

E.P. THOMPSON, THE HISTORIAN: AN APPRECIATION

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Edward Palmer Thompson was a remarkable person and a great historian. That does not mean that he was always right, or that later generations will always read his works in the same ways. But he was wonderfully creative and original, full of pioneering insights, with his own distinctive style and interpretation. As a result, he became one of the most influential of modern British historians. Moreover, he was a polymath – a man of letters, political campaigner, polemicist, and theorist as well as student of the past¹ – a remarkable combination that is unique among contemporary historians. Perhaps the closest comparison is with a figure from an earlier generation – R.H. Tawney, who was also a theoretician of the Left as well as a historian.² In both men, there was a strong moral dimension to their history and politics. However, the comparisons are not exact. Edward Thompson was a more passionate and public figure than was Tawney, although both were able to inspire others through their teaching and writing – which is a great gift.

On his best form, Edward Thompson was a spell-binding lecturer and speaker. He spoke with great conviction but without glossing over the complexities. His publications had the same quality. He wrote a rich, luxuriant English prose, often laced with fury but simultaneously lightened with humour and satire. By these means, he influenced not only those who knew him and those he taught but also thousands of others whom he had never met. He attracted a number of historians to study his own period, which was British

social history of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Others he provoked to try to prove him wrong, which they sometimes did and sometimes did not. And many more, working on quite different periods and historical problems, were inspired in their own work by his passionate commitment to the study of the past. [*Additional note from PJC (2018):* And they adopted and adapted some of his key concepts, such as the ‘moral economy’].

Where did Edward Thompson find the inspiration for his lifetime of study, argument, and political activism? Much, of course, came from within; and much more from his life partnership with his fellow historian and peace campaigner, Dorothy Thompson. But he would be the first to point out that individuals do not operate in isolation from their times and from their own traditions and cumulative experiences.³

Looking at his historical writings as a whole, therefore, three strong influences stand out. For Edward Thompson, they were intertwined. But they can be identified separately as: firstly, a deep absorption in English literature; secondly, a developing relationship with the international body of ideas known as Marxism; and thirdly, a tradition of secularised Dissent, that has descended from radical Protestantism.

I: English Literature

Manifestly, Edward Thompson was exceptionally well read, steeped in the literary traditions of Britain; and he relished both poetry – which he often read aloud with great effect in his lectures – and prose. In particular, he admired the creative struggle of dissidents and outsiders. So it was not surprising that his first and last books were about English authors who were rebels against the mainstream culture of their day, as can be seen in his studies of the socialist writer and artist William Morris (1955; 1977) and of the deeply unconventional poet and artist William Blake (1993).

Indeed, Edward Thompson had begun his teaching career as an extra-mural lecturer for the Workers Educational Association in Leeds, teaching English as well as History. He was therefore quite ready to provide a close reading of literary texts, giving them a detailed attention that is unusual among historians. However, he was not at all involved in the many controversies generated by English studies. He greatly disliked the abstract versions of literary theory with a capital ‘T’. His interest was very much that of the contextualist, concerned to understand writers and their writings in the context of their times. That did not mean, incidentally, that for him literature and art had no wider meanings. On the contrary, they had the greatest of resonance precisely because they were anchored within a living history.

Moreover, that meant that Edward Thompson also took seriously some of the more surprising episodes in English literature. For example, in Hardy’s novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) the anti-hero Henchard, in a drunken moment, sold his wife Susan at a fair and for many years she accepted this as a *de facto* divorce. Edward Thompson asked himself whether this was purely an artistic invention – or whether Hardy was drawing upon a tradition of actual events in the past. And from that came a scintillating Thompson lecture, later published as an essay, on the real-life ‘Sale of Wives’, which he found to be an unofficial, often highly ritualised, minority form of do-it-yourself divorce, that continued among plebeian culture, although it was severely frowned upon by church and state.⁴

In this way, by studying a topic that was so unknown and so apparently obscure, Thompson illustrated his marked capacity to surprise his readers, as well as to interest them in the general implications of a particular case study. This was simply not the sort of subject that was supposed to interest a stereotypical Marxist, breathing fire and revolution. But for Edward Thompson it made perfect sense. The ‘politics of the personal’ were an important aspect of the past; and literature could open up new dimensions for historical analysis.

