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**Dorothy Thompson, *The Dignity of Chartism*,
ed. S. Roberts (Verso, London, 2015), pp. xxx + 206
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although the message is unchanged.*

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Dorothy Thompson was both a remarkable person and an influential historian of Chartism. This collection of her essays – some minor, some more substantial – highlights the approach of one of a formidable pair of fellow historians and left-wing intellectuals. Dorothy Thompson remains much less well known than her husband Edward (E.P.) Thompson. He was the public personage of the two. He wrote prolifically, as a historian, poet, novelist, Marxist-humanist theoretician, and anti-nuclear campaigner. Dorothy Thompson, who shared much of his thinking, was a more private person but had her own voice, as this collection reaffirms.

Sixteen essays are assembled, following an affectionate tribute by the editor Stephen Roberts. He stresses Dorothy Thompson's commitment to the future of the discipline, as a notably caring and constructive doctoral supervisor. She enjoyed developing the companionship of shared research interests, as she always did with her husband. And she, like he, was a ready and energetic debater.

One hitherto unpublished contribution is a rare piece, being co-written by the Thompsons together. It provides an in-depth study of Chartism in Halifax, with all the hallmarks of Dorothy Thompson's deep immersion in the scene. At the end, there is a rueful coda. Once the Halifax Chartists were dashing radical activists, in quasi-revolutionary times, while later they seemed mere bit players in a narrative of triumphant Liberalism: 'old buffers' (p. 124) out of their time. That rueful phrasing hints at a particularly E.P-Thompsonesque sympathy with those who had gone out of fashion. In fact, neither of the indefatigable Thompsons could ever be accused of bufferdom. But they often felt isolated, even on the Left, which gave them their edge and – sometimes – their edginess.

Calm briskness remained a key Dorothy Thompson trait throughout. She constantly calls for clarity of definitions, attentiveness to the detailed evidence, and an awareness of the importance of class analysis. She did not favour the so-called 'linguistic turn', which sought to prioritise language (known reverently in the 1980s as 'discourse') over social context. Nor did she ever rescind her belief in Chartism's radical potential, pointing to its long-term indirect legacy of working-class self-help rather than to any immediate revolution.

Another of Dorothy Thompson's concerns was to restore women to their place in history, but without an over-insistent feminism. She argued not only that working-class women contributed forcefully to Chartism but also that later nineteenth-century British politics became increasingly masculinised. Hence female engagement had become lost from later accounts. 'The roughness of behaviour and the language of the Chartist women did not fit the image of the respectable nineteenth-century female, while the lack of a specifically feminist political programme meant they were of little interest to the feminist movement that arose in the later years of the century' (p. 47). So Dorothy Thompson sought to recover female activism on its own terms. That aim matched her independent feminism, which she always maintained calmly and straightforwardly though not militantly.

She clearly enjoyed her subject. Chartist denunciations of class privilege and expressions of hope for a more egalitarian future resonated with her own beliefs. But she developed a robust acceptance of realities. She did not demonise the powers-that-be to explain Chartism's immediate political defeat. Nor did she believe that, but for state repression, there would have been a popular revolution. She rejected the easy view that the Chartist leaders had only to call for an uprising for such a victorious outcome to ensue.

The masses were (and are) not simply a blank force, waiting to be roused at the bidding of others. 'Men rarely follow leaders advocating armed rebellion unless they have nothing to lose or unless they are fairly certain of victory' (p. 172). Effecting structural political change in a profoundly unequal society was not something that could be achieved purely by the radical leadership's will-to-win.

Here is the brisk, sane voice of Dorothy Thompson. She became first and foremost a research historian, with left-wing sympathies but with no pre-set narrative. In her later years, she warned specifically against letting formulaic ideologies, whether Marxist or other, warp the historical account. She expressed this view in a valedictory speech in 2005 (reprinted, pp. 189-94).

Collectively, these essays make the same point. Dorothy Thompson was a sturdy debater in print and even sharper-tongued in private. But she wanted the arguments to be informed by in-depth research and by good sense. As a young freelance scholar with family pressures, she struggled for many years to write. The contrast with E.P. Thompson's prolific pen must have been secretly difficult to bear, however much she admired his bravura style and intellect. Finally, however, Dorothy Thompson herself got into the archives and emerged triumphantly.