



EDWARD THOMPSON

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Edward Palmer Thompson 1924–1993

EDWARD PALMER THOMPSON was born on 3 February 1924 near Oxford, the younger of two sons of Edward John Thompson and Theodosia Jessup Thompson. The household was high-minded and liberal. The father, son of Methodist missionaries in India, followed the family tradition, although he left the ministry in 1923, after twelve years in India and (during the Great War as chaplain) in the Middle East, where he met his wife, herself a Methodist missionary from a New England family rich in jurists and public servants, with its own missionary connection with the Levant. Edward sen., himself a writer, poet and historian, left India shortly before Edward jun.'s birth for a Fellowship at Oriel College, Oxford and, eventually, a University Lectureship in Bengali. India had been the main field of his missionary activity, India's national struggles were to be the main concern of his secular public activities, and India was also to be the major subject of his historical writings. The young Thompsons were to grow up breathing the atmosphere of Indian freedom, and probably better acquainted with the famous figures of the Indian independence movement than with those of British politics. Edward claimed that Jawaharlal Nehru, between spells in jail, showed him how to keep a straight bat.

That the younger Thompsons should, in the atmosphere of the 1930s, have extended the family liberalism leftwards to Communism, is not surprising. They were not the only children of progressive-minded parents, even in Oxford, to do so. Both Edward and his brother Frank, his senior by three years, grew up in that town, where they went

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to the Dragon School before Frank was sent to Winchester, from which he naturally passed to New College. For financial reasons the younger Edward was sent to his father's old school Kingswood, a Methodist establishment, which may or may not have a bearing on the fact, obvious from the references to Methodism in his later historical writings, notably in *The Making of the English Working Class*, that the tradition of John Wesley was not a part of the family heritage which he was anxious to make his own.

Frank's career at Oxford, where he joined the Communist Party, showed every sign of scholarly, literary and social brilliance. He volunteered for military service in 1939 and was captured and executed at the age of twenty-four by the Bulgarian government during the war while leading an SOE mission in support of the Bulgarian partisans. Edward co-edited the story of this mission and some of Frank's wartime diaries and lectures for publication in 1946 (*There Is A Spirit In Europe* (London)). Some of his poems were published in later anthologies of World War II poetry and one was used as a text for the official celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war.

Frank was important to his younger brother's life, not only because Edward was deeply loyal to family tradition, and indeed in later years integrated it into his historical research. He was to publish his father's letters to Rabindranath Tagore, investigated Frank's tragic wartime mission both in Britain and Bulgaria, and had made some progress towards a critical account of this still unclarified episode. It was also because Edward's relation to Frank was central to his development. It was, I think, a complex relation of admiration for and competition against a brother who, in life, had appeared as the more favoured and brilliant, and who by his death acquired the status of a hero and martyr of the war of anti-Fascist resistance. While Frank fought, Edward left Kingswood for Cambridge, where he stayed for a year at the then stolid and Tory Corpus Christi College before being called up in 1942. (The college, some of whose senior members showed minimal enthusiasm for the youthful Thompson, was eventually to make him an Honorary Fellow.) He served as a subaltern in the 17/21st Lancers in the North African and Italian campaigns, leading a tank squadron in the battle of Cassino. Like Frank, he had joined the Communist Party.

In 1945 he returned to Cambridge, where he met his comrade, colleague and lifetime partner, Dorothy Towers—also a youthful Communist—whom he married in 1948.

Although he did not know it, the pattern of his work as a historian,

writer and public activist was set in these immediate post-war years. For, though he completed part I of his Cambridge History Tripos, he chose not to continue his formal studies, but took an immediate degree, as was then possible for ex-service undergraduates. He spent his remaining year at Cambridge reading independently, mainly in the history and literature of the Elizabethan period. As the most cursory glance at Thompson's work shows, he was at least as interested in literature as in history. The two interests were all the more inseparably merged, because he saw himself primarily as a writer. His first publications, in a left-wing cultural review, were a short story and poems, and towards the end of his life he returned to publishing both poetry and fiction. Indeed, when the Communist Party established or formalised a number of 'cultural groups', he chose to be active in the Writers' Group rather than the Historians' Group, which flourished from 1946 to 1956. Although both Thompsons were members, he played no important part in the very active intellectual debates of that group. Nor was he associated until the late 1960s with the historical journal *Past & Present*, founded under the Group's auspices, only joining its Board, of which he remained a cherished member until his death, in 1969. Unlike his wife, he never undertook dissertation research. On the contrary, he deliberately rejected the option of a purely academic career as a university teacher, as he also spurned the metropolitan life. Like several left-wing ex-service graduates of historical or historico-literary bent at the time he opted for the provincial world of extra-mural 'workers' education, but not before the Thompsons had done their revolutionary duty in the summer and autumn of 1947 by helping to build the so-called 'Youth Railway' from Samac to Sarajevo in Tito's Yugoslavia. Edward commanded the British Brigade of a few hundred volunteers in this international enterprise, assisted by Dorothy as Brigade Secretary and Martin Eve, later Edward's publisher, as 'cultural officer'. His deputy, a left-wing Christian Fabian, recommended the West Riding as the place to go for the aspiring adult educator. That is where the Thompsons went.

