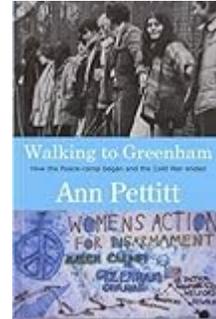


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Fairhall. *Common Ground: The Story of Greenham.* London: I.B. Tauris, 2006. 216 Seiten. ISBN 978-1-4294-6250-1.

Ann Pettitt. *Walking to Greenham: How the Peace Camp Began and the Cold War Ended.* Aberystwyth: Honno Welsh Women's Press, 2006. 310 Seiten. (paper), ISBN 978-1-870206-76-1.



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Sammelrez: D. Fairhall: Common Ground

Ann Pettitt's *Walking to Greenham* and David Fairhall's *Common Ground* are two of the most recent contributions to the much-studied protests which occurred in the 1980s and 1990s at Greenham Common in Newbury, England, the site of an American military base which housed Cruise missiles at the end of the Cold War. These protests against nuclear weapons were unique in many ways, but especially in their women's only focus and longevity. Sociologists, feminists, women's studies scholars, and historians have written interesting accounts of this fascinating phenomenon since the beginning of the movement in the early 1980s. Pettitt and Fairhall add to this growing scholarship in two very different ways. As a founder of the Greenham women's movement, Pettitt offers an autobiographical account of the events and her part in challenging the Cold War status quo of the 1980s. Fairhall, on the other hand, offers a journalistic perspective of the Greenham protest and its place in the wider history of the Cold War, women's rights, and English common law. The two works are very

different, but complement each other nicely and together provide a good overview of one of the most important protest movements in recent British history.

Of the two accounts, Pettitt's *Walking to Greenham* is a much more interesting read for both the scholar and the general public. Extremely well-written, this engrossing account invites the reader into the world of Ann Pettitt, one of the founding mothers of "Women for Life on Earth: Women's Action for Disarmament," which sponsored a 120-mile peace march from Cardiff to Greenham Common in September of 1981. While an interesting read in its own right, its commentary and perspective should be particularly interesting to scholars of Cold War and peace history. Pettitt critiques the Cold War powers and argues for the importance of individual action in the face of powerful forces. She argues that the irrational fears of powerful men in the USSR and US caused the Cold War and its arms race. With their leaders caught in a cycle of escalation and reaction, the masses of powerless peo-

ple on both sides of the Iron Curtain took matters into their own hands by protesting and forcing their leaders into dialogue with each other. She convincingly explains how these peace movements, especially the Greenham Common women and the Moscow Group for Trust, convinced the superpowers to rethink nuclear escalation and seek peaceful coexistence.

Pettitt begins her autobiography with her birth in Lancashire following the Second World War. This war figures prominently in her story, not only because it was when her parents met, but also because of the lessons she learned from it through her parents's stories. Reading stories of the Holocaust and the news from left-wing newspapers, she grew up believing in the importance of being a witness to evil and of individual direct action in influencing the course of history. Pettitt lived out her beliefs by participating in protests in college in the late 1960s, joining the squatters movement, and going "back-to-the-land" by settling in rural Wales. In this sense, her own activism and the Greenham Common movement can be seen as part of the wave of activism and dissent which swept through Europe and the United States in the latter part of the Cold War. While Pettitt had a rather typical activist background, she continuously portrays herself as an average mother, representing average apolitical women in her era. She frames her argument in this way as part of her effort to encourage average women to become more politically active. The moral of her story is that if she, a poor overworked mother of two little boys, could do something to change the world, so could the average individual. Seeing her role as a mother and protector of children as primary to her protest, she framed her protest as a mothers's demand that the Americans and the complicitous British government stop endangering children with their nuclear arms race. In her eyes, this was the main reason for the Greenham movement's focus on women's participation and leadership.

Pettitt also effectively situates the Greenham Women's movement within the feminist and peace movements. After the march to Greenham in 1981, the activists created a peace camp outside the military base, where it remained for the next decade. The women's peace camp evolved over the years, away from Pettitt's original vision into a more woman-centered, feminist and lesbian protest, with empowering women as a secondary goal. The image of the peace camp also changed from housewives, Quakers, and hippie mothers to that of strident lesbian feminists critiquing male-dominated power politics. While Pettitt did not support this shift, she is not overly critical of it, attempting to be fair while continuing

to tell the story from her perspective. Pettitt is, however, critical of Britain's mainstream peace movement, which was dominated by organizations on the Left and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). While these organizations attracted large numbers at their rallies, Pettitt asserts that the Greenham women's movement was more successful in attracting support from average people because it was democratically organized and operated outside of mainstream politics and organizations.

