

Rezensionen

Weather Report

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Bill Ayers, **Fugitive Days: Memoirs of an Antiwar Activist**, Boston: Beacon Press 2009, 336 S., EUR 21,59, ISBN: 978-080703277-0.

Mark Rudd, **Underground: My Life with SDS and the Weathermen**, New York: Harper Collins 2009, 336 S., EUR 9,99 (pb), ISBN 978-006147275-6.

Susan Stern, **With the Weathermen. The Personal Journal of a Revolutionary Woman**. Edited and with an introduction by Laura Browder, Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press 2007, 440 S., EUR 19,99 (pb), ISBN 0-8135-4093-3.

Cathy Wilkerson, **Flying Close to the Sun. My Life and Times as a Weatherman**, New York: Seven Stories 2007, 416 S., EUR 13,99 (pb), ISBN 978-1-58322-771-8.

The American *Students for a Democratic Society* (SDS) was the nation's largest and most active radical organization in the 1960s. Deeply involved in the Civil Rights and peace movements along with numerous other leftist causes, *SDS* grew rapidly in the middle of the decade as it focused ever more on opposition to the growing American war against Vietnam. Mostly composed of white students from middle class or wealthy backgrounds, there were relatively few white working class activists in the American radical youth movement of the 1960s and even fewer among the *Weatherman* group that came out of the 1969 collapse of *SDS*. The few Black *SDS*ers from the early years generally left *SDS* by the mid 1960s and many of them then joined exclusively Black radical organizations. Rapid growth combined with open membership left the organization vulnerable to infiltration attempts by various Marxist-Leninist sects, while the shock of witnessing an increasingly bloody war abroad and facing increasing repression

by the government at home radicalized even the most moderate of its members by 1968. In 1969 the organization splintered into factions and collapsed, with many of the last group of national leaders moving into the *Weatherman* organization – so-called after they took a line from a Bob Dylan song “you don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows” for the title for their first position paper. They adopted a revolutionary rhetoric of “bringing the war home” and moved rapidly from aggressive street fighting to bombing as ways to do it. Although they were few in number after their first months, some of them rose to prominence as “America’s Most Wanted” criminals and the group has been the subject of several movies and many books.

This review essay focuses on the recently published (or in Stern’s case, republished) memoirs of four *Weathermen*, Bill Ayers, Mark Rudd, Susan Stern, and Cathy Wilkerson. One came from a Quaker-pacifist background (Wilkerson), another from a secular mainstream Protestant family (Ayers), and two from secular Jewish families (Rudd and Stern). Unlike a number of other *SDS*ers known as “red diaper babies,” both Rudd and Stern came from families that were not part of the Jewish-American leftist tradition, but both refer to their early exposure to the Holocaust and how their determination not to be like the “good Germans”, who did nothing to oppose it, shaped their politics.¹ All four were white and from upper middle class or wealthy backgrounds, but that was typical of *SDS* and the white radical movement in general.

Cathy Wilkerson joined *SDS* early in the 1960s and had a long career as an *SDS* activist and functionary before she joined the *Weathermen*. She was never quite part of the top leadership in either organization (though as editor of the *SDS* newsletter “New Left Notes” she was at the top of the second rank), but she often had close relationships with top leaders and was included in their circles. Susan Stern was a local *SDS* activist in somewhat isolated Seattle, but she was also involved in some of the major national demonstrations and activities of *SDS* and the *Weathermen* before she became a defendant in one of the better known conspiracy trials of the late 1960s. Mark Rudd came out of *Columbia University’s SDS* chapter and became a national leader of *SDS* just in time to join the top leadership of the newly formed *Weathermen*, but was later demoted and increasingly sidelined. Bill Ayers became active in the *University of Michigan* chapter of *SDS* only in the late 1960s, but was part of the group that set up the *Weathermen* and soon became one of its main leaders.