The West Riding offered a more practical advantage, the support of an old family friend, Guy Chapman, then Professor of Modern History at the University of Leeds who, with Norman Gash, also provided research supervision for Dorothy. Though Chapman's support got Edward short-listed for a post as staff tutor in history and literature in the University's Department of Extra-mural Studies, it would probably have been insufficient to get him appointed. 1948 was the first of

several years when it was to become virtually impossible for a known and active member of the Communist Party to get a teaching job in or around British universities, although no attempt was made to remove those already in place in what Americans now call 'tenure-track' posts. Fortunately the formidable Sidney Raybould, then head of the department, was a strong believer in intellectual pluralism, and deliberately sought to find representatives of various points of view, however heterodox. Thompson may therefore have been actually appointed *because* he was a Communist, probably a unique case at that time. Still, those who recall the radiant charisma, both personal and intellectual, of the young (as of the older) Thompson, will not doubt that he interviewed wonderfully well. Politics apart, at the age of twenty-four he must have been a hard man not to appoint.

The West Riding was the Thompsons' base from then on. All their children were born there—Ben (1948), Mark (1951), and Kate (1956). For seventeen years Edward led the life of the adult education tutor, not all that dissimilar from that of the political campaigner which filled his spare time. He knew the 'unsocial hours' of the itinerant speaker, the endless journeys to and from evening classes in Hemsley, Otley, Dewsbury and as far afield as Middlesbrough, but also the hospitality, tea and comradeship of people engaged in self-education and good causes. His students, in turn, recognised that there was something special about what a future member of his Batley class described as 'a tall, rangy sort of fellow' whose 'nervous energy'—another contemporary impression—'was so abundant that he would pull constantly at his sweater till, before his students' mesmerized gaze, it was seen to unravel.' A surviving BBC film of Thompson passionately explicating a poem by Blake to an adult class, vividly recalls this phase of his career.

There is no measuring what his writings owe to his experience of life in what was still an old and barely reconstructed region of the first Industrial Revolution, not so far removed from the memory of the handloom weavers whose large-windowed cottages were still visible in the old textile villages. (To understand their history, he bought himself a loom and learned to weave.) It is characteristic that *The Making of the English Working Class* is dedicated to two of his working-class adult students, Dorothy and Joseph Greenald. Without the Yorkshire years the book might not, in fact, almost certainly could not, have been written.

Had it been published some years earlier, it might well have also been dedicated to the West Riding members of the Communist Party, a

strongly working-class organisation in a classic district of the old industrialism, who kept Thompson's liking and respect even after he ceased to share their loyalties. For eight years he was, to all appearances, a devoted and unquestioning Communist activist, a brilliant, handsome, passionate and oratorically gifted young man, plainly regarded by the party leadership as an obvious asset. During this period he wrote the first of his books for the party's publishing house, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955, revised 1977). In the summer of 1956 he suddenly emerged as one of its most prominent critics. Within a few months he was no longer in the party. For the rest of his life, though always campaigning on the left, he was to keep aloof from complete identification with any political party—even the Labour Party which the Thompsons joined in the early 1960s, over the resistance of party authorities suspicious of firebrands who had very likely not put their Marxism behind them, but refused to answer questions on the subject.

What drove Thompson into rebellion, together with other Communist intellectuals, was the failure of the British Communist Party to face the issues raised by Khrushchev in his denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in February 1956. There is little doubt that he, like some others had felt uneasy about some aspects of the Soviet Union before then, and about the *modus operandi* of the British Communist Party. Nevertheless, it is almost certainly wrong to suppose that many of them, and certainly not Edward Thompson, were potential dissidents waiting for an opportunity to secede. Indeed, the usual course for intellectuals who changed their minds about Marxism, Communist policy or the Soviet Union, had been simply to leave the party, as a succession of the student recruits to the party of the 1930s and 1940s had done since 1939. This course Thompson and his fellow rebels specifically disclaimed. The rebellion of 1956 was that of men and women whose immediate object was not to secede from the party but to reform it.

It seemed evident to many, perhaps most, members of the party's 'cultural groups'—certainly to the historians, who became the major centre of politico-intellectual dissidence—that Khrushchev's revelations about Stalinism, required a major and self-critical rethinking, both of the history of the Soviet and the British Communist Parties. Khrushchev had at least confronted the past, though spectacularly failing to make a satisfactory, let alone a 'Marxist', analysis of it. He had merely put the blame entirely on Stalin ('the cult of personality'). The

British Communist Party leadership refused even to admit the seriousness of the revelations, and insofar as it did so by implication, it resisted, and did its best to avoid and to stifle, discussion of them within the party. It was this refusal that drove hitherto loyal intellectuals into rebellion and was to convince Edward Thompson that a party structured on the centralist, orthodox and disciplined Marxist-Leninist lines of the Communist Party was politically and intellectually unacceptable. Together with John Saville, economic and social historian (and later Professor) at the University of Hull, he set up a small duplicated discussion journal within the party under the title, borrowed from an early nineteenth century publication designed 'to renew and reinvigorate a flagging Jacobin radicalism',¹ and patently chosen by Thompson, *The New Reasoner*.

