

Obituary

George Lamb

January 8, 1964 - May 21, 2021



If George Lamb had been asked for guidance on what to include in his obituary, the response would probably have been a rolling of eyes, followed by directions to his Twitter profile.

Community Worker with issues. Knows gibberish, went to many different places of learning some of which were quite good. Worked with many different communities.

When people say of someone who has recently died ‘Oh, he was a force of nature’ that isn’t necessarily reassuring. What do they *really* mean? A modern-day Heathcliff

striding across the windswept moors? An irascible old git in a flat cap, railing about everything going to hell in a handbasket and how much better the good old days were?

George would have hooted with laughter at the notion of being compared to a Bronte-esque hero but there would also have been a chuckle of recognition at the grumpy pensioner, a stereotype he joyfully played up to as he often answered the phone with the greeting ‘Hello, miserable bastard here.’

Sharp as a tack, George was a master of ironic understatement and sardonic asides, whilst being the kindest, funniest, and most loyal friend possible, with an unerring talent for causing mayhem and mischief wherever and whenever possible.

George was born with a rare genetic condition and his parents were told he was unlikely to survive into his teens. This was the beginning of being ‘special,’ a euphemism disabled people recognise as code for being expected to take ‘second rate’ and ‘second best’ and be grateful for the privilege. To George the very word was a red rag to a bull, and he would immediately launch into a chorus of ‘SPECIAL, so fucking SPECIAL!’ if he heard it.

As a Muirhouse boy from a working class family and ‘in your face’ disabled to boot, the fact that George eventually found himself at Moray House studying for a degree in Community Education is a minor miracle in itself, but when he set his mind on a goal he went for it with gusto. However, whilst he looked back on his experiences of Higher Education with some fondness, the cultural and academic challenges he faced meant this wasn’t the easiest time for him. George was the first to acknowledge that the pressure of studying impacted on his always fragile mental health and, after graduating, he went on to experience intermittent periods of depression throughout the rest of his life.

I first met George when he was working to set up a disabled people’s action group in Pilton, West Edinburgh. This was at a late stage in his ‘official’ Community Education career and by then his reputation as a ‘bit of a loose cannon’ preceded him.

I took this at face value as, for many disabled people, doing anything vaguely unorthodox is enough to make them an object of scrutiny and speculation. But it turned out George really was wild in his ambition to introduce this group to radical disability politics and transform them into revolutionaries.

The next time our paths crossed was in 2006 at North Edinburgh Arts for the opening night of *Giants*. This was an exhibition of the work of internationally renowned film maker and photographer David Hevey, and featured outsize cut out figures, charting the journey of disabled people from institutions to activism. George was instrumental both in bringing *Giants* to Edinburgh and also setting up a programme of workshops and community events to coincide with the installation. Until this point, disability arts were at a very low profile in Scotland, and it was George's determination to bring *Giants* to a different audience that proved to be the kickstart needed to launch the careers of a generation of Scottish disabled artists.

Then came the heady explosion of social media, particularly Facebook, as a new way of campaigning and networking between activists. One day, out of nowhere, George messaged, asking if I'd be interested in helping to set up a group to confront the impact of austerity and neoliberalism on disabled people? Campaigners in England had recently established DPAC (Disabled People Against Cuts), and George was looking to do something similar here by transforming the 'Black Triangle' Facebook page, initiated by John McCardle, into an 'in real life' vehicle for change.

This was the beginning of a time of frenetic activity for George, and for everyone else caught up in his infectious enthusiasm. Black Triangle dominated the disability landscape in Scotland at a point when the major charities, with all their money and resources, could only say 'oh, nasty government, how can you be so horrible to poor little disabled people?' and fund a couple of marches. This strategy of labelling disabled people as 'vulnerable' and 'the hardest hit' infuriated George as it sent out 'a message to the enemy' that they were free to trample over us, an invitation which was duly accepted.

Our campaigns were very different to those of the ‘pity porn’ merchants. By now, George had stepped back from paid employment and was looking to do something meaningful and hopefully exciting. This meant direct action and launching the anger of disabled people straight at the heart of the organisations which richly deserved it. Outsourcing corporations like Atos, the parasites contracted to implement Work Capability Assessments on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions, were a frequent focus of protests, but George quickly got bored with simply standing about with a placard outside their offices on York Place and instead wheeled off into the road to bring the traffic to a standstill.

At another protest, George was part of a Black Triangle group which took over the foyer of the Stasi HQ lookalike assessment centre on Lady Lawson Street and refused to leave, even under threat of arrest; whilst his acting skills came into their own when, on a picket of Leith Job Centre, George pretended to collapse in the middle of Commercial Street, causing absolute havoc all around him.

