

In Memoriam: E. P. Thompson (1924–1993)

Forward from Liberalism was the title of a book written by the poet Stephen Spender in his youth, during the brief period when, like so many other British intellectuals in the 1930s, he found himself in the Communist party. Edward Palmer Thompson was one of the many who continued the curve of his parents' social and ideological commitment to the Left. In the case of both his father, Edward, and his mother, Theodosia Jessup Thompson, it was a commitment to a socially conscious Protestantism. Both his parents had been missionaries, with strong links to what was not yet called the Third World, especially to India. Edward Thompson, Sr., gave up the Methodist ministry to return to Oxford shortly before Edward, Jr.'s birth, to a lectureship in Bengali and a life of active support for the Indian independence movement. The great figures of Congress went in and out of the Thompson household whenever they were in England. As Edward, Jr., liked to recall, he had been instructed in his infancy how to hold a cricket bat by Jawaharlal Nehru, then recently out of jail.

Nothing was more natural than that both sons of Edward Thompson, Frank and (three years his junior) Edward, should move further to the left, which in the 1930s meant the Communist party. Frank, whose intellectual gifts and charm were immediately obvious, carried the family's immediate hopes. He was sent to one of the most prestigious public schools (prep schools), Winchester, from which he passed to New College, Oxford, where he joined the party and had a career of scholarly, literary, and social brilliance. He volunteered for military service in 1939 and was captured and executed by the Bulgarian government while leading a British mission in support of the Bulgarian partisans during the war. Edward coedited the story of his mission, and some of his wartime diaries and letters, for publication in 1947. Some of Frank's poems are in later anthologies of World War II poets.

Frank was important in his 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 published his father's letters to the great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore and thought of writing a critical account of Frank's tragic Bulgarian mission—but also because Edward's relation to Frank was central to Edward's development. It was, I think, a complex relation of admiration for and competition against the brother who, in life, had been seen as the more favored and brilliant, and who by his death had acquired the status of a hero of the war of antifascist resistance. Edward was not sent to Winchester, for financial reasons, but to his father's old Methodist school, where he practiced left-wing agitation. From there he went in 1941 to a not-very-prestigious Cambridge college with a reputation for conservatism, where he spent one year before being called up. He

served as a subaltern in the 17th/21st lancers in the North African and Italian campaigns, leading a tank squadron at the battle of Cassino. In 1945 he returned to Cambridge, where he met his comrade, colleague, and life partner, Dorothy—also a teenaged communist—whom he married in 1948.

Although he did not know it, the pattern of his work as a historian, writer, and activist was set in the immediate postwar years. For though he completed his part one of the Cambridge history degree, he chose not to continue his formal history studies, but took a degree immediately—this was possible for ex-servicemen—and spent his final year at Cambridge reading independently, mainly in the history and literature of the Elizabethan period. For, as any reader of Thompson's work knows, he was as interested in literature as in history—perhaps initially more so, though for Marxists the two could not be separated. The literary roots of the British Marxist history of that time have been underestimated: they are patent in another ex-Methodist, Christopher Hill, and in V. G. Kiernan. However, Thompson was unusual in refusing to go the orthodox road of the historian, which led to university teaching. Instead, after a spell in Yugoslavia helping to build the "Youth Railway," he chose to work in adult education (at that time largely evening classes for workers). At the time this attracted several ex-servicemen intellectuals of the Left, notable