After a few months the party suspended those connected with the *New Reasoner* from membership. However, by this time the invasion of Hungary by Soviet troops appeared to confirm the worst suspicions of the critics. The *New Reasoner* group resigned from the Communist Party, headed by Thompson, who increasingly emerged as its most eloquent and stylish spokesman, and—for the first time—a widely-known personage on the national intellectual Left. The *New Reasoner* re-emerged as a printed quarterly in 1957. Two years later it combined with another product of the ferment of 1956, the *Universities and Left Review* (animated by another ex-Communist-Party historian, the youthful Raphael Samuel, later father of the *History Workshop Journal*) to form the *New Left Review*, which is still in existence. However, Thompson's close association with the journal came to an end in 1962, when the *Review* was taken over by Perry Anderson and a group of younger Oxford Marxists, whose intellectual and political style was not his.

For some time after 1956 he made, or joined in, various attempts to establish a socialist position to the left of the Labour Party which failed, like the *May Day Manifesto* which he launched with Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall (1966). Neither were the various Trotskyist and Trotsky-derived groups and parties of the period to his taste. The British New Left after 1956 never managed to become a political force, as distinct from an intellectual one, nor did Thompson. Eventually, after a period of relative political quiescence in the 1970s, he was to discover a new political vocation in the revived movement for nuclear disarmament.

¹ B. D. Palmer, *E. P. Thompson, Objections and Oppositions* (London, 1994), p. 74.

ment of the early 1980s. In this movement he was to occupy a position of extraordinary prominence, somewhat analogous to that occupied by Bertrand Russell in the early stages of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) after 1958. The Thompsons had naturally been associated with the CND since its foundation, but only as local activists.

It is thus evident that Thompson's history and his politics are inseparable. He was and remained essentially 'The Historian as Activist'—to quote the title of a study of his work in the *American Historical Review*.² Nothing illustrates this better than the massive volume published in 1963 which—justifiably—made him famous almost overnight. *The Making of the English Working Class* is the exact opposite of a work written *sine ira et studio*. Indeed, few historical works have been written with so avowed, passionate and partisan a purpose, namely—in the phrase that instantly identifies itself as his—'to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" handloom weaver, the "utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.'

Like almost all of Thompson's works, it had outgrown its origins. Just as the 900 pages of *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* had started as a review of a long-forgotten book by an American author who had aroused his anger, so the 848 pages of *The Making* had begun as the first chapter of a textbook of British working-class history from 1790 to 1945. (The publishing house of Gollancz understandably decided to stick with what they got.) Similarly *Whigs and Hunters* was to start as a contribution to a volume of essays on eighteenth-century crime which he was editing with some of his former students. On this occasion the very bulk of the book added to its force.

A book written with such polemical verve and passion—'a long, sprawling, closely documented book which nevertheless has something of the point and vigor of a pamphlet', noted a (literary) reviewer³—might have been expected to meet a polemical reception, as indeed the Communist Thompson's book on William Morris had done. Yet, so far as can be discovered, only one serious reviewer (Gertrude Himmelfarb) dismissed it, at considerable length, as 'a tract that has all the appurtenances of conventional history'.⁴ Though the specialists' reception was

² M. Bess, 'E. P. Thompson: The Historian as Activist' *American Historical Review*, 98, 1, February 1993, 19–38.

³ J. Gross, 'Hard Times. "The Making of the English Working Class"', *New York Review of Books*, 16 April 1964, 8–10.

⁴ G. Himmelfarb, 'A Tract of Secret History', *New Republic*, 11 April 1964, 24–6.

far from uniformly favourable,⁵ few reviewers denied its sheer power and extraordinary impact. 'With the publication of this new book' the *New York Times*' reviewer—an established American social historian—held that the man who had been 'one of Britain's angry young socialist historians . . . showed every sign of becoming not just an angry middle-aged historian, but one of the leaders of the British historical profession'.⁶ Superlatives—'a work of commanding authority and permanent importance',⁷ 'a magnificent book, a book that will be read for many generations to come',⁸ came not only from the expected quarters, but from those who disagreed strongly with his views. One of the most hostile judges thought that what he regarded as Thompson's 'obsession may have helped him to write a great book.'⁹

Whatever the peer assessment, there could be no doubt of the book's impact on the less expert public. 'Mr Thompson has unquestionably arrived', wrote the same hostile reviewer. 'Students are not only reading his book—they are sometimes buying it—at three and a half guineas a time; the danger is that they may read nothing else.' The readership of *The Making* expanded with the growth of the (increasingly radicalised) student population of the decade. By 1968 Penguin Books chose to celebrate the publication of its thousandth volume by issuing it in paperback. It has never been out of print since.

