

Reviews

March On

Ann Pettitt, *Walking to Greenham: How the Peace-camp began and the Cold War ended*, Honno (www.honno.co.uk), 320 pages, paperback ISBN 1 870206 76 2, £8.99

Peace March 1981, or *Fredsmarsjen 1981*, to give it its original, Norwegian title, did not end in Paris on 6 August, after six weeks on the road from Copenhagen. It merely paused for breath, resting its weary feet, searching for someone like Ann Pettitt to take up the torch and carry it on. Later that same month, Ann and her friends set out from Cardiff for the gates of Greenham Common. The rest, as they say, is history.

Part One of Ann Pettitt's autobiography tells the story:

'... I was trying to help write a leaflet in someone's house in Kidwelly, about nuclear-free zones. I was feeling bored and stuck generally ... what was the point of your local town declaring itself a "nuclear-free zone" when what we were facing was the possibility of a nuclear war "limited" to Europe? My eye caught an item in a *Peace News* magazine that was lying open on the floor, about a group of women walking from Copenhagen to Paris to protest about this threat. I no longer felt bored or stuck. I felt terribly excited.'

Ann and a handful of other women in Wales set about organising their follow-on march. Caring for children, gardening, and all their other responsibilities had to be managed at the same time as they looked for places to stay, begged money, and gathered the vitals to sustain what became Women for Life on Earth.

Twenty and more years on, what was achieved, and why did Ann Pettitt do it? The short answer to the first question is rather startling: the end of the Cold War and the removal of some 'theatre' nuclear weapons from Europe. Ann has her own particular perspective on that sea change in world affairs. From Greenham she had journeyed to the Soviet Union to meet with members of the unofficial Moscow Group for Trust. She, together with a British and an American colleague, wished to discuss the Group's 'Appeal to Governments and Publics', which called for greater mutual trust between peoples East and West based on direct contact.

Subsequently, in the company of Dr. Olga Medvedkova from the Moscow Group, the Greenham delegation visited the official Soviet Peace Committee. The protests at Greenham Common were big news in the Soviet Union, where they were portrayed as directed against aggressive US militarism. But the Peace Committee hierarchy was unimpressed at Dr Medvedkova's inclusion in the delegation which brought first-hand news from Britain. She was subsequently arrested and convicted on a trumped-up charge, but given a suspended sentence, indicating some belated sensitivity to wider international opinion.

Mikhail Gorbachev, then a comparatively unknown Politburo member, surprised a visiting delegation from the British Communist Party ‘by describing the provocative behaviour of someone called Ann Pettitt who had visited with a Greenham “delegation” and had brought an uninvited person into an official meeting.’ Gorbachev suggested to the assembled delegation that they should keep their peace movement comrades ‘under better disciplinary control’.

Notwithstanding her personal notoriety, Ann Pettitt identifies Gorbachev as the man who broke the mould, and moved the world away from gathering confrontation and towards serial disarmament measures which encompassed the removal of cruise missiles from Greenham and, ultimately, the return of at least part of the base to common land. He ‘led the world out of the arms race ... a wise and honest leader, astonishingly undervalued’ by his own people.

Why did Ann answer the call of the Scandinavian women and keep marching for a Europe free of nuclear weapons? A deeper motivation seems to have been at work, borne of her parent’s wartime experiences in Northern France and, in particular, her father’s enthusiasm for the Soviet Union, which led him to make an unauthorised visit to Moscow in 1937. The person Colin had come to see had mysteriously disappeared. The implication is that he had disappeared in Stalin’s purges of the 1930s which engulfed millions of Soviet citizens. Six years later, in 1943, Solange, Ann’s mother-to-be, would taunt German guards in the northern French town of Tourcoing with cries of ‘Stalingrad’, as news spread of the Germans’ defeat there. The parents’ commitments and courage found their own particular echo in the daughter.

Ann Pettitt says she can’t quite remember how the Cold War ended. But she has given us a poignant and insightful account of the bits she can recall, which resonates strongly with the assault on life and liberty that is now our daily lot.

Tony Simpson