All in all, they provide a good sample of the *Weatherman* leadership and leading cadres so we have a good selection to work from. The two memoirs by Wilkerson and Rudd are self-critical political memoirs while the other two by Stern and Ayers are basically ego documents – memoirs recounting the author’s past in ways that put the author at the center of events in a heroic mold. The one thing that comes through clearly in all four of these memoirs is how the ongoing and escalating slaughter in Vietnam along with the increasing militancy of African-American radicals and their increasingly brutal

repression drove some of their opponents to ever more desperate measures to try to stop them. While the *Weathermen* were on the extreme edge, their desperation was shared by many others and none of the radical or liberal groups seem to have found a successful strategy to actually stop them.

Cathy Wilkerson was the oldest and most political of these memoirists. She came out of a Quaker pacifist family background that influenced her early politics and she joined *SDS* shortly after it was created in the early 1960s. She was an *SDS* activist on the local level and then held positions in *SDS*'s regional and national offices before she joined the *Weathermen*. She doesn't have the storytelling talent of some of the others, but she is by far the most politically reflective. As a result her memoir is indispensable for anyone who wants to understand the political evolution that transformed *SDS* from a moderately social democratic New Left organization into a radical one that eventually gave birth to the *Weathermen*. She has given it a lot of thought and she has read the other memoirs, talked the issues over with old friends, and gone back to the original documents and position papers before sitting down to write. As a result, she is able to make clear to the uninitiated reader just what the political thinking was behind each major shift along the way. In a sense this is the perfect antidote to Bill Ayers' great adventure story and Susan Stern's personal odyssey because here, it is politics and historical context, rather than good intentions or psychology, that explains what happened – not that she ignores her own background and psychology, but they don't drive events even though they sometimes explain her own choices.

Wilkerson was involved in virtually every aspect of *SDS*'s history, having begun as a member of the influential chapter at mostly Quaker *Swarthmore College* that produced a full crop of early *SDS* leaders (second only to the *University of Michigan* chapter that gave birth to the organization). After graduating, she worked in one of the more important of *SDS*'s community organizing projects in the mid 1960s before moving on to work in the *National Office* in Chicago. She was a campus traveler organizing chapters in the Washington DC area and she was also the editor of the *SDS* newsletter "New Left Notes" during much of the organization's peak and collapse. Furthermore she was an active member of the movement that comprised the early stage of development of second wave American feminism in the late 1960s, before she went off with the *Weathermen* and ended up in her father's townhouse when one of her comrades crossed some wires and blew it up – killing three of her comrades while she and another just barely escaped with their lives.

Feminism provides one of the more interesting aspects of her story. Though she doesn't really focus on her activities in the early Women's Liberation movement here, her analysis of her history in *SDS* and the *Weathermen* is informed by a strong sensitivity to gender issues. She is a very smart and talented woman who rose high in the ranks of leadership in *SDS*, but she never saw herself as a leader and generally deferred to a supposed intellectual superiority of her closest male comrades. Even though she was active in some of the earliest and most important of the Women's Liberation consciousness raising groups in Chicago and Washington D. C., she makes it clear in her

memoir that she suffered from a debilitating personal insecurity of a sort that was common among young American women and which the consciousness raising groups were first formed in part to overcome. Her insecurity combined with an increasing desperation to somehow stop the slaughter in Vietnam to alienate her from the developing self-confident feminist politics of some of her sisters, in part because they had begun to focus on women's issues to the near exclusion of any further activism against the war. Instead she subordinated her doubts about their strategy and tactics to follow some charismatic men and women into the revolutionary fantasy world of the *Weathermen*.

Like Susan Stern and Mark Rudd, Wilkerson is very clear about the brutal conformity and brainwashing of the *Weathermen* and like Rudd she is very critical of the group's self delusion and political miscalculations. Unlike Rudd, but like Stern and Ayers, she still has a tendency to claim on occasion that the *Weathermen* somehow played a positive role in inspiring a large number of others. But despite these lapses, she is usually very clear sighted about their failures.