The Making of the English Working Class changed Thompson's life. It turned him for some years into an official academic. In 1965 he was appointed to the new University of Warwick as Reader, where he founded and directed the Centre for the Study of Social History. The move to the Midlands—first to Leamington Spa, eventually to Worcester—also allowed Dorothy Thompson a more permanent academic career at Birmingham University and to continue her studies on Chartism, which her husband did not wish to duplicate. This is a major reason why *The Making of the English Working Class* was not pursued further into the nineteenth century, as one might have expected. Instead he extended his enquiries backwards into the eighteenth century, which

⁵ For contemporary negative criticisms, cf. R. Bendix in *American Sociological Review*, 30(4) August 1965, 605–6; R. K. Webb in the *Massachusetts Review*, 6(1) Autumn–Winter 1964–5, 202–8; 'The Making of the English Working Class?' (1965) in R. M. Hartwell, *The Industrial Revolution and Economic Growth* (London 1971) pp. 361–76.

⁶ H. Ausubel, 'The Common Man as Hero', *New York Times Book Review*, 26 April 1964, 44.

⁷ J. Gross, 'Hard Times', loc. cit., 10.

⁸ S. Thernstrom, 'A Major Work of Radical History', *Dissent*, XII, 1, Winter 1965, 90–2.

⁹ J. D. Chambers, 'The Making of the English Working Class', *History*, LI (1966), 183–8.

was henceforth to be at the core of his research interests. He did not totally abandon the nineteenth century, but his publications in this area are not central to his work.¹⁰

From a scholarly point of view Thompson's years at Warwick were remarkably fruitful. Starting with the influential studies on 'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism' and 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', (1967 and 1971 respectively) he began to lay the foundations for a far-reaching reconsideration both of pre-industrial society and, in effect, of his own historical perspectives, which were to be brought together in a work to be called *Customs in Common*, to which he looked forward from the early 1970s. Equally important, certainly from Thompson's point of view, Warwick gave him the opportunity of teaching and working with a group of research students, which was to produce both his own third book, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origins of the Black Act* (London 1975) and the volume of his and his students' studies on eighteenth-century crime, for which it had originally been intended, *Albion's Fatal Tree* (London 1975).

A number of papers in this general field were published during the early and mid-1970s, notably 'Patrician Society, Plebian [sic] Culture' (*Journal of Social History* 7, Summer 1974), 'The Web of Inheritance', an introduction to the volume *Family and Inheritance* (Cambridge, 1976), edited by Thompson, Jack Goody and Joan Thirsk, the report of an earlier *Past & Present* conference, 'Folklore, Anthropology and Social History' (*Indian Historical Review*, III (2), 1977), originally given to the Indian Historical Congress in 1976¹¹ and 'Eighteenth-Century Society, Class Struggle Without Class?' (*Social History*, 2/2, May 1978, 33–65.) Other studies remained at the seminar stage, or were not published in English.¹² The discovery of folklore and folklore studies, neglected in *The Making*, soon becomes evident, as does the stimulus of social anthropology, which fertilised so much British historiography in the 1950s and 1960s, but also his reservations about the directions of some practitioners of that discipline.¹³

¹⁰ e.g. E. P. Thompson, 'The Political Education of Henry Mayhew', *Victorian Studies*, 11 (1967); E. P. Thompson and Eileen Yeo (eds.), *The Unknown Mayhew: Selections from the Morning Chronicle 1849–50* (London, 1971).

¹¹ Both are reprinted in E. P. Thompson, *Persons and Polemics* (London, 1994), the latter under the title 'History and Anthropology'.

¹² 'Rough Music: *le charivari anglais*', *Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 27, 1972.

¹³ Cf. 'Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context', a review of works by Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas, in *Midland History*, 1 (3), Spring 1972, 41–55.

It was also during these years that he entered the mainstream of professional history, as a member of the editorial board of *Past & Present* and as a pillar of the international Round Tables on Social History, organised by the Paris *Maison des Sciences de l'Homme* (*MSH*), which met irregularly in Paris and in other European academic centres, bringing together established and often prestigious scholars from the United States of America and three or four European countries with rising talent. That brilliant impresario of the intellect, Clemens Heller, who (under the supportive leadership of Fernand Braudel) had turned the *MSH* into a major centre of international scholarly exchanges, recognised both the moment for internationalising the field of 'social history', and that Thompson was central to it. He was not easily convinced to enter the milieu of international academic colloquia and conferences which was far from his usual habitat, nor was he a natural cosmopolitan, still less at ease with some styles of discourse popular on the continent. I recall the luncheon at which Heller (who had come to London specially for the purpose) successfully persuaded him to join the enterprise. By 1976 the Round Tables had exhausted their initial field of discussion—the history of the working classes in the more general context of class relations—and shifted into the region where history, social anthropology and *Volkskunde* meet, before fading away. In this they paralleled Thompson's own development during the 1970s. These were also the years when, thanks to a perceptive and understanding editor, Thompson acquired, for the first time, a wider platform than that of the inward-looking socialist Left for his views on public affairs. To the weekly journal *New Society* he was, for several years after 1967, to send—usually to be collected from the last possible train arriving in London before, or sometimes after, the deadline—some of his most eloquent denunciations, several of which were republished as *Writing by Candlelight* (London, 1980). On the basis of these one might safely regard him as one of the very finest writers of English polemical prose, 'the best political essayist today in the tradition of Swift, Hazlitt, Cobbett and Orwell.'¹⁴

