



A People's History of Woodcraft Folk

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A People's History of Woodcraft Folk

By Phineas Harper

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As a way of commemorating the ninetieth anniversary of the organisation's inception, this book is an attempt to, in the words of the author, provide "glimpses into the many chapters of Woodcraft Folk's evolution, struggles and adventures" (p10). Through an exploration of 90 years of pictures, memorabilia, symbols and histories and featuring a number of articles written by various members, past and present, it is an audacious effort to chronicle the Woodcraft Folk's fascinating history.

The various articles, punctuated by a succession of wonderful paintings, drawings, photographs and antiques, form the bulk of the book's text. In a loose chronology, they trace Woodcraft Folk history from its origins as a splinter group from Kindred of the Kibbo Kift to its contemporary status as an educational youth movement aimed at social change. The articles on the whole make an effort to ground Woodcraft Folk history in wider events, providing a welcome perspective on the organisation's foundations in combatting societal ills such as inequality, discrimination and a disconnect from nature. Having said this, the title itself – *A People's History of Woodcraft Folk* – is something of a misnomer and those in search of a rigorous Woodcraft Folk history with rich analysis and a variety of perspectives will be disappointed. In its ambitions to provide snapshots into Woodcraft Folk values, practices and tales, though, it is successful and well worth reading.

As someone who's attended several Woodcraft Folk camps in the past and been active in the Hebden Bridge group, the book's searching insights into various aspects of the organisation's identity are very evocative and reflective of my experiences. From its radical heritage and emphasis on free thinking to its prescribed love of nature and, most significantly for the purposes of this book, strong visual and iconographic tradition, the many layers of Woodcraft Folk's character receive exploration and light exposition. It captures the quasi-mythical and other-worldly feel of Woodcraft camps very well.

In many ways, the raft of well-curated images that the book contains are the most remarkable content. The variety of lovely pictures are astonishing, including a Cubist tent design from the 1920s (p16), beautiful hand-illustrated log books from camps (pp32-37) and all manner of banners, costumes, badges, totems, carvings and linocuts. The book carefully documents Woodcraft Folk's slow and gentle transition from a Scout-like, though radical, organisation in its earlier years to the more liberal, in the non-political sense, organisation that we see today.

The highlight of the articles are attempts to contextualise Woodcraft Folk events and histories through their enactment at significant historical junctures, strident examples of which are the Woodcraft Folk's commendable roles in bringing Czechoslovakian children to the UK as part of the Kindertransport effort during World War II and supporting striking miners during the strikes of 1984. In fact, the articles which interrogate Woodcraft Folk's link to other progressive movements such as the labour movement (p130) and the co-operative movement (p134) are the most interesting of all.

This book is an excellent resource for those who are looking for an introduction to the Woodcraft Folk or want to relive their past Woodcraft-related adventures and get ideas for future ones. Despite limited analysis and academic insight, the articles contained within offer illuminating snapshots into different chapters of the organisation's history and the wonderful variety of photographs, antiques and pictures make the book worth a read on their own merit.

The Reviewer

Dylan Wilby works at the Co-operative College, a member-led educational charity based in Manchester which aims at the promotion and support of co-operatives in the UK and abroad. He currently works with England's network of co-operative schools, organising events and providing training for school leaders. He attended a number of Woodcraft Folk camps and was an active member of his local Woodcraft group during his teenage years.