This relatively long memoir covers a complex history very thoroughly and it is so full of richness and detail that it is difficult to summarize in a short review. But that is just a reason to recommend it all the more strongly to interested readers, and our short overview of the *Weatherman* story here can be more easily told in the review of the other three memoirs.

Mark Rudd's memoir might surprise some of those who knew him in the 1960s. As a very young member of the *Columbia University SDS* chapter he was never known for reflection and he rose to prominence there as the leader of an *Action Faction* that consistently put action ahead of thought (as opposed to a *Praxis Axis* group that had older and more politically sophisticated leaders).² But he has written a thoughtful book.

Like most of these books, Rudd's is well written and carries the reader along. He is skilled at describing personalities and personal interactions. And as a former devotee of action, Rudd is especially good at describing actions – be they the taking over of university buildings, student strikes, street fighting with police or the ways in which they organized their lives as fugitives after the *Weathermen* went underground. But he is also very good at explaining the background to these events. So not only do we get a vivid account of the 1968 *Columbia University* take-over, strike, and police brutality, when he was the head of *Columbia SDS*, he also provides a clear explanation of how *Columbia University's* collaboration in deadly military research, along with the University's exploitation of its neighbors in Black Harlem, led to the confrontation in the first place.

2 But we should note that by the time the *Weathermen* were formed a number of the better educated and politically more sophisticated leaders of the *Praxis Axis* joined them along with Rudd and his *Action Faction* colleagues. One of them, Ted Gold, was killed in the Townhouse explosion in 1970. The intellectual leader of *Columbia SDS* and Rudd's first mentor, Dave Gilbert, also joined the *Weathermen* and later ended up serving a life sentence for a bank robbery that ended in a shoot out which killed some policemen.

Ideology isn't Rudd's strong point but his description of the developing splits in *SDS* in 1969 is excellent. Firstly on the attempted take-over of *SDS* by the Stalinist-Maoist and later Trotskyist *Progressive Labor Party* known as *PL* and the formulation of an opposition under the rubric of a *Revolutionary Youth Movement* (*RYM*), but then also on the split in the latter between *RYM I*, which became the *Weathermen*, and *RYM II* which went on to become yet another Maoist splinter party. Unlike some of the other memoirists, he is critical of the adoption by all factions of Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and the abandonment of the basic principles which distinguished the New Left in America from the old. He provides a priceless description of the chaos at the last *SDS* convention in June 1969, with the *PL*ers and their opponents chanting slogans and counter-slogans at each other until the anti-*PL* factions finally abandoned the field and effectively split the organization.

Rudd became one of the leaders of the new *Weatherman* organization which resolved to have a "National Action" in the fall that would stimulate an uprising of young people, while taking revenge on the Chicago police for their brutal beating of demonstrators at the *Democratic Party's* "National Convention" in 1968 – an action that soon became known as the "Days of Rage", and which was denounced – by their *Black Panther* 'allies' as adventurist and suicidal [the *Panthers* thought that an anti-police riot by white radicals would inevitably spark massive repression against Black Chicagoans]. Rudd says that despite his longstanding commitment to action and street fighting he was convinced that this was a mistake, but that he was browbeaten and subjected to contempt by Ayers and others until he backed down. That matches reports of how Ayers and his allies had earlier dealt with opponents in *Michigan SDS* and is corroborated as well by the accounts of Stern and Wilkerson. The *Weathermen* engaged in extensive 'criticism/self-criticism' sessions that broke down any resistance to group decisions and Rudd is suggestive in his description of how this unwittingly reproduced many of the techniques of isolation, sleep deprivation, sexual initiation and group bonding that characterizes religious cults. The *Weathermen* added the practices of collective drug tripping on LSD and group orgies called "wargasms" to the mix.

Women's Liberation was in the air and the *Weathermen* adopted some of its rhetoric as well. One form of Women's Liberation in the *Weatherman* organization consisted of women taking up street fighting in a big way – as we see in the women's memoirs, nobody was more tough or macho than a street fighting *Weatherwoman*. But another form of alleged Women's Liberation took the form of a "smash monogamy" campaign that broke down loyalties within the group that weren't directed to the group as a whole. But Rudd makes it clear that for him and the other alpha males of the group "it meant freedom to approach any woman in any collective. And I was rarely turned down." (164) One consequence was the rapid spread of sexually transmitted diseases, known collectively as the "Weather crud".

