

Review by Anna Hutchinson

North Edinburgh Social History Group was formed in 2009 to research and record the history of community activism in North Edinburgh. When we joined I am sure group members did not foresee the amount of material, photographs and news clippings we would have to sift through to obtain the finished result.

Never Give Up shows how local people have successfully campaigned about issues happening within their area throughout its history, from the proposed rent increase in 1962 through to the closure of our local community newspaper in March 2011. Importantly, the publication shows that activism in North Edinburgh is still alive and kicking today.

Community spirit has always been a feature of life in North Edinburgh and *Never Give Up* celebrates the role of local residents who have developed and managed countless local organisations over the years. The strength of activists within North Edinburgh is that they know what is needed within their communities. Many professionals often forget to consult with local residents when planning projects for our area and local activists have held them to account and demanded that they be part of the development process.

Our research highlights how women have played a key role in most of the campaigns which have taken place in North Edinburgh. *Never Give Up* also records how many of the services for children and young people in our community such as play schemes, crèche facilities, youth clubs and childcare were developed by women.

The publication of *Never Give Up* shows the skills our group developed whilst preparing this project. It depicts the knowledge, technology and critical thinking the group has achieved. Another positive outcome is that we have managed to mobilise local people. Since the launch of our project, a new campaign called North Edinburgh Fights Back has been founded. This group has been meeting to campaign against local government cuts which has seen £1million slashed from local budgets in recent years resulting in projects which residents fought hard to obtain being closed down.

Never Give Up will be of interest to people who want to get involved in their community. It shows how success can be achieved when local communities get together to campaign for projects and will educate people about how to campaign in a concise way to achieve their aims. It will also be a useful resource within schools and places of learning. We hope that *Never Give Up* will give others confidence in helping to bring about a better future to their lives and their community.

The launch of the project was a huge success and our group enjoyed meeting up with many activists who we hadn't seen for a long while. It was also good to share our experiences with some of the younger activists who had no knowledge of what the older generation had achieved. The pride on the faces of local activists and the positive feedback we received about the project made all the hard work worthwhile.

We are very proud of this publication and we know that it will be a lasting documentation of activism within North Edinburgh.

Review by Allan Hosey

This book charts the birth and growing pains of North Edinburgh (comprising Drylaw, Muirhouse, West & East Pilton, Granton, Royston, Wardieburn). These communities total approximately 20,000 residents and 9,000 (predominantly post-World War 2 Council-built) homes. The vibrant social history of this area is documented in the pages of this well researched book.

From a community development practitioner's perspective there are several recurring aspects of the book which are fascinating. I will give a brief illustration on two elements of these. Firstly, local communities often collectivise in order to challenge perceived wrongs, and there are inherent tensions when these views clash with the State. Secondly, I will briefly refer to the social and cultural development of community life in poorly resourced estates.

Collectivise – 'considered as forming one mass'

The ability and willingness of working class communities to join together and highlight injustice, or to campaign for change is woven like a rich tapestry throughout this book. On some occasions there would be a professional community development worker supporting the campaigning process but more often than not the community development role would be an organic one delivered by more experienced activists. As a general rule the former would focus on process whilst the latter might be hell-bent on outcomes!

The centrality of housing to community campaigning is well evidenced in the book. Local government reorganisation took place in 1995. Previously community development was a Regional Council function whilst housing was a District Council role. This separation of responsibility enabled arms length support of tenants' organisations. It is interesting to note the gradual shift away from Council-employed community workers supporting groups campaigning against council housing policy or school closures in North Edinburgh. An overt recent example of this shift was an outburst by a Councillor from the ruling coalition on the City of Edinburgh Council. She accused the voluntary sector project of 'biting the hand that feeds them'. The perceived crime of the organisation, only partially funded by Council grant, was to allow their building to be booked for a public meeting by an anti-cuts protest group! This small example demonstrates the inherent tensions that can occur when State funding is used as a carrot and stick technique to stifle protest.

The building of vast council estates with no social or cultural infrastructure and poor transport links was a hallmark of post war town planning. The ability of the working class communities in North Edinburgh to recognise this gap and develop social and cultural activity is evident from the earliest days recorded in the book. Their response appeared to be largely organic in the beginning. Later, that organic creativity was used regularly and to good effect for highlight campaigning issues on everything from damp housing to industrial pollution. This fusing of the cultural and political became a regular feature of campaigns in the eighties and nineties and was supported by community development practitioners. However, as should be expected from the profession, the role of the practitioner was to be in the background supporting the community rather than leading it. Therefore, it is a fitting tribute to the practitioners that the book is all about the campaigners and activists and their community rather than the processes behind the scenes.

Review by Nicola Ceesay

During my community education placement I had the opportunity to work with local activists involved in the North Edinburgh Social History Project. At the time of my involvement the project was in its infancy; the group were collecting data and deciding upon a reasonable time line for recording the history of community activism. It was quickly established that the history of activism could not be accurately portrayed or understood without it being contextualised within the political, economic and social history of the local area.