His spell at Warwick came to an end in 1972, with a public flourish. He resigned after a conflict between students and the university administration, whose offices were occupied. The documentation found there appeared to show that university officials were monitoring the political activities of students and staff, as well as other more serious interfer-

¹⁴ B. Crick, 'Thompson and Liberty!', *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 11 May 1980.

ences with civil liberties, not least those of American visitors to the Centre for Social History. Though Thompson's view of the contemporary student ferment was far from uncritical, he plunged into action, using the material discovered to edit an instant denunciatory Penguin book with a self-explanatory title: *Warwick University Ltd: Industry, Management and the Universities* (Harmondsworth, 1970). The episode sharpened Thompson's sense of civil freedoms under threat from encroaching authority, to which he was to give frequent and powerful expression in his writings on public matters in this decade. He increasingly devoted his pen to the defence of Common Law and Constitution.

However, even before the crisis at Warwick, Thompson had decided to resign from the university. He was never at ease with organisations, structures and timetables: his preference was for friendships, informality and the surge of movements, although for his juniors even the friendship and informality of this large man with 'wild, prematurely greying hair' who 'looked like he had just strolled in from the moors' could be formidable. There is a Blakean air to the description by one of them: 'He was intense and energetic and had piercing eyes.'¹⁵ At all events he turned, with relief, 'to pursue the career which he had always wanted, of freelance writer',¹⁶ varied by occasional spells of teaching in universities, mainly in North America.

Two things now made this easier: Dorothy's full-time appointment at the University of Birmingham, and his mother's death, which provided the means for buying the splendidly-named Wick Episcopi, a tree-flanked eighteenth-century country house with a vista over Worcestershire pastures across a ha-ha. Furnished for comfortable living in unaffected taste, it was to become the Thompsons' lasting home. Some time earlier he had also come to rent a spectacularly inaccessible and primitive ancient Welsh farmhouse on a mountainside of equally spectacular beauty overlooking Cardigan Bay, from the architect and environmentalist Clough Williams-Ellis, who loved to collect intellectuals as part-time tenants. To Hafotty the Thompsons retreated from the tensions of English life by means of a hard-wearing Land Rover. These are the settings in which his friends like to recall him: angular, craggily handsome, already, like many other large men in middle age, slightly bent forward, gardening in Wick—as he did to the last, when health permitted—or pottering about the forecourt of Hafotty, reporting on his

¹⁵ Cited in Palmer, *E. P. Thompson* p. 104.

¹⁶ From a memorandum by Dorothy Thompson.

latest sighting of the local hen harrier. In both places the Thompsons welcomed friends from far places—and for most of their friends both Wick, and, notoriously, Hafotty, were far and not easy to reach—with easy hospitality. Both were working homes, though only Wick held Edward's very substantial primary and secondary libraries. He visited other archives and libraries as animals on the veldt go to water-holes: intermittently, out of necessity though with profound enjoyment. They were not his regular habitat. Big cities, even those with Public Record Offices and British Libraries, were places to visit, not for living.

It is not easy to say how and why these extraordinarily fruitful years in Thompson's intellectual life came to an end sometime in the later 1970s. What is clear is that, some time before 1979, when he was to plunge full-time into the anti-nuclear agitations, the eighteenth-century studies, into which he had entered with such zest, began to mark time. For a time much of his energy was pre-empted by a lengthy settling of accounts with the writings of Louis Althusser, then surprisingly influential on the young intellectual Left. The results were published, together with important earlier intra-Left controversies—notably Thompson's historically powerful critique of Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, 'The Peculiarities of the English'¹⁷—as *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London, 1978). The reasons why Thompson turned aside from his researches to fight a major ideological battle against this antagonist, are not clear. They are probably to be sought in his acute sense of isolation from the intellectual young of the 1960s New Left, to which he gave expression in a moving interview in 1976.¹⁸ There can be no question of Thompson's passionate outrage at the fashions then capturing the radical young. Still, even if *The Poverty* contains some of Thompson's most interesting reflections on the nature of the historical project, it is a pity that he did not let himself be diverted by those who tried to convince him that his work on the eighteenth century was more important than the demolition of a philosopher who would in any case soon drop out of ideological sight. When he returned to the eighteenth century at the end of his life, he had a decade of scholarship to catch up, other topics—Blake and the days of the young Wordsworth—competed for his interest, and much of the original *élan* of his plunge into pre-industrial society had been lost. He

¹⁷ Originally published in the *Socialist Register*, 1965, 311–63.

¹⁸ Interview with E. P. Thompson in *Radical History Review*, 3, Fall 1976. It is reprinted in *Visions of History. Interviews with E. P. Thompson et al.* (New York, 1984).

was too ill to recover the lost impetus of the 1970s. In the form finally published, *Customs in Common*, in spite of all its many brilliancies, could be described as 'a mélange of four previously published works (and a very long . . . reply to critics of the "moral economy") as well as two unpublished "road papers" pulled out of his academic hat . . . a somewhat awkward sum of its parts, overdeveloped here, underdeveloped there.'¹⁹ It remained a torso, a master's 'work in progress', but not a new masterpiece.

