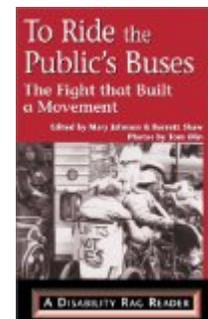


Mary Johnson, Barrett Shaw, eds.. *To Ride the Public's Buses: The Fight that Built a Movement*. Louisville, Ky.: Advocado Press, 2001. xiii + 188 pp. \$17.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-9627064-9-3.



Reviewed by Richard K. Scotch

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## Rights of Passage

*To Ride the Public's Buses: The Fight that Built a Movement* chronicles the decade-long campaign by the advocacy group American Disabled for Accessible Public Transportation (ADAPT) for access to public transportation in the 1980s. These grassroots protests were among the most important and visible political actions of recent decades, and helped to build the modern disability rights movement. The book, edited by Mary Johnson and Barrett Shaw, is a compilation of articles that originally appeared in *The Disability Rag* and the *Ragged Edge* magazine (publications for which Johnson and Shaw have served as editors) between 1983 and 1990. A newly written foreword by ADAPT organizer Stephanie Thomas and an epilog from 2001 are also included, as well as a number of excellent photographs of protests and movement leaders by Tom Olin.

Many people with disabilities rely on public transportation to get to work, go to school, shop, or meet with family and friends, and thus accessible public transit is a vital component of independent community life. However, bus and fixed rail

systems historically have not accommodated people who use wheelchairs or who have other mobility restrictions. Congress recognized this problem in the early 1970s with the passage of the Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1970 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which required local public transportation systems to make themselves more accessible by using lift-equipped buses that could accommodate wheelchair users and other people with mobility-related impairments.

However, following the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980 and a court challenge by the transit industry, the federal government backed off of its commitment to transportation accessibility, allowing local public transit systems the option of offering "special" paratransit services instead. Such paratransit services typically involved woefully inadequate pick up and drop off services with restrictions on when, where, and how often riders could travel. Paratransit systems in a number of localities also limited service to trips for certain purposes, such as for health care visits, that reflected a truncated vision of the lives

of people with disabilities. While some cities combined paratransit with buses equipped with lifts, those buses were often limited to a few routes, not maintained properly, or were operated without using the lifts at all.

The failure of local transit providers to offer accessible bus service led to widespread local protests by disability activists. Among the most successful of these protests were those in Denver, Colorado, led by individuals associated with the Atlantis Community, an independent living center, who took on the name ADAPT. Building on their Denver accomplishments, the protestors organized what grew into a national protest movement with chapters in many cities across the nation. In each city, ADAPT activists led campaigns to force their local public transit authorities to provide fully accessible bus systems, often engaging in nonviolent civil disobedience by chaining themselves to inaccessible buses, blocking traffic, or disrupting meetings. Members of ADAPT chapters also combined to conduct a sustained series of national protests at the regular conventions of the American Public Transit Association (APTA).

The ADAPT protests played a crucial role in changing local policies in many communities, and ultimately led to a renewed national commitment to accessible public transit in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Yet the significance of ADAPT's activities extended far beyond the area of public transportation. By recruiting, training, and mobilizing a network of grassroots activists, ADAPT helped create a national infrastructure for a cross-disability political movement. Along with independent living centers and other community-based institutions and periodicals such as the *Disability Rag* and *Mouth*, ADAPT and other movement organizations helped to integrate individuals and local groups into a national disability community. ADAPT has continued its activities in the past decade with a campaign to close nursing homes and restrictive state facilities for people with disabilities in favor of community-based con-

sumer-directed services that support independence.

*To Ride the Public's Buses* has the strength of good journalism. It provides fresh contemporaneous accounts of movement activities from large cities and smaller communities across the country. Through stories on individual incidents and movement figures, the reader can follow the trajectory of this struggle in successive chronological chapters from its Denver roots in the early 1980s through its ultimate national successes in 1990.

The limitations of a journalistic approach are also found in this collection. Apart from the brief foreword and epilog, there is no editorial attempt to explicitly tie the disparate news accounts together into a coherent narrative. Similarly, historical background on earlier struggles over accessible transit, and follow-up information on the aftermath of protests is missing, as is contextual material on key policy issues or individual or organizational participants. Historians and social scientists interested in the development of the movement will find short accounts but little broad analysis of tensions between local activists and national ADAPT figures, or between ADAPT and other disability advocacy groups such as the Paralyzed Veterans of America.

This book will serve as an important source on ADAPT and the fight for accessible transit, but it does not offer a satisfying explanation of the broader issues of accessibility and independence for people with disabilities. For those already knowledgeable about this era of disability history, however, *To Ride the Public's Buses* will provide a wealth of data in lively, readable text and visual images. Those new to issues of public transportation and disability will find a fascinating introduction that should lead them to further study. In either case, the book should be on the shelf of anyone interested in the history of the social movement of people with disabilities, or of how creative and dedicated activists can successfully confront unresponsive public bureaucracies.

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