



Beyond Nab End

William Woodruff

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The second volume of Woodruff's memoirs starts with him having arrived in Poplar in the early 1930s. On spec he turns up at a steel foundry and luckily gets a job. His digs are with an old couple in Bow where he has to share a single bed (head to toe) with their mentally retarded son.

Life in the foundry is grim but William is indomitable. For recreation one day he cycles (then in the days before inflatable tyres) to Berkhamstead to try and track down an old girlfriend. She's not there and he has to return in a snowstorm - it takes him eight hours to get back to Poplar and then he has to get up three hours later to work at the foundry.

Eventually he decides to 'get some leernin' and his first white collar job starts for the water board in ... Brettenham House! He continues to pursue his studies, finally winning a place at Ruskin College, Oxford. How the ex-steel worker became an Oxford academic - and William's concluding description of returning from the war to meet the son he's never seen - is deeply moving.

Beyond Nab End Details

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Author : William Woodruff

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From Reader Review Beyond Nab End for online ebook

M.J. Johnson says

This is the second part of William Woodruff's compelling autobiographical account of his early life. The book continues on from The Road to Nab End and is just as readable. It describes his escape from unemployment in 1930s Blackburn by heading south for London, and how, after taking advantage of a few fortunate opportunities and with the help of some truly inspiring people, gets himself to Oxford University. Excellent.

Foxeroo says

Really enjoyed this book, it was so evocative, flowed well and took you to an era which seems like most of us could never survive in now.

Darla Ebert says

The riveting first tale of Nab End by Woodruff segued into Beyond Nab End and I felt I had stumbled over another treasure. It did not disappoint. I found SO compelling all the details of life in the veritable slums of northern England and then again in London.

It makes me want to go back and re-read the first book!

Sibyl says

I am currently re-reading this backwards.

It is several years since I first read this book - perhaps in a holiday cottage? But I was having a discussion with my daughter, currently studying GCSE History, about the meaning of propaganda and knew there was a vivid description of the writer as a young man on holiday in Germany, going to a Nazi rally becoming more and more disturbed by the behaviour of the crowd.

So I ordered the book from my local library and in trying to track the passage down was enthralled by the story of a young man from a working class background who had almost no formal education after primary school, but goes to work in London gets involved with left-wing politics and ends up studying at night school. From there he went to Ruskin College and finally applied to study at Oxford University. It was a journey that needed a lot of determination, and a lot of help from other people along the way.

The sad thing is that it would be impossible for a young man in a similar situation to make a similar journey now. William Woodruff's fees were paid by the London County Council.

Linda Fitzgerald says

I enjoyed this second volume as much as the first and it gave a real insight into the events leading up to the Second World War , some of which I was unaware . His life was sufficiently interesting to have warranted another book to follow this one! He would have certainly been on my list of 'people I would most like to invite to a diner party ! And I shall be investigating his other works.

John says

An exceptional autobiography. Woodruff's storytelling voice is superb, and his recreation of pre and post World War II England is vivid. I'll admit that the book was dry at points, but overall Beyond Nab End is extremely engaging and provides a fitting conclusion to Woodruff's journey from a young, North Englander in the working class to an Oxford educated man.

Alison says

I loved the first book in this series - a well-written link with the world of Grandad's stories of his youth. I like the way William wrote about the other people in his life - honest but not nasty - and his passion and dedication are to be admired. Not as stunning as the first one (maybe because Grandad didn't go to Oxford!!) but enjoyable, nevertheless.

Denise Flynn says

Loved it....wish I'd read the first book and plan on reading some of his other published works.

Judith Johnson says

An excellent read,in a voice still clear and present all these years on. What a wonderful writer this historian is - it makes you think about all the other young people, like my father-in-law, who left school early through circumstances... I look forward to reading William Woodruff's other books. A couple of my fave quotes from this one:

'As a constant visitor to the continent and a strong supporter of the League of Nations, he (Sir Alfred Zimmern) always had first-hand knowledge of the growing political crisis. He used to say: 'If children can decide how they will act together, why can't we?'

'As I stood among the showers of sparks and watched the workers toil, I couldn't help wondering how a 'sand-rat' could sweat his guts out and be paid very little for it; whereas if you studied workers - as I was

doing - you did very well. The farther one got away from working with one's hands - the work that made the wealth of nations , that gave us our daily bread - the better off one was. I had been brought up to believe that hard manual work paid - it didn't. None of the men I was look at would come to be known individually; they'd play almost no role in forming the opinion of their age; yet without them our world could not continue.'

Neophiliac says

"May you lead an interesting life" is the chinese curse. As I have noticed in other biographies the childhood and teenage years are packed full of tales but it gets to a point in life where although it may be a happy and fulfilling life there are few stories to entertain people. I'm afraid I put this book down during his time at Oxford and didn't get around to finishing it. I'll try to rectify that soon.

Susannah says

William Woodruff the historian who died in September 2008 wrote two surprise best sellers in his 80s - The Road to Nab End and this book, Beyond Nab End, the second part of his personal memoir. This is very readable book chronicling the time from when he hitched to London during the depression, worked in a foundry developing his political ideas, became educated through the WEA and on to Oxford where his studies were eventually disrupted by the second world war and where he also spent time pre war travelling in Belgium and Germany. It is a fascinating book to read - very evocative of it's times and it is difficult to put down!

Adam says

What he began with his wonderful "The Road to Nab End", William Woodruff continues in this, his detailed, personal, and very human portrayal of his years spent in London, Oxford, and elsewhere. As with his previous book, I had some difficulty in bringing myself to stop reading, forcing myself at the close of a chapter to lay the book aside and get on with my day. What Woodruff captures here is a decidedly British perspective on both class divisions and the stubborn tenacity of some in believing that these "divisions" do not have to divide and separate. Even if one is the son of lower-class weavers from the dirt and grey of Blackburn, life, love, education, and possibility can be experienced in profound, beautiful, and newly heartbreakingly ways.

We follow Woodruff as a sixteen-year-old into the factories of London, Woodruff as political aspirant (with necessary scholarships) into the halls of Oxford, Woodruff as a bonafide student deeper and deeper into his love for learning, and Woodruff as a fading pacifist into the fog of World War II. It is a journey that is at times alternately touching, embarrassing, frustrating, and inspiring, one which (particularly if the reader has traveled with Woodruff as a young boy in the pages of his earlier book) finds you hoping like mad for this young man.

As we find ourselves grasping for holds upon an increasingly slippery slope, we would do well to read books

such as these, honestly recounting the conflicted inner life of a world at war. Woodruff's account of his experiences preceding and leading through World War II serves well to remind the reader of several issues of grave importance, the first being Man's desperation to hold together some semblance of beauty in the face of such ugliness, and the second, ironically, being Man's tendency to paint faux beauty across the cannibal's face in order to justify the atrocity of war. Woodruff helps us to remember how blind nationalistic fervor can make us, and reminds us of the rampant danger inherent therein. Truthfully, only those of this generation can truthfully do this reminding, and they are fading quickly. Thankfully, even as those who walked through the darkness of world war are leaving this place, the accounts of their lives remain.

This is one account I will recommend without hesitation.

Anne says

As someone who has read a lot of memoir, "Beyond Nab End" and its precursor "Road to Nab End" are standouts, and it is almost beyond comprehension that William Woodruff wrote these in his ninth decade with such clarity and utter recall. In book 2, you the reader, are there with William as he struggles in London after arriving as a 16 year old with few prospects, and then perseveres until he makes it into Oxford, the unlikeliest of candidates. The sounds, the sights, the smells of everything are complete and Woodruff also demonstrates an understated sense of humor about everything he encounters. I particularly enjoyed his adjustment to Oxford in his stolen clothes as well as his trips into Nazi Germany during its rearmament phase prior to the outbreak of WWII. Never didactic, Woodruff who in real life was an eminent history professor, sneakily teaches his audience a great deal and pleasurable so. His personal website is maintained and worth perusal. 4.5 stars.

Jennifer says

This sat a long long time on my shelves after reading The Road to Nab End, and might well have sat longer but for a need for a book with a place name in the title for the library book café. Ironically, I can't remember the relevance of Nab End.

This book covers the period in Woodruff's life between leaving home for London in the early 1930s and passing his final Oxford examinations during WWII... with a quick run-down of his war which he had written about in another book... possibly the first volume of autobiography, but not the one which hit the jackpot with the public.

I found it a captivating story but rather sad somehow, as he leaves behind the ideals of his youth. He arrives in London intent on becoming a Labour MP, with seemingly no hope, and I am not entirely sure what he exchanges for that dream. He writes at one point of how marrying into the aristocracy would have been a betrayal of his class... yet there is a definite feeling of leaving his family behind for some reason that is unclear, not because they have grown apart due to the education and opportunities which have come his way. Other than that women in his book are vivid and varied (which I suppose accentuates the 'irrelevance' of his family) He makes, and this may be the appeal of his writing, some acute observations of every environment in which he finds himself.

Nova says

I read these books in the wrong order nevertheless really enjoyed them both. They are a true account of life in Lancashire during the economically hard times back in the 20s. The bottom is falling out of the cotton mill industry and life gets pretty desperate for the lower classes. They are well-written and hard to put down. I have a copy of Beyond Nab End to swap or sell but The Road To Nab End will be donated to the Waitakere Library as they don't have one.
