

Book Review

Resisting the State: Canadian History Through the Stories of Activists,

by Scott Neigh. Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2012. \$24.95 CAN, paper. ISBN: 978-1-55266-520-6. Pages: 1-227.

Reviewed by Amanda Joy¹

Resisting the State is one of two books in which author Scott Neigh explores the history of Canadian social justice activism through the experiences of longtime organizers. The second book focuses on issues of gender and sexuality, while *Resisting the State* is organized around movements targeting the state in some way, such as anti-poverty work, immigration policy and anti-racism. Neigh refers to his approach as “history from below”: whereas we normally learn history from the top down, focusing on elites, institutions and “great men,” he argues that it is not only the powerful who create social and political change. Instead, he shows us the course of history as collectively made through the struggles of regular people in both big and small ways.

Neigh introduces his readers to eight activists in six chapters. These include Isabel and Frank Showler, a couple of pacifists whose radical Christian beliefs led them to resist the Second World War; Charles Roach, a Trinidadian-Canadian lawyer who repeatedly challenged racism and colonialism in the course of his work; and Lynn Jones, a labour activist who fought racism from within the labour movement. We also meet Kathy Mallett and Roger Obonsawin, who have worked with indigenous communities and families in Canadian cities, bringing leadership to Friendship Centres and other indigenous-led organizations; Don Weitz, an anti-psychiatry activist who helped to develop a radical anti-psychiatry magazine; and Josephine Grey, a human rights activist who has worked with and on behalf of poor communities in Ontario.

Neigh’s approach to telling these stories is to use individual biographies as “nodes” from which to tease out “strands” that can be followed to investigate the social relations in which they are embedded. Each chapter begins with relevant context on the historical moment

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in Canadian society and politics, including both an explanation of the problems that the activist is struggling against, as well as the theoretical underpinnings needed to give insight into their perspective and actions. For example, in the chapter on Lynn Jones, Neigh gives a brief history of Black Nova Scotians, followed by some background on slavery and how capitalism has organized different “kinds” of people to do different types of work; he then discusses race, gender and work in the Canadian context. He approaches social theory at an introductory level, incorporating critiques of nationalism, colonialism, capitalism and racism into his historical narratives.

Neigh writes in solidarity with his subjects by describing them and their struggles in their own terms. While he comes from a radical, anti-authoritarian perspective, his subjects come from a more diverse range of viewpoints and backgrounds. Some work from within state systems to effect concrete changes for their communities, and others organize from outside, and in opposition to, the state. The majority of the activists profiled have been involved in either grassroots community organizing or in organizing through official channels, such as the legal system, while only a couple were involved in protest and direct action organizing. The choice of who to include in the book seems to be guided by a desire for a diversity of movements, regions and identities, and in this respect Neigh is quite successful.

Neigh’s approach is reflexive, continually positioning himself by relaying his own autobiography and learning process as it relates to each chapter. In the chapter on Josephine Grey’s anti-poverty work, Neigh describes his own middle-class upbringing, his relationship to money, and how he came to learn about poverty through his activist involvement. He makes himself and his own journey present in his writing, and in the process invites readers to evaluate their own positions in relation to power and oppression.

Because these stories span decades of activist organizing, Neigh is able to detail not only some inspiring victories, but also the ebb and flow of movements over time, including what happens when movements fizzle out. In chapter 3, indigenous activist Kathy Mallett describes how making gains can be a double-edged sword, contributing to complacency or causing the community to lose focus. Similarly, in chapter 4, Lynn Jones describes the difficulty of engaging a community in struggle over the long term, particularly when people are putting in a lot of volunteer work; in her case, people began to burn out after achieving a significant

victory. For activists, there are important lessons to be learned from the histories described here, both from victories and failures.

One criticism is that the scope and intent of the book does not appear to match up with what Neigh actually delivers. Although the book's introduction frames the project as offering an alternative Canadian history, what Neigh delivers is a partial history of struggle against the Canadian state, told through the stories of a collection of activists and organizers. A narrowed scope would help to keep the stories in focus and prevent the book from seeming fragmented. The book would also benefit from a more thorough discussion of what ties the chapters together, and of what is uncovered by studying activist history "from below." For example, how is this perspective more insightful than what is offered by "top-down" historians? It would be nice to see Neigh in conversation with other scholars for this reason, but direct engagement with other historians is notably absent.

Neigh's greatest strength and contribution is in personalizing important moments in the history of resistance in Canada. The personalities of the profiled activists, most of whom are now seniors, shine through in Neigh's writing, and this makes for engaging reading. Scholars of Canadian history or activism may find Neigh's personal approach to these subjects a refreshing change from a more top-down history, while remaining accessible to social justice activists providing insights from prior generations.