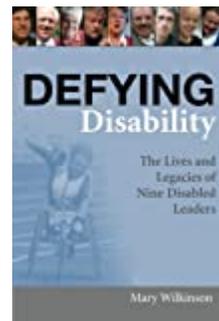




**Mary Wilkinson.** *Defying Disability: The Lives and Legacies of Nine Disabled Leaders.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2009. 224 pp. \$36.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84310-415-5.



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**Commissioned by** Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

## Pride against Prejudice

Wilkinson's suite of biographies of diverse and prominent British disability icons struck this reviewer as a delightful surprise. This work, certainly intended for a wide and popular audience, displays consistent scholarly quality, fascinating and detailed narratives, as well as gravitas, while at the same time maintaining a skillful and light touch. The fact that the book lacks scholarly footnotes should not deter the academic reader because this work takes its subject beyond a purely scholarly audience to a wider popular audience. This is vital for disability history due to the need for the dissemination of knowledge about important figures in disability history. An activist and highly experienced and accomplished journalist, Wilkinson achieves this feat with ease. We find her attention to her craft and her passion for her subjects on every page.

The volume contains nine mini-biographies averaging about twenty pages each, of nine men and women who, Wilkinson amply demonstrates, overcame, not their disabilities, but the social, physical, and attitudinal barriers that confront many disabled persons, thus

confirming and illustrating many instances of the social model of disability. The individuals profiled here, from backgrounds of both wealth and poverty, varying levels of parental education, and experiencing a galaxy of impairments, achieved, and continue to achieve, distinction in fields as disparate as sports, broadcasting, politics, and business, among others. Wilkinson never indulges in pity, and her subjects rarely accepted pity.

Significantly, this work is anything but a collection of *overcoming* narratives. The British leaders profiled are not remote icons standing (or sitting in their wheelchairs or scooters) on so many proverbial pedestals. Instead, Wilkinson presents each as a flesh-and-blood human being, complete with strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures, both professional and personal.

Nor do all of Wilkinson's subjects embody the typical *rags-to-riches* stereotype. While some have attained economic success after humble beginnings, others have achieved distinction in various fields without reaping substantial financial gain. The variation is substan-

tial. Bert Massie, a public servant with limited mobility, was working class by birth and might now be considered middle class. Jack Ashley, a politician who became deaf as an adult, was born into poverty and became a life peer. Rachel Hurst, an activist born with a rare neuromuscular condition, is the daughter of actors who became the driving force behind the founding of the European Parliament of Disabled People and has not appreciably changed her class status.

Disability studies professor Tom Shakespeare, a person of short stature, was the son of a physician with a title and wealth. His politics led him to conceal or be embarrassed about his class origins, including his inherited title. Phil Friend, a high-performing wheelchair user, has practiced advanced entrepreneurship in the field of disability compliance for government and business, leading him from a working-class background to considerable wealth. Peter White, a blind broadcaster, rose from a working-class to a middle-class position and achieved significant influence in media. Mat Fraser was born with short limbs due to his mother's use of thalidomide while she was pregnant. He was born into poverty and now makes a good living as a television and radio performer. Andrew Lee, another activist, the only subject with a learning disability, was from a middle-class background and has not appreciably changed his class status. Tanni Grey-Thompson's parents were professionals, and she remains at about the same class status. She was born with spina bifida, and is considered the premier paralympic athlete in the United Kingdom.

A great strength of Wilkinson's portraits is her train-

ing and work as a journalist. She has indeed researched her subjects intensively, using interviews with the subjects themselves, their family members and colleagues, and on some occasions with their political opponents. What emerges is a series of ongoing life narratives, canvases that are unfinished. Extensive quotations from the subjects and their writings allow Wilkinson to personalize each chapter while maintaining a consistent style.

Nor are the nine portraits entirely separate, despite the widely varying backgrounds and endeavors of the subjects. Wilkinson notes many instances in which her subjects crossed paths, usually in a friendly and cooperative manner, but occasionally in disagreement. Disability politics is not entirely unlike other politics.

Another important feature of Wilkinson's work is her short but telling tenth chapter titled "Different Lives, Common Purpose." The title clearly describes its aim, and the conclusion succeeds admirably. Wilkinson notes that each subject lives with purpose, fighting discrimination while actually making use of her or his disability. Indeed, she stresses that each subject has focused on ability rather than disability and insisted, with great determination and the help of education, family, and friends, that society also focus on their abilities. Despite their diverse interests and impairments, Wilkinson stresses that all of her subjects have embraced the social model of disability and have, as Wilkinson notes, "confounded low expectations, shown what can be achieved and given a sense of empowerment" (p. 214). Finally, Wilkinson stresses that many of her subjects have led the fight for and effected "changes in policy and practice" (p. 215).

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