II: Developments within Marxism

A second strong influence was Marxism, particularly of the British variety – which was different from the theoretical Marxisms of France and was also consciously opposed to the state socialism of the Stalinist tradition. Edward Thompson was impressed as a young man by this rich corpus of thought, with which he remained in dialogue throughout his life.

One of the elements that attracted him originally was the historical emphasis within this mode of analysis. Marxist thought supplied a shape to the broad sweep of history, as it progressed from feudalism to industrial capitalism; and Marxism simultaneously was founded upon a belief in the role of revolutionary change from below as the means of change. Human ‘agency’ was the dynamic force, arising from the friction of class conflict. That helped to form Thompson’s approach to history, which he shared with his friends and fellow-historians like Christopher Hill and Rodney Hilton, who were collectively known as the ‘British Marxist historians’ (a label that needs careful definition but which they are collectively unlikely to escape).⁵

Belief in the importance of ‘history from below’ was the underlying theme of Thompson’s most famous book, *The Making of the English Working Class* (first published in 1963 and still in print). This massive study looked at the emergence of a conscious working-class culture, during the early Industrial Revolution. But Thompson argued expressly that class was not an automatic response to economic change but was a dynamic and interactive creation between social groups: ‘I do not see class as a “structure”, nor even as a “category”, but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to happen) in human relationships’.⁶

Despite that bold manifesto, *The Making* can be criticised for not looking at the ‘other side’ in the conflict between the workers and the powers-that-be. Thompson did elsewhere study upper-class attitudes to the law in his *Whigs &*

Hunters (1975); yet he had relatively little interest in the emergent middle-class culture. Nonetheless, the issues that he raised remain central. His interpretation of class as a matter of consciousness and culture is as much a subject of live debate today as it was when it was first published in 1963, even though the nature of the arguments have changed over the years.

[*Additional note from PJC* (2018): debates about consciousness/identity remain active but have nowadays widened to feature gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, colonial/imperial roles, religion, etc. etc. as well as, and sometimes even more than, social class.]

As this implies, Edward Thompson was far from a crude economic determinist, although bizarrely his views were sometimes caricatured as that. In many of the specialist essays that followed *The Making*, he set out precisely to analyse the complex roots of past beliefs and behaviour. For example, when writing on ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd’, he denied that riots were simply spasmodic and futile reactions to hunger. Instead, he sought to demonstrate that people’s attitudes were formed within a web of customary expectations and that their actions constituted a realistic form of direct action within the political system of eighteenth-century England.⁷

In other words, he emphatically did not believe the crude Marxist dogma that the economic infrastructure simply ‘determined’ the superstructure of politics and culture. If anything, he gave primacy to culture and consciousness.

Thus Edward Thompson’s general relationship to Marxist thought was an evolutionary one. In his political life, he left the British Communist Party in 1956 and thereafter considered himself as a man of the Left, rather than a card-carrying communist or spokesman for the cause. He criticised those who sought to turn Marxism into the equivalent of a religious faith, from which there was to be no dissent. It was something that he stressed repeatedly. Indeed, in later life he declared himself to be ‘a kind of post-Marxist’, although he did not like the term:

[It depends] whether I'm talking to severe anti-Marxists, which tends to push me back onto the Marxist rails; [but] when I'm talking with dogmatic Marxists, it pushes me off the rails straight away.⁸

Above all, in his own theoretical writings – especially in *The Poverty of Theory* (1978) – he attacked some of the intellectual variants of Marxism that developed in the West, notably the structural Marxism of Louis Althusser that had some fashionable currency in France in the 1970s.⁹ It was crucial for Edward Thompson that all abstract concepts had to be tested in the light of experience and argument, which in the case of history meant in the light of the evidence of past experience and in the light of argument over their meaning.

That was a very characteristic statement of his position. Throughout his life, Thompson always stressed that theory was a good servant but a poor master. Abstract and untested ideas were ‘the abomination that maketh desolate’, as he remarked in a fine Biblical turn of phrase.¹⁰ As a consequence, he distrusted abstract theories from whatever source, whether from old Marxism or from new literary theory. Evidence and argument provided the keys to sort out good ideas from bad ones. This viewpoint drew upon a profoundly British tradition of empirical investigation. But he disapproved equally of ‘sheer vacant empiricism [which] is a gathering-ground for all kinds of unstated theory’. The evidence had to be informed, tested, and challenged by theory. Moreover, all historical data had to be checked for accuracy and to make sure that they had not been doctored for particular purposes. Thus Edward Thompson was always suspicious of the official record and keen to hunt out the unofficial account or the unexpected source.