However, George’s true piece de resistance was a protest where, rather than being at the centre of the action, he was one of the brains behind the scenes. In 2013, Iain Duncan Smith, the then Secretary of State for Social Security at Westminster, was invited to give a keynote speech at a conference on ‘Welfare Reform’ at an Edinburgh hotel. Needless to say, with a delegate fee of £350 a head, the people in the ‘welfare reform’ firing line, the mere riffraff, were obviously not on the guest list. Instead, it was to be a jolly day out for the poverty industry movers and shakers.

A tight-knit group, five disabled and one non-disabled, convened secretly to devise a cunning plan. All very cloak and dagger and, naturally, George loved it. The six of us pooled money to pay for a room at the venue the night before the event. Then three of us, dressed up as office drones, strolled into the hotel the next morning, along with a guide dog, for a ‘breakfast meeting’ with a guest.

Quite incredibly, there was minimal security and, whilst delegates were queuing to register, we walked into the conference room and sat at the front table, stunned at how easy it had been. George was outside the entrance to the hotel, and we instantly sent

him a text with the timing of the keynote speech, followed by a countdown so he could co-ordinate the crowd to begin chanting as Smith got to the podium.

And then it all kicked off. We managed to heckle Smith for about five minutes before security guards very politely asked if we'd finished and led us away. Smith cancelled his planned press conference and swept out, entourage in tow, with what was later described as 'a face like a smacked arse.' Meanwhile, George was rounding us up like a boss for media interviews and generally keeping everything organised.

Later, we all met back at his place to listen to the BBC Scotland lunchtime news, and we were the lead story! Apparently, Smith had been hurried out of the back entrance of the hotel and taken away in a laundry van. George said that he wouldn't knowingly give a penny to the Tories, but he would have happily paid good money to see that.

George was a founder member of Disability History Scotland (DHS), and it was here that he concentrated much of his energy in the years leading up to his death. He was never happier than when he was organising conferences and giving talks about the contribution disabled people have made and continue to make to Scottish society. Being a huge fan of military history, he relished working on the DHS project 'All Together Now' which explored the aftermath of WW1 and changes to social policy on disability after the conflict.

He leaves a huge legacy but the 'Hidden Histories' trail at The Scottish National Portrait Gallery, a memory chest and an animated film 'One Last Push' about disabled people's struggles for civil rights from 1918 to the present day will live on, hopefully for decades.

This all makes George seem very driven and relentless, but he knew how to enjoy himself too. He was a popular stalwart of the Rocksalt Coffee Shop in Leith and liked a good curry at the Mintleaf. He also loved a good binge-watch, Scandi noir, for preference, the R4 Serial 'Tracks' and podcasts like 'The Strange Case of Charles Dexter Ward' and 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth'.

He also loved travelling, although being out and about with George was always a mixture of fun topped off with a frisson of stress. What would he get up to next, especially when trains were somehow involved? George resolutely refused to book passenger assistance for any rail journey on the principle that non-disabled passengers could travel spontaneously so why shouldn't he be able to? He would approach the staff at the ticket barrier with supreme confidence, inform them that he was going on the next train to Dundee, for example, and 'could do with a bit of help, pal....' No one ever refused.

One of my favourite memories of George was the 2018 road trip, along with our friends Caroline and Matt, from Edinburgh to John O'Groats. Again, George was adamant we wouldn't need to book accommodation beyond Inverness, as there were bound to be 'loads of accessible hotels' in the Highlands. Well, not for the first time his optimism was misplaced, and the result was a breakneck drive to the Thurso tourist office, the alternative being sleeping overnight in Matt's van. We made it with only minutes to spare, but that was George all over. Taking things to the wire but getting away with it.

Due to side effects from his medication, George began kidney dialysis in 2016. It was then he discovered he only had one kidney and as he wryly observed, given his numerous encounters with the medical profession, it was a bit remiss no one had thought to mention it before. He always said that dialysis wasn't a long-term solution, and he would stop as soon as it got boring. So, when he announced to close friends in spring 2021, he had reached this point, it was a shock but not a surprise.

That he was planning to die close to the anniversary of Claire, his lovely wife's death seemed very fitting. And then, being the contrarian he was, George changed his mind and said he'd wait for the fine weather so he could have one last road trip with his pals.

On the afternoon he died, he and our friend Susan were putting the details for this final adventure together. When she left, he was tired but in high spirits and looking forward to the jaunt. A good way to go.

After his funeral, people from all walks of life got together to talk about George and there were so many stories, far too many to recall here. He has left his mark forever in the hearts of everyone who knew and loved him.

Sasha Callaghan

Disability Rights Activist and Visual Artist