As such, my involvement with the group's early process of critical reflection facilitated the development, in my mind, of a narrative of a community which has borne the brunt of economic decline, and long-standing attacks on public services. It did however, become clear that despite suffering the effects of economic catastrophes, such as Margaret Thatcher's regressive austerity programme during the 1980s, the community of North Edinburgh has collectively organised on countless occasions. Learning about this process demonstrated to me that collective social action – as an extension of political and economic democracy - enabled the community of North Edinburgh to successfully defend existing services and to demand services that the community lacked. Furthermore, the creativity in the processes and strategies that the various campaigns employed indicated a wealth of ideas and the power of harnessing collective will.

Additionally, analysing decades of newspapers with the group and listening to qualitative accounts of experience added substance to the quantitative community profiling strategies concerned with the analysis of indices and markers of deprivation that are introduced at university. From a student perspective, statistics and data as mere abstractions do little to convey the realities of the subjective experience of those who have experienced the long term effects of fiscal retrenchment. Furthermore, encountering qualitative experience assisted in the development of my own theoretical perspective in the understanding of poverty as a by-product of wider structural shifts and sharply away from the obfuscating discourses of the right which seek to individualise the issue of poverty.

However, through conversations with the community activists I have developed what may be termed a necessary scepticism with regards to more recent attempts by the state to 'engage' community members in decision making processes. According to the group the mechanisms by which community activism would have occurred in the past, such as direct action on real issues, has been usurped – in part - by Community Planning Partnerships and the increasing bureaucratisation of Local Authority structures. The activists expressed a feeling of defeatism experienced during such processes, conveying the subtle message that 'participation' in government structures appears to be primarily concerned with the co-option and regulation of communities wherein spaces for participation and engagement are conditional.

Furthermore, the growing discontentment over recent austerity measures introduced by the Conservative/Lib Dem coalition which have affected the area have coincided with the launch of the social history project. The launch of the project as a process of reflection upon historical action has prompted the re-establishing of old networks and subsequent resurgence from the community in the form of grassroots action by way of regular public meetings and deputations to demand accountability for cuts to public services. However, direct action has been met with hostility and has prompted both

threats and insults being issued to the community by a local councillor. Fundamentally, this experience as a student in the quagmire of community development has given rise to fundamental questions about the conditions of community engagement and participation and the place for direct action and the right to dissent, as a crucial element of building participatory democracy.

Review by Alex Wood

North Edinburgh Social History Group's *Never Give Up*, a history of community activism in the Pilton, Drylaw, Muirhouse, Royston and Wardieburn areas of Edinburgh, is a superb publication from several quite different perspectives.

Firstly, unlike many fairly subjective accounts of local communities, it is not merely a collection of reminiscences, but is centred on careful and systematic research. A superb timeline, illustrating Scottish, UK and international history from 1843 to 2010 puts the local history firmly in the context of wider events. The local events themselves are explained not only in the words of the local activists but from a range of other records including the press, council reports and minutes and trade union records. In capturing the history however, the human narrative has never been lost and the voices ring loud across the years, expressing the pride, the pain and the anger of communities too frequently ignored.

The production of *Never Give Up* achieves another quite remarkable feat. Its creation was a mighty effort in itself but its publication offers the communities, both from which it sprang and which it describes, a sense of their own achievements over these last 70 years. What emerges is what Burns called "the pith o' sense an' pride o' worth", a proper recognition of the human potential of the vast mass of ordinary folk. The ultimate measure of the publication will be the extent to which it helps reignite a self-belief in the capacity of communities to operate collectively and challenge those whose hold over power is at the expense of the many.

It is also an intellectual and moral rebuttal of those who dismissively speak of 'the underclass'. The concept of a passive mass, unassimilated into wider social norms, dependant on benefits, operating economically on the edges of the black economy, has been an excuse for the political right (including the Blairites) to demonise the poor and to shift responsibility for the economic shortcomings of the market system from those who run it to its victims. It has also been an excuse for those on the left, puzzled by the effects of de-industrialisation and the subsequent shrinkage in the traditional, unionised and collectivist working class, to explain the seeming disappearance of collectivist politics on a mass scale. *Never Give Up* paints a different picture. Although it accurately records the now broken connection between trade union activism and community activism, it also illustrates the continuing capacity of even the poorest communities to create and re-create cultural, sporting, welfare **and** political organisations and campaigns. We may inhabit a crassly consumerist society. Individualism may be rampant but the lesson which *Never Give Up* begs us to learn is that Margaret Thatcher was wrong when she stated that 'There is no such thing as society'.

There is society and there are communities. As well as a necessary reaction to exploitation, the urge to operate collectively is deeply human, a recurring, almost elemental, instinctive force. *Never Give Up* powerfully reminds us of that.