Incidentally, one of his life-long hobbies was the search for previously unknown or missing historical documents, especially those relating to the semi-clandestine world of religious and political radicalism in the eighteenth century. He followed up leads with great persistence, often taking years in the quest. One

of his most famous ‘finds’ was the archive of a small underground religious group known as the Muggletonians, after their leader Ludowick Muggleton (1609-98). This sect had survived from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries virtually unknown to historians. Their records had last been viewed by an Anglican clergyman in 1869 but even then the group was very obscure. Edward Thompson advertised his quest for these documents, and eventually in 1975 he received a message from a living Muggletonian, who had over eighty boxes of papers. They smelt agreeably of apples, since they had been stored in fruit boxes by their owner, a Kentish fruit farmer. But they contained a previously unknown archive that stretched back to the mid-seventeenth century.

Ultimately, the collection has been deposited with the British Library; and thus Thompson was midwife to an important increase in the known historical data for others to analyse.¹¹ He also used his knowledge of the Muggletonians as a crucial element in his study into the milieu of radical religious ideas that influenced the artist and poet William Blake. Moreover, Thompson identified sufficiently with the underground tradition of the Muggletonians once to style himself in 1968 – before an amazed American audience – as a ‘Muggletonian Marxist’.¹² That baffled everyone. But Muggleton had not found a new convert. Thompson would not have been an easy follower of any religious orthodoxy. But, by the same token, neither was he an orthodox Marxist. [*Additional note from PJC* (2018): despite some similarities in the terms, there seems to be no known relationship between the Muggletonians and the ‘Muggles’, or people from the non-magical world, as later popularised in the Harry Potter novels by Joanne K. Rowling (publ. 1997 onwards) – her usage probably derived from the slang term for a dolt or ‘mug’].

III: Hermeneutics and the Tradition of Secularised Dissent

Although classical Marxism laid great stress upon economic factors, Thompson himself did not specialise as an economic historian. As already noted, his

interests lay in the field of culture and consciousness. In studying that, one of Thompson's key techniques was the style of examination that is known technically as hermeneutics, also summarised by the code-word of 'empathy'. This approach has been especially influential in cultural anthropology but has increasingly had a marked impact in modern historical and cultural studies. It entails taking all ideas in the past or in other cultures with complete seriousness, and trying to understand them on their own terms. 'Empathy' was not quite the same as 'sympathy'. Strange or unfamiliar ideas did not have to be endorsed; but they were to be studied with sensitivity. And the hermeneutic credo condemns as false pride any belief in the automatic superiority of the moderns to the ancients, or indeed of the 'First World' to the 'Third World'.

The approach is not one that is confined exclusively to Marxists or to left-wingers. So Edward Thompson was in fact writing for many historians when he penned a classic statement of the hermeneutic aim, which was to avoid judging with hindsight. Thus in *The Making of the English Working Class*, he wrote famously:

I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.¹³

And he justified that aim with the comment: 'After all, we are not at the end of social evolution ourselves'.

Throughout his historical studies, Edward Thompson therefore set out to understand the motivations and behaviour of *all* individuals in the past, not just those of the great and the good. No-one was too poor or too obscure to overlook. Indeed, one of his essays was about 'The Crime of Anonymity', when angry people sent anonymous threatening letters to local magistrates about economic and other grievances. By definition, nothing is known about the authors of these letters. Their identities are lost to history, just as they were

unknown in their own day. But by a close study of the content and context of their threatening notes, Thompson was able to interpret their motives and tactics. It remains a little gem of historical detection.¹⁴

Why then, it may be speculated in turn, was Edward Thompson so ready to fuse hermeneutics with his Marxism? One reason seems to have stemmed directly from his own family and intellectual background, which predisposed him to this style of enquiry. He came from a tradition of radical Protestant nonconformity, which has not ended in the twentieth century but has generated alongside itself a parallel position of secularised dissent. Edward Thompson was not a religious man. But he was well aware of his background in radical religion. His father had been a Methodist missionary in India before he left the faith; and Thompson's mother also came from a family of nonconformist missionaries.

