

Squatting in Britain 1945-1955: housing, politics and direct action

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Squatting in Britain 1945-1955: Housing, Politics and Direct Action

Don Watson

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In the mid 1940's tens of thousands of homeless and inadequately housed people squatted in Britain, representing a significant episode in social - and housing - history. In sheer numbers, at least, there is little in the history of housing campaigns to rival this social movement. Yet, like their post-World War One predecessors, and their successors in the 1970's, these squatters, most of whom occupied ex-army camps, have been paid very little scholarly attention.

Don Watson's book rectifies the situation with a detailed and meticulously researched account of the post war squatting movement. Watson is a historian and, in this tradition, he draws on documentary evidence, archive material, and oral history as well as published works to document the movement from its genesis, through its most active and visible period in 1946, through to the 1950s when thousands still occupied the camps but sometimes, by this time, with 'authorised' or semi legitimate status. In doing so, he highlights an important historical example of the ways in which people in severe housing need can respond to their conditions, and confront local authorities and politicians to shape policy. Watson has gathered sources from the National Archives, the Labour History Archive and Study Centre, the Mass Observation Archive, local archives, libraries, and heritage centres and records offices across England and Scotland, amassing a wealth of evidence. The sources on which his account is based include minutes of local council, Cabinet, and Communist Party meetings, government memos, circulars, and reports, correspondence (between squatters and local authorities, and between local authorities and Government), Mass-Observation records, theses, recordings of radio documentaries, memoirs, and press reports.

Watson is careful to locate the movement within the wider political and policy context throughout. Chapters 2 and 3, for example, are devoted to establishing the context, in the first half of the 19th Century, from which the squatting movement eventually emerged, particularly in relation to housing policy, practice and supply, but noting also working class political organisation and direct action (e.g. rent strikes). Watson does not rely on a simplistic 'housing shortage' explanation for the emergence of post-war squatting, but instead applies closer scrutiny, explaining in detail the character and cause of working class housing conditions by the 1940s. The housing consequences of industrialisation are a central theme and we are reminded that eradicating slum housing required consideration to wage levels which, for many at that time, would not support rents of better quality accommodation. Council housing rents were not, of course, always affordable to the lowest waged workers in those days. In these chapters Watson expertly interweaves a history of housing policy, collective action, and the housing demands of the political left, and the reader sees how these culminated in the squatters' movement of 1945/6.

Chapters four, five and six present a detailed account of squatting at the height of the movement in 1946-47, melding observation, documentary evidence and first-hand accounts to produce a rich picture of life in the squats - and in the squatted army camps in particular. But this is not a book just about the motivations and experiences of the squatters. Watson presents a comprehensive picture of this episode of social history, also detailing the role, actions and reactions of local authorities, national policy-makers, and related social and political movements and bodies. The subtitle of the book - 'housing, politics and direct action' - perfectly summarises its three key strands, which Watson expertly interweaves throughout. There is some interesting discussion, for example, of Aneurin Bevan's resistance to the demands of the squatters' movement to improve conditions in the army camps to temporarily alleviate the housing crisis, demands which had some public, press and political support. Patching up Nissen Huts to provide temporary accommodation

did nothing to achieve Bevan's goal of delivering high quality, affordable housing for the working classes, and in some ways undermined it by diverting resources, materials and labour away from the building programme.

Rare in scholarship about social movements and collective action, Watson highlights examples that have taken place outside key periods of high-profile activism. He notes, for example, squatting before the end of the war, particularly in Scotland, and devotes two chapters (seven and eight) to the period from the late 1940's to mid 1950's. By this time, many involved in the 1945/6 movement were no longer classed as squatters, having had their status legitimised when local authorities took over some of the camps. Some however continued to campaign and lobby, for example for better conditions and acceleration of the housing programme.

Those interested in squatting who already know something of the movement's activities in 1945/46 may be particularly interested in this account of squatting beyond 1946. Commentators without access to the archive Watson has comprehensively analysed have hitherto had to rely on material generated during high profile periods of activity (primarily press reports, some eye witness accounts and a few published papers). Watson's work is therefore a particularly valuable addition to current scholarship in this area, though he does perhaps take his critique of those who have previously written on the subject (e.g. Colin Ward, Andrew Friend) too far, in that they did not aim or claim to provide a comprehensive, scholarly, account of the squatters' movement.

Watson's scrupulous attention to detail is to be commended. He has mined what sources there are to maximum effect and the result is a thorough, balanced, and convincing discussion. Watson stays close to the information revealed in his sources, speculating very little beyond that (for example with regard to the rationale behind specific political responses to squatting - any discussion along these lines is always well referenced and justified) and guarding against drawing unsubstantiated conclusions. For instance, he neither overstates, nor underplays the impact of this squatters' movement on national policy, celebrating (and evidencing) their victories but noting the limitations of the movement also. It is only at the end of the book that his own personal and political sympathies become more apparent, as he ventures towards explicit critique of the Labour Party's (Bevan in particular) response to post war squatting, and the resistance to using army camps as temporary accommodation for homeless people specifically. Watson suggests that 'Labour at this point saw working-class people as the recipients of progressive government policies rather than active participants in them' (p179), explaining the Party's refusal to work co-operatively with the squatters. Though Watson does not romanticise the squatters, movement, he does explicitly depict those involved as having 'wide imaginative horizons when it came to assessing the solutions available for housing problems...[as] people in dire housing need [who] came to believe they could change their individual circumstances through acting collectively with others in the same position. In so doing, they challenged not so much the authority of the government as the assumption that it knew best" (p184).

Anyone with an interest in social movements, housing policy, working class history, political or collective action should read this book.

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