After the frustrations of his career in the social sector Bob took time to pursue another passion of his - writing poetry and plays. If you follow him on Facebook you can often read some of his poetry which I can assure is better than an AWL leader you may not have heard of. I never realised he had written so many plays, although not all have been performed. His love of sport, particularly football, comes through in the book and he proudly wears his West Bromwich cap on the cover. I would love to know his take on the Paralympic movement.

Today he is still fighting the good fight as a leading member of Left Unity and critical of reformism in all its forms. He retains his friendship and collaboration with comrades of our current. It has been a privilege for Socialist Resistance to collaborate on this book with him.

Source [Socialist Resistance](#).

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