It was a tradition that stressed the importance of every individual conscience, even in opposition to the mainstream ideas of the day. No soul was too poor to save. Translated into secular hermeneutics, it meant that no ideas or attitudes in the past were too bizarre or too eccentric or too unsuccessful that the historian or the anthropologist could not study them.¹⁵ It entailed a certain cultural humility on the part of the enquirer and a willingness to understand the lives of others. That deeply humanist attitude completely pervaded Edward Thompson's approach to history and to life more generally.

Furthermore, the dissenting tradition also encouraged every individual to stand up publicly for his or her beliefs. Conscience, as well as consciousness, was to be taken seriously. Everyone had a duty to 'bear witness', even if it meant opposing priests and governments, and even if it meant facing opposition and criticism from friends as well as from enemies. The relevance of that attitude for Edward Thompson's career is obvious. It sustained him during the many political and academic controversies in which he became engaged. And, above all, it encouraged him when in the 1980s he began his public activities as

a peace campaigner. He was a secular protestant, in the literal meaning of the term. It was fitting therefore that one of his famous polemics on behalf of nuclear disarmament was entitled *Protest and Survive*.¹⁶

There was therefore a clear intellectual logic that linked Edward Thompson's work as a historian with his new role as a peace campaigner in the 1980s. It meant a switch of attention but not of his basic belief in the potential force and importance of ideas in their historical context. Isolation here was the enemy. The individual conscience did not lead to an atomised vision but rather to a call for dialogue between the multitude of views. He would have enjoyed participating in the ferment of ideas in England in the radical 1640s, or in Paris in the early days of the French Revolution. As it was, he helped to foster a European Left, where many individuals combined across national boundaries to express and develop their views together.

[*Additional note from PJC* (2018): E.P. Thompson is sometimes denounced as a 'little Englander' by critics on the British Left; and there was certainly much that was distinctly 'English' about Thompson's empiricism and scepticism about theory. On the other hand, his involvement in the 1980s with European Nuclear Disarmament (END) and contacts with Eastern European dissidents signalled his international commitments, as did his lifelong interest in American radicalism, inherited from his American mother, and in Indian politics and culture, inherited from and shared with his missionary father. This latter theme was acknowledged in E.P.T's last publication, just before his death: *Alien Homage: Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore* (Delhi, 1993). Not that interventions by British scholars are always welcomed. Nonetheless, they fuel an important and continuing interchange: see P. Satia, 'Byron, Gandhi, and the Thompsons: The Making of British Social History and the Unmaking of Indian History', *History Workshop Journal*, 81 (2016), pp. 135-70.]

Literature, Marxism and secularised dissent thus made a heady and many-sided combination, and contributed to a remarkable man and a strikingly original historian. During his lifetime, Edward Thompson's own ideas developed, changed, and deepened. He did not freeze his own interpretation of history into a rigid system, nor want others to do the same on his behalf. Equally, attitudes and approaches to the study of the past have also changed over the same period and his pioneering works are now read in different ways by later generations.

Consequently, the tribute of history to his history should not be to canonise him among the variegated traditions of the Left – nor to excoriate him from the Right. He wanted to be read seriously and argued with seriously. Throughout his lifetime, he himself was a doughty polemicist and loved a good debate. So, even when the nature of the political campaigns and the intellectual arguments and the historical interpretations move on – as they always do – it is not difficult to predict that E.P. Thompson's passion for history, past and present, will continue to inform, to provoke and, above all, to inspire.

ENDNOTES:

¹ E.P. Thompson's major historical publications include *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955; revised 1977); *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963; 1968; and many later edns); *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (1975); with D. Hay, P. Linebaugh and others, *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (1975); *Customs in Common* (1991); and *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (1993). In addition, he wrote a novel; poetry; numerous essays on current affairs, disarmament, history, and theory; memoirs of his brother and father; a critique of the early days of Warwick University (where for a time he headed the Centre for the Study of Social History) as well as brilliant and sometimes devastating private letters, which deserve publication in themselves, to his wide circle of friends.

² R.H. Tawney (1880-1962) was author not only of *The Acquisitive Society* (1921) and *Equality* (1931); but also of *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (1912); *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism: A Historical Study* (1926); and *Business and Politics under James I: Lionel Cranfield as Merchant and Minister* (1958). See A. Wright, *R.H. Tawney* (1987); and J.M. Winter, 'Introduction: Tawney as Historian', in idem (ed.), *History and Society: Essays by R.H. Tawney* (1978), pp. 1-40. [Additional note from *PJC* (2018): the comparison is explicitly pursued in T. Rogan, *The Moral Economists: R.H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E.P. Thompson and the Critique of Capitalism* (Princeton, 2017).]