The second half of the book is devoted to Pettitt's attempt to work with the Moscow Group for Trust, after the Greenham peace camp was firmly established. Pettitt and her colleagues directly confronted leaders of the state-supported Soviet Peace Committee in an attempt to force the Soviet leadership to deal with the issue of nuclear disarmament and the Group's demands for dialogue between the two hostile blocs. Eventually, Mikhail Gorbachev was impressed by their demands, and opened a dialogue with the United States. She credits Gorbachev and his wife Raisa with implementing the suggestions of the Group and eventually ending the Cold War. While this is a rather simplistic perspective on the end of a complex historical phenomenon, Pettitt does draw attention to the important contributions made by activists like her and the Group, and other dissidents from across the Soviet bloc, to forcing American and Soviet leaders to rethink the Cold War status quo.

Throughout the book, Pettitt flashes back to moments in her parents's lives during the Second World War. While these are extremely interesting snippets in their own right, they do distract from the overall narrative of her story. They tantalize the reader, bringing them into the world of the 1940s, only to yank them back out again to the world of the 1980s, with little explicit connection between the two generations. I would like to see her parents's stories more effectively integrated into the narrative to better understand how Pettitt viewed these events in relation to her own life and the peace movements at the end of the Cold War. She also ends her book without explaining what happened to the Greenham movement and her own life after the late 1980s. Despite these gaps in her narrative, Pettitt's story is wonderfully written and is a valuable source for scholars of the peace movements, feminism, and the Cold War in the 1980s.

David Fairhall's Common Ground nicely complements Pettitt's account by filling in the rest of the story of the Greenham Commons protest after Pettitt left it and placing it within a wider historical context. His is a much more comprehensive account of the Greenham

Commons protests, presenting it from multiple perspectives. While he obviously admires the protesters and favors their interpretation of the events, he includes comments and insights from a variety of other perspectives, including governmental ministers, U.S. Air Force personnel, and local residents of Newbury. Like Pettitt, Fairhall describes the original march from Cardiff to Greenham Commons, but he devotes only one brief chapter to this part of the protest and gives much less attention to Pettitt's role as an original organizer. Most of the other thirty chapters of the book are similarly brief accounts of various aspects of the protests and their place within the wider milieu of British politics in the 1980s and 1990s. Fairhall also devotes much more attention to the latter phases of the Greenham movement as it evolved into a local fight to preserve ancient rights of access to common lands. Overall, Fairhall's history of the Greenham Commons is much more broad and wide-ranging in perspective, but is also less engaging and less in-depth than Pettitt's account.

Perhaps Fairhall's most important contribution to understanding the Greenham experience is his discussion of the Thatcher government's responses to the protests and the wider political context of the protests. As a defense specialist for the *Manchester Guardian*, Fairhall had access to key players in the Cold War and insight into political responses at the highest levels. His knowledge of the history of the rights of commoners and laws affecting the debate over Greenham Common, and the history of protest activism in Britain aids in his understanding of the wider meaning of the protests and their impact on British politics. Unfortunately, his coverage of this history lacks analysis. For example, he makes a point of connecting the Greenham women's protest to the suffragettes, but does not fully explore in what ways this was a women's movement and how the Greenham protesters viewed themselves in relation to suffragettes and feminism in general. He also does not explore the role of gender in the construction of the protest and how it might have either helped or hindered the effectiveness of the movement. There are many more examples of how Fairhall could have taken his account to a deeper level, but this type of omission is understandable since this piece is more of a journalistic overview than a schol-

arly analysis.

Common Ground is, however, packed with information, providing a detailed chronology of events related to the history of Greenham Common from the 1930s through the 1990s. Throughout the book, Fairhall attempts to ascertain the impact of the Greenham women on the local community, the British government, the Cold War, and their own lives. While he includes the perspectives of government officials who predictably assert that protesters had no impact on their decisions or the Cold War, and Greenham protesters who also predictably claim to have helped end the Cold War, Fairhall seems to come down somewhere in the middle on the issue. He argues that the Greenham women's primary contribution to ending the Cold War was to bring the issue of nuclear weapons to the attention of the British public. He also argues that the Greenham experience profoundly affected the women themselves by providing them with a voice, some political clout, and empowerment. While he does give some credence to the power of protest, he does not go so far as to assert that it ended the Cold War, or even provided a serious solution to the problem of nuclear proliferation. He seems to believe that real power is in the hands of political leaders, not in the activism of the people.

Despite the lack of deeper historical analysis on the part of both authors, Fairhall and Pettitt do make important contributions to our understanding of the Greenham Common protests and political dissent in the Cold War era. Pettitt helps us to see the Cold War and the issue of nuclear deterrence from her perspective as an active participant in a nuclear protest movement. Her writing style makes the experience accessible and real to the reader in a way that few other accounts have done. Fairhall, on the other hand, provides us with a wider perspective of the issues and history involved in the Greenham protests, effectively situating it within the long history of British protest and the political climate in Britain during the Cold War. Both focus on the local and national aspects of this uniquely English protest, but also hint at the transnational connections between activists at Greenham and those in other countries across the world. As such, these are important contributions to our understanding of the history of Cold War politics and dissent.

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