However, from the end of 1979 both history and socialist ideological argument of the old type dropped into the background, as the cause of nuclear disarmament took over Thompson's life for the next five years. During this period he wrote extensively but almost exclusively on the dangers of nuclear war,²⁰ which, through the European Nuclear Disarmament Appeal (END) he did his best to detach from the debates between East and West. The proposal to station a large number of missiles of a new type on European soil had revived the flagging anti-nuclear movement. How far the great peace-movements of the early 1980s contributed to ending the Cold War remains a matter of debate. However, this is perhaps to read history backwards. The issue that mobilised so many at the time, was not, in the first instance, ending the Cold War, but the sudden mutual escalation of nuclear armament which appeared to bring the globe once again to the edge, and perhaps over the edge, of nuclear extermination.

This was certainly Edward's view. Nothing, he felt, could now be more urgent than the fight against what he called 'the doomsday consensus'. In the course of these years he became, as never before, a public figure: the most powerful voice and pen of the anti-nuclear movement in his own, and in some other countries. From 1980 to 1985 he drove a powerful physique to the limit, endlessly criss-crossing the frontiers of 'nineteen or twenty different countries',²¹ speaking, writing, arguing, being seen. Hundreds of thousands grew familiar, in the giant demonstrations of the early 1980s, with his dramatically rock-ribbed look, the flying hair (now white), the passion exploding in voice

¹⁹ 'Proto-nothing', review article by D. Levine, *Social History*, 18(3), October 1993, 382.

²⁰ E. P. Thompson, 'Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilization', *New Left Review*, 181 (1980). Several of his writings were reprinted in *Zero Option* (London, 1980), *Double Exposure* (London, 1985), *The Heavy Dancers* (London, 1985), EPT (ed.), *Star Wars* (Harmondsworth, 1985), EPT and Dan Smith (eds.) *Protest and Survive*, (Harmondsworth, 1981), EPT *et al.* *Exterminism and Cold War* (London, 1982).

²¹ E. P. Thompson, *Persons and Polemics* (London, 1994) p. 360.

and gesture, in short, the sheer star quality of his public presence, of which he was not unaware. Millions more learned to recognise them through the cameras of the mass media. Those were the years when public opinion polls placed him among the Britons most admired by their contemporaries, and perhaps for a time, among the men, the most admired. (The Queen, the Queen Mother and Mrs Thatcher continued to run ahead of him.)

By the middle of the 1980s the danger of immediate nuclear crisis seemed to have receded. In any case the missiles against which the movement had mobilised, were now installed. By 1985 Thompson's 'total immersion in the peace movement was easing' and he was struggling, doubtfully ('if, or as, I return to my trade' he wrote late in that year²²) to find his way back to history. But by this time his health had begun to give way.

He himself put down its initial deterioration to 'some bug' he had picked up at a conference in New Delhi. But, in any case, his constitution had probably been pushed beyond its limits during the years of campaigning. He was in hospital for much of the winter of 1987. The collapse of his health became obvious in the next years, during the lecturing visits abroad which the Thompsons' financial situation increasingly made necessary. (After Warwick they could rely only on Dorothy's academic salary supplemented by Edward's literary earnings, mainly the continuing, but hardly life-supporting, royalties from *The Making*.) Illness in Canada in 1988, and a further spell in a New Jersey hospital in 1989–90 revealed, or added to, the extent of his physical breakdown. From then on, increasingly immobile in England, in and out of hospital, the flame of his mind and passion playing round the prematurely aged ruins of his body, he lived at death's door, but refused to die.

His physician, he reported, thought that 'I evidently must have some mission in the world still, since I have narrowly escaped death twice'.²³ He had. He was surrounded by fragments of uncompleted projects, lectures intended to turn into books, or plans postponed: *Customs in Common*; his book on William Blake (with Marx, William Morris and Vico the inspiration of a lifetime); the period of the early Romantic poets (subject of a brilliant set of Northcliffe Lectures in 1982); the enquiry into his brother's death. He even branched out into new projects: India, his father's relations with Rabindranath Tagore, which

²² Palmer, *E. P. Thompson*, p. 141; EPT, *Persons and Polemics*, p. 361.

²³ Palmer, *E. P. Thompson*, pp. 143–4.

produced an 'unbidden and unplanned book' published shortly before his death,²⁴ even the case of Sampson Occum, an American Indian whose struggles to reclaim customary native lands in the American revolutionary era, he had chosen in 1988 as the subject of the Herbert G. Gutman memorial lecture in New York. One must agree with the friend who writes 'his last years were a self-imposed and, one suspects, pressured commitment to finish up a series of writing projects.'²⁵

By the time he died, he had published *Customs in Common* (London, 1991) and the Tagore Book; the Blake book, *Witness Against the Beast* was about to come out (London, 1993) (shadows of what they might have been, but still). He had collected together such of his papers as he wished to preserve, *Persons and Polemics* (London, 1994), and had made what arrangements were possible, for the remaining projects. Before his health broke down finally, he had also managed to publish his only novel, *The Sykaos Papers* (London, 1988), a Swiftian satire on a dark world. He knew he had no time for more. Fortunately he had time to demonstrate the victory of spirit over physical ruin in a moving television film of the two Thompsons at Wick, made by a friend, *A Life of Dissent*. He died, a few days after returning from hospital for the last time, peacefully in his garden at Wick on 27 August 1993.