³ Sources include three interviews where E.P. Thompson talks about influences upon his work: see H. Abelove (ed.), *Visions of History: Interview with E.P. Thompson and Others* (1983); video archive, *E.P. Thompson Interviewed by P.J. Corfield* (1993). [Additional note: video now (2018) available from London University's online store: <https://store.london.ac.uk/product-catalogue/school-of-advanced-study-publications/institute-of-historical-research/interviews-with-historians/>]; and programme by Bandung for ITV Channel 4, *Rear Window IV: E.P. Thompson* (1993). [Additional note: now (2018) available on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eirT8D28bTk>]. There are also interpretations in B.D. Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism and History* (1981); G. McLennan, 'E.P. Thompson and the Discipline of Historical Context', in R. Johnson and others (eds), *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics* (1982), pp. 96-130; and H.J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis* (1984), esp. pp. 167-220. [Additional note from *PJC* (2018): re-assessments appear regularly, including notably S. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory: E.P. Thompson, the New Left and Postwar British Politics* (Manchester, 2011); and C. Efstathiou, *E.P. Thompson: A Twentieth-Century Romantic* (2015).]

⁴ E.P. Thompson, 'The Sale of Wives', in his *Customs in Common*, pp. 404-66.

⁵ There is a danger that the label will obscure differences of emphasis and chronology in the work of these historians; but for overviews, see Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*; B. Schwarz, "'The People" in History: The Communist Party Historians' Group, 1946-56', in Johnson and others (eds), *Making Histories*, pp. 44-95; and chapter on 'The Marxist Initiative', in C. Parker, *The English Historical Tradition since 1850* (1990), pp. 177-201.

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- ⁶ E.P. Thompson, *The Making* (1968 edn), p. 8.
- ⁷ E.P. Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’ (1971), repr. with his later review of criticisms and a detailed restatement/refinement of his position, in his *Customs in Common*, pp. 185-351.
- ⁸ From interview recorded Feb. 1992 in *E.P. Thompson Interviewed by P.J. Corfield* (1993), as cited above n. 3.
- ⁹ The title of *The Poverty of Theory* carried a clear echo of Marx’s diatribe against Proudhon in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), and also of a later philosophical attack on Marxist determinism in Karl Popper’s *Poverty of Historicism* (1957).
- ¹⁰ From interview recorded Feb. 1992, in *E.P. Thompson Interviewed by P.J. Corfield* (1993), as cited above n. 3. Thompson’s reference is to the ‘abomination of desolation’ in *The Bible*, St Matthew, 24:15.
- ¹¹ Thompson’s own account of this discovery is provided in his *Witness against the Beast*, pp. 115-19; and a summary, obviously much dependent upon information from Thompson, is provided in the preface to C. Hill, B. Reay and W. Lamont, *The World of the Muggletonians* (1983), a work that is dedicated to Phil Noakes, the Muggletonian fruit-farmer and *de facto* archivist.
- ¹² At a lecture on William Blake at Columbia University, New York City, in 1968: see reference in E.P. Thompson, ‘The Blake Tradition’, *The Guardian*, 4 September 1993, p. 27.
- ¹³ Thompson, *The Making* (1968 edn), p. 12.
- ¹⁴ E.P. Thompson, ‘The Crime of Anonymity’, in Thompson and others, *Albion’s Fatal Tree*, pp. 255-308, with sampler of anonymous letters, pp. 309-41. [Additional note from PJC (2018): It’s appropriate here to acknowledge the research help given to EPT by his old friend, the local historian, E.E. Dodd: see C. Steedman, ‘Threatening Letters: E.E. Dodd, E.P. Thompson, and the Making of the “Crime of Anonymity”’, *History Workshop Journal*, 82 (2016), pp. 50-82.]
- ¹⁵ Interestingly, the philosophical parent of hermeneutics was the German scholar Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), who also came from a strongly Protestant family (his father was a pastor) but subsequently lost his faith: see I.N. Bulhof, *Wilhelm Dilthey: A Hermeneutic Approach to the Study of History and Culture* (1980), esp. pp. 1-23.
- ¹⁶ E.P. Thompson and Dan Smith, *Protest and Survive* (1980).