By the time of the "Days of Rage" riots their number was down to a few hundred rather than the tens of thousands that their leaders had predicted would flood into

Chicago to fight the police. Discouraged but undaunted, they took to the streets and attacked. They battled the Chicago police, inflicted casualties and took even heavier casualties until they were jailed or driven from the streets. Rather than face up to this as a defeat, the *Weathermen* declared that they had been hardened and purified of their weaker elements. Then, in order to avoid facing heavy jail time for the riots and to prepare for armed actions, they decided to go underground and *SDS* basically ceased to exist as a national organization – though many local chapters continued to operate and the *PL* splinter kept claiming the name for itself. While Ayers passes lightly over this development Rudd is condemnatory, concluding that “the destruction of *SDS* ... was a historical crime ... my friends and I chose to scuttle America’s largest radical organization ... for a fantasy of revolutionary urban-guerrilla warfare.” (190f). “We were now a classic cult ... The rest of the movement hated us, which only confirmed the rightness of our path.” (184)

If the masses couldn’t be brought into the streets to fight, the *Weathermen* would have to find another way to “bring the war home.” They settled on dynamite. Rudd was demoted from the national leadership known as the “Weather Bureau” and joined up with the New York group. He says he didn’t participate in their first bombing attempt in New York at the home of a judge who was presiding over a mass trial of *Black Panthers* (though there is some reason to doubt that).³ In any case Rudd makes it clear that he and all of the national leaders knew about and approved the next plan, which was to set off an anti-personnel bomb filled with nails at a soldier’s dance near Fort Dix New Jersey.

When the bomb they were preparing went off prematurely – barely injuring Cathy Wilkerson and Cathy Boudin, but killing Terry Robbins, Ted Gold and Diana Oughton (Bill Ayers’ long term companion) – it was a fiasco. In retrospect Rudd notes that it would have been even worse had they succeeded in bombing the dance and killed and maimed a large number of off-duty soldiers and their girlfriends. The leadership reorganized with Bill Ayers, Jeff Jones, and Bernadine Dohrn taking firm control. The surviving leader of the more militant group took the blame for the townhouse disaster and was expelled, in what Rudd calls “a brilliant maneuver that successfully rewrote history. Suddenly no one remembered how universally accepted the old ... line was.” (215) The expelled faction leader defended his being made into a scapegoat by saying that promoting the revolution required that the leaders be infallible and he likened his role to that of the Old Bolsheviks in Arthur Koestler’s “Darkness at Noon”, who confessed to numerous crimes at the Moscow trials in the late 1930s rather than cast doubt on the party’s leaders. This is typical of the kind of megalomania that typified the *Weathermen* at the time and which still leaks through in some of these memoirs.

The leaders then decided to stay underground and keep on bombing, but they would only target buildings and avoid any human casualties. Over the next few years

³ He was never charged with the crime and if he had said otherwise he might have exposed himself to prosecution.

they set off bombs in the toilets of a number of prominent locations, including the headquarters of the New York City police, the *Pentagon*, and the US Capitol Building – all without causing any casualties but also without any real political value beyond outraging the officials of the Nixon administration and the *FBI*. Rudd is scathing about the decision to continue bombing, and rightly so, but one has to wonder if he would have been so critical had he not been first demoted from the leadership and then further demoted as part of the group responsible for the Townhouse explosion.

Still Rudd stuck with the *Weathermen* and participated in later actions, including the famous jail break when they helped Timothy Leary, the *LSD* pioneer and guru, escape from a federal penitentiary and go into exile. His description of his underground life and activities over the next seven years is still very interesting, but given the growing isolation and irrelevance of the *Weathermen*, it adds little of significance to the story already told. At least Rudd recognized their isolation and irrelevance, something Ayers and some of the others seem to deny even to themselves despite sometimes paying lip service to the reality. They seem determined to hold onto the illusion that what they did was somehow really important and had inspired thousands of followers rather than having alienated most of the rest of the left along with the rest of the country.