How can we assess Thompson's achievement? He was many things, but he will be remembered longest, as he probably would have wished to be, as a historian.

First, the quite extraordinary impact of his writings must be noted. The *Arts and Humanities Citations Index* recorded him (for the period 1976–1983) as among the 100 most-cited twentieth-century authors in any field covered by the Index, and the most cited of the four names in the list described as 'historians'. The early 1980s almost certainly saw him at the peak of his fame, but, to judge by the *Social Sciences Citations Index*, in which he also figures very prominently, his then published historical writings maintained virtually the same rate of citation for the rest of the decade, and probably fell no more than five per cent below it in the first half of the 1990s.²⁶ Moreover, in his

²⁴ *Alien Homage: Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi, 1993).

²⁵ Palmer, *E. P. Thompson* p. 150.

²⁶ I am obliged to Ms Lise Grande for these calculations. The figures for 1995 are estimates based on the citations through April 1995, the last available at the time of writing. The works counted are: *The Making of the English Working Class*, William Morris (reprinted 1977), *Whigs and Hunters* (1975) and Thompson's articles in *Past & Present* (1967 and 1971), the *Journal of Social History* (1974) and *Social History* (1978).

lifetime a substantial number of studies took his work and thinking as their subject: an unusual situation for historians not yet in their grave.²⁷

Much of this is due unquestionably to his exceptionally enthusiastic reception in the United States, where even the official academy welcomed him with fewer hesitations than in his own country, as is indicated by his election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1979, before the British Academy in 1992. Nevertheless, his influence was greatest and most immediate among the radical young scholars then flocking into the explosively growing field of 'social history'. The initial reading of *The Making* 'resonated perfectly with the hopes of a generation of radical scholars that common people could make their own history, and that sympathetic historians could write it using such imaginative tools as reading upper-class sources "upside down", pursuing oral history of the living, and "decoding" behaviour of the dead.' Even for those in the social sciences outside the narrowly historical field, 'he sent a quenching shower of spring rain across a parched landscape.'²⁸

His considerable impact on historians, political scientists and notably on sociologists, was by no means confined to the United States and Britain, where he was described as 'the historian of the sociologists'.²⁹ (A 1988 survey of the field of sociology cited him in five out of its twenty-two sections, though, oddly enough, not in that on 'Social Movements'.³⁰) In spite of its purely English subject and the enormous costs of translation, *The Making*—described by a Spanish historian as

²⁷ Among others: A. Dawley, 'E. P. Thompson and the Peculiarities of the Americans', *Radical History Review*, 19, Winter 1978–9, 33–59; B. Palmer, *The Making of E. P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism and History* (Toronto, 1981); C. Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle* (Chicago, 1982); also 'E. P. Thompson and the Discipline of Historical Context', *Social Research*, 61(2), Summer 1994, 223–4; E. K. Trimberger, 'E. P. Thompson: Understanding the Process of History', in T. Skocpol (ed.), *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 211–43; S. Desan, 'Crowds, Community and Ritual in the Work of E. P. Thompson and Natalie Davis', in L. Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1989), pp. 47–71; H. J. Kaye and K. McLelland (eds), *E. P. Thompson. Critical Perspectives* (Philadelphia, 1990); M. Bess, 'E. P. Thompson: The Historian as Activist', *American Historical Review*, 98(1), February 1993, 19–38. H. J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis* (Oxford, 1984) deals at length with EPT.

²⁸ A. Dawley, 'E. P. Thompson and the Peculiarities of the Americans', *Radical History Review*, 19, Winter 1978–9, 39.

²⁹ A. Giddens, 'Out of the Orrery: E. P. Thompson on Consciousness and History', in *Social Theory and Modern Sociology* (Stanford, 1987), p. 203.

³⁰ N. Smelser (ed.), *Handbook of Sociology* (Newbury Park; Beverly Hills; London; New Delhi, 1988).

'possibly the most imaginative work produced by European social history' made its way across the Channel. In France Pierre Bourdieu made himself Thompson's champion, as did *Le Mouvement Social*; in Germany his influence on the new field of 'Alltagsgeschichte' came through Hans Medick and his colleagues at the Max Planck Institute for History in Göttingen; while Spain (where university radicalisation in the last years of Franco had stimulated interest in all historians associated with the Left) published him as soon as the dictator was in his grave. In India his writings helped to inspire the subsequently influential 'subaltern school'. Indeed, interest in his work was such that local enthusiasts collected together and published his smaller historical studies long before he himself came to do so in *Customs in Common*: in 1979 in Spain, in 1981 in Italy, in 1980 in Germany.³¹

For Thompson's scholarly influence was (and remains) far from confined to *The Making*, though his reputation among the wider public is virtually identified with this book, which, indeed, towers over the rest of his work. From 1975 the citations of his other historical writings, notably of the influential 1967 and 1971 *Past & Present* papers, always outnumbered the references to the major work, and by a widening margin.

Secondly, intellectually Thompson remained a controversial figure throughout, though few who knew him as a person, however exasperated, resisted his warmth, his charm, his humour, or even a detectable element of puzzled vulnerability. His death was probably received with more personal grief than that of any other British historian of his time.

He made enemies on political grounds, though, oddly enough, not in the proverbially acrimonious universe of discourse of the ideological Left, where he found the targets for some of the heaviest salvos of his intellectual artillery, without ever losing the admiration of his adversaries and victims. Some (and it should be said, only *some*) of those who stood to the right of Thompson politically, found it difficult to admit, or at least publicly to recognise, the stature of a man with whom they disagreed so strongly. For Thompson did not do much to discourage his image as the radical outsider. His relation both to the everyday

³¹ E. P. Thompson, *Tradición, revuelta y conciencia de clase: Estudios sobre la crisis de la sociedad preindustrial* (Barcelona, 1979); *Plebeische Kultur und moralische Ökonomie. Aufsätze zur englischen Sozialgeschichte des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts* von Edward P. Thompson, ausgewählt und eingeleitet von Dieter Groh (Frankfurt, 1980); E. P. Thompson, *Società patrizia, cultura plebea: Otto saggi di antropologia storica sull'Inghilterra del Settecento* (Turin, 1981).

world of university and politics was spiny. For some his life as a free scholar might even look like 'self-imposed exile in Worcester'.³² He was a non-conformer by instinct, who refused to let his name go into *Who's Who*. Such men tend to attract controversy and do nothing to repel it.

A third observation arises from the nature of Thompson's intellectual production: a unique, and uniquely impressive, but never wholly controlled, amalgam of poetic intuition and empathy, a high-powered intellect, passion, and words. He was both an analytical and a romantic historian, a sort of English Michelet on a more modest scale. Though he had the true scholar's hunger for script and print ('As I passed the New York Public Library this morning', he told an audience in 1985, 'I felt a knife inside me—the sense of how long it was since I had been able to work . . . there'³³), as a researcher he was more like a pioneer explorer or a tracker pursuing sometimes convoluted trails, than a cartographer. His voyages of discovery were neither planned from the outset nor—except in a stylistic sense—finished. Not by chance his most powerful arguments, like his books, began as *pièces d'occasion*.

That is why an assessment of his historical work is unusually difficult. Thompson's influence was pervasive, but he formed no 'school', and such 'schools' as tried to narrow his work for their own purposes, as by turning him into a 'culturalist', oversimplified the complexities of his thought. He had no 'disciples', although some important American scholars such as the late Herbert Gutman, transformer of United States labour history, derived their ideas directly from him, and some of his concepts, for example, that of the 'Moral Economy', inspired important work elsewhere.³⁴

He was essentially an opener, not a closer, of horizons and arguments. Not a single proposition of *The Making* has gone unchallenged, and few scholars today would simply subscribe to its argument, even supposing that we can formulate it precisely. Even some of his earliest admirers thought his account debatable or incomplete. And yet it was immediately seen as 'a landmark in historiography' in which he 'has

³² P. Flather in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 20 February 1981.

³³ E. P. Thompson, *Persons and Polemics*, p. 360.

³⁴ H. G. Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, edited by Ira Berlin (New York, 1987), esp. pp. 18–22; J. C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, 1976). For a more general survey, Dawley, *op. cit.* (see n. 27, above) and R. Wells, 'E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common and Moral Economy*', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 21(2), January 1994, 263–307.

rearranged history'.³⁵ And this must also remain the consensus of judgement today.

His major contribution is as the historian of the world as seen and experienced by the poor and the obscure, a task which required both imagination, empathy, the scholar's erudition and capacity to recognise the otherness of his subjects and their times: in short, Thompson's peculiar gift of marrying the methods of old-style literary history and literary criticism with those of historical research. But, though he shared the passion of antiquarians and recoverers of past feeling, he transcended this by the analytical ability to situate the experience of the poor in a changing pattern of relationships between wider social forces and—as became increasingly evident in his later writings—the webs of community, law and the State that held all together. Last, but far from least, he knew how to find the words for both his passion and his intellectual analysis.

The research contributions of even the finest historians have a restricted shelf-life. Their work has obsolescence built into it. Lucky those with the gift of words which can outlast their footnote references. In any century there are few of these. It is safe to say that Thompson is one of them. As an obituarist wrote: 'Thompson's work combined passion and intellect, the gifts of the poet, the narrator and the analyst. He was the only historian I knew who had not just talent, brilliance, erudition and the gift of writing, but the capacity to produce something qualitatively different from the rest of us, not to be measured on the same scale. Let us simply call it genius in the traditional sense of the word.'³⁶ On reflection the obituarist maintains his judgement.

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Note. I am greatly indebted to Mrs Dorothy Thompson. Other friends and students of Edward Thompson have been consulted, notably John Saville, as have my own memories and the obituaries (for a list of which see note 4 to the introduction of B. D. Palmer's *E. P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London/New York, 1994)). To this biography I am also indebted.

³⁵ Cf. S. Thernstrom in *Dissent*, XII(1), Winter 1965, 90–2; A. Briggs in *Scientific American*, January 1965, 125, 128.

³⁶ *Independent*, 30 August 1993, 14.