Then there is the story about a leadership coup in 1976 shortly before the end of the *Weatherman* organization which replaced the group that included Ayers and Dohrn. According to Rudd the group of victorious new leaders forced Bernadine Dohrn to confess on tape to various crimes against the people, including “naked white supremacy, white superiority and chauvinist arrogance” as well as with “denying support to Third World Liberation” and having “set out to destroy the women’s movement.” (279f) Rudd reports that on the tape she named Jeff Jones and Bill Ayers as her fellow criminals.⁴ Assuming that Rudd didn’t invent this tale, it’s a sad end to a sad story.

Susan Stern wasn’t part of the national leadership of *SDS* or the *Weathermen*, but she was a prominent activist in the Seattle area who identified with the *Weathermen* and was one of a group of activists known as the *Seattle 7* who were tried on Federal conspiracy charges after a riot in 1970. Her memoir republished here is also the earliest of these to be written, having been started while she was in jail in 1972 and first published in 1975. It is thus the most immediate and least historically informed of the memoirs. It is also the most personal of the lot.

Having begun as a fairly passive *Civil Rights* and anti-war movement supporter, Stern was first mobilized by a political feminism which spoke to her own repression and oppression. Shortly afterwards she got into drug use and it is clear that from then on she was heavily dependent on amphetamines and barbiturates – a dependency that helps explain the attraction for her of violent street actions and other forms of excitement. Along with drugs, sex provided a major stimulus and she recalls that at one point “sex motivated most of my political ventures.” (41) She also had something of a singing

4 Needless to say this incident seems to be one of many things Bill Ayers forgot when he wrote his book.

career, thereby rounding out the classic trilogy of 'sex, drugs, and rock & roll'. In fact, in contrast to most of the more political *Weatherman* leaders, Stern seems to have been an authentically radicalized hippy.

Her published memoir is weak on political analysis and her political development never makes much sense, but there is a hint in the introduction that suggests that this might be the fault of her first editors who were more interested in a commercially viable story than in her politics. Where Stern's account is strongest is in her personal approach to events, but this undermines the politics of her milieu. I'm no fan of the practice of engaging in the pseudo-psychological analysis of radicals (usually in order to avoid taking their politics seriously), but Stern's account makes psychological analysis unavoidable as she discusses her personal needs and how they were fulfilled by her political activities. Most radicals and *Weathermen* were not in fact lonely, sex and drug obsessed individuals who sought fulfillment through political activism, but that seems to have been the case with Stern. Politics and political collectives made her feel included and whole in ways that drove her political choices. She reports that projecting the persona of a "strong" woman helped her repress her own insecurities and her swaggering "in your face" sex work, and her attraction to macho street fighting rhetoric (and practice) clearly served this psychological function.

It was the street fighting during the police riots in Chicago in 1968 that energized her even more than feminism. While the *Weatherman* foundation document was "too long and too theoretical" (65) for her to read, she threw herself into the organization that promoted street fighting "and for the first time in my life was happy" (72). For Stern and some others, feminism and street fighting merged together as aggressive street fighting liberated them from their timid and frightened feminine 'good girl' personae and turned them into proud and free street fighting *Weatherwomen* with black leather jackets, clubs, and guns. Stern is very good at describing this process and in portraying the experience of street fighting, dealing openly and vividly with the adrenaline high she experienced through aggression and violence (a high that we might note fit well with her drug preference for amphetamines). Of course such a liberation through violence may also have appealed to mild mannered, middle class males as well as to repressed young women raised to be 'ladylike' – Bill Ayers wrote about his desire as a youth to be a tough lower class Italian-American instead of the well behaved, upper middle class WASP⁵ that he was in fact – both of these were playing out their fantasies of being tough.

Stern's description of her conversion to the *Weathermen* reinforces the religious cult-like description of the organization by Rudd and some others. She describes going through a sleepless period of doubt and increasingly high anxiety as she pondered severing her ties to her family and past, indeed to her own former self, in order to join the *Weathermen*. The stress built up until she reached a crisis and suddenly all was clear and

she felt at peace. Any historian familiar with 17th century Puritan conversion narratives will find this passage to be strikingly similar to those narratives of religious conversion. When she was expelled from the collective for lack of discipline, she internalized the rejection and wanted even more to be a member of the group rather than questioning the group's premises, so she engaged in an intensive self-reform in order to win readmission. She describes the excitement of the Days of Rage riots against the Chicago police and how the faithful convinced themselves afterwards that the disappointing turn-out and their being driven from the streets was really a victory because they had proved their courage and allegedly inspired thousands of others by their bravery. It was pure fantasy, but some of these memoirs show that their authors still cling to the fantasy.

She is particularly vivid in her description of the *Weathermen's* brutal criticism/self-criticism sessions and how their targets, including herself, collapsed under the onslaught with their egos completely destroyed and finally agreed with all the criticisms they had been subjected to.⁶ Stern's description of this process parallels those of Rudd and Wilkerson and lends credibility to Rudd's description of the breakdown and taped 'confession' of Bernadine Dohrn.

Stern is especially effective in her description of the "smash monogamy" campaign which she brings to life even better than Rudd and Wilkerson. Couples were forced to split up and have sex with others or face expulsion – and some male leaders took advantage of this to coerce women into having sex with them. Rudd says something of the same thing, though he denies any coercion and just says that he was rarely turned down. But Stern vividly describes an incident in the *Seattle Weather* organization communal house when she says she heard Rudd enter an adjoining sleeping area and pressure a woman who was in a monogamous relationship into having sex with him. Stern says her friend tried to ward him off with cries of "no, no, no, please don't" (176),⁷ but Rudd persisted in what would seem to have amounted to a clear case of rape. Somehow, despite her feminism, Stern seems to have accepted this and she remained loyal to the organization.

Even after Stern was expelled from the *Weathermen* for various infractions she continued to internalize their criticisms and to identify with the group that had expelled her. After the Townhouse explosion in New York, she and some other ex-*Weathermen* decided to go underground and carry on as if they were still in the group. She even describes going underground in semi-religious terms, as suicide and rebirth. But then she found the underground life depressing and pointless. As she wasn't really facing any heavy criminal charges at the time she soon resurfaced – unlike the better known protagonists like Ayers, Dohrn, and Wilkerson, who were on the *FBI's* most wanted list.

But soon after she returned to Seattle, she and six others (some of whom had been her political opponents and who had always opposed violence at demonstrations) were

6 There are lots of examples, but see especially the incident on p. 215 when she was the target and gave in.

7 Stern makes it clear that she hated Rudd, so her version of this episode may not be entirely accurate.

arrested and charged with conspiracy to create a riot at a demonstration that had turned violent several months earlier.⁸ As one of the *Seattle Seven*, she was in the middle of a trial process that became a media circus and she thoroughly enjoyed being a star at the center of it all. But she was on her way towards psychological collapse. She describes how she played at being a drugged out party girl (that is, she played at being a party girl, she really was drugged out and added a cocaine addiction to her drug repertoire) while secretly building bombs. After a while she suffered a nearly complete personality dissolution. Of course by this time she was long cut off from the *Weathermen*, but she continued to identify herself as a *Weatherwoman* – at least in her own mind.

It took three months in jail (for contempt of court, the conspiracy charges against the *Seattle 7* had collapsed when the prime witness against them admitted in court that he would lie to put them in jail) to get her off drugs and back to some semblance of sanity – at least for a while. While in jail she acknowledged her personal reasons for engaging in political activity, writing her best friend “I want to stand out in ... history ... My existence will have meaning only if lots of others know about it ... fame, immortality ... until I have it I will always be unhappy. I guess that’s the saddest thing about me, my fatal flaw.” (363) After she got out of jail in 1972 she had an unsuccessful love affair and then returned to her downward spiral. She became severely depressed and addicted to cocaine. She returned to making money as a stripper and then moved on to prostitution. She pulled herself together long enough to write and publish her memoir, but in 1976 she took a sauna after drinking and taking drugs – and died of heart failure at the age of thirty-three.

Bill Ayers’ book is very well written but it is a celebratory memoir focused on its author as hero and seems obsessed at times with his sexual adventures. It will be of very limited use to historians or anyone else who is looking for an accurate account of events, as Ayers suggests at the outset when he says it is “only one version of events” without any “pretence toward history.” An unwary reader might still think that is just a minor escape clause, but in fact it is the main approach Ayers takes to his story, mixing fact and fiction almost indiscriminately. He doesn’t just change some names “to protect the innocent”, he invents things, reverses and mixes chronologies, and puts himself into stories that really happened to others.⁹ It isn’t clear how much of this is deliberate invention and how much it is just the way in which memories are formed, reformed and reconstituted – or how many of his inventions and excisions are now part of the way he really remembers the events.

8 Of course Stern had worked hard to make sure that there would be violence, but several of the others were clearly innocent and they certainly didn’t conspire together.

9 For example he changes the date of a demonstration in Ohio putting it in 1968 instead of 1967, and he claims that he and his girlfriend were involved and arrested. He makes it a good story, and it is based on what really happened but in fact neither of them was there and he gets a lot of the story’s details wrong. In numerous other instances, when it comes to the sequence of events, he often gets it confused and places some events out of order in ways that make the reactions of the participants unintelligible.

In any case these details of factuality don't concern him, as he aims at a sort of 'higher truth' that he associates with fiction. While he successfully uses fiction writers' techniques to embellish his story and he recreates his own past as he might have wished it had happened, the result is more than problematical for historians – though historians interested in studying the ways in which memoirists use and distort the past may find this to be a useful example. It is also striking that he manages to write his story of the *Weathermen* without ever mentioning Mark Rudd, even though Rudd was a top leader when the group formed and even though Ayers does provide a fairly detailed description of the Leary jail break, where Rudd claims to have been a key participant while Ayers was not. For Ayers, Rudd seems to have become a non-person.

The unreliability of his version of the *Weatherman* story is bad enough, but for a supposedly political book, Ayers' uncritical approach is even worse. "Mistakes were made" he says using the passive voice, but he makes no serious attempt to explore what they were or why they happened. The *Weathermen* were indeed driven by good intentions in opposing a bloody war and an evil system, but for Ayers (unlike Wilkerson and Rudd) that seems to absolve them of all responsibility for anything negative they might have done.

Bill Ayers' personality comes through loud and clear in this book – both the positive and very likeable side, and the down side of what Diana Oughton called his Peter Pan aspect (92). His optimistic 'everything will be all right' attitude kept him going through hard times, but in the book it leads him to ignore some serious issues. He ignores the macho bullying of their fellow radicals both within and outside their faction. He idealizes the relationship between the *Weathermen* and the *Black Panther Party*, ignoring both the *Panthers'* sexism that features so prominently in Wilkerson's and Rudd's memoirs and the fact that the *Panthers* not only rejected the *Weathermen* as allies, they denounced them as adventurist and suicidal. These are just a few of the issues that are raised in the books by some of his former comrades in arms which Ayers fails to address.

All in all, Ayers' book tells an exciting and sex filled story that is a very good read, but given the mixture of fact and fiction, the reader can't be sure of the reliability of almost anything he says and it might better be treated as a work of fiction than as one of history.

Far less bloody than their European counterparts in the *RAF* and *Red Brigades*, the *Weathermen* were like them in being a product of a rapidly growing and increasingly radical student movement. And like their European counterparts, the *Weathermen* helped speed the disorientation, disillusionment and collapse of the movement to which it gave birth. Collectively these memoirs provide historians with a great deal of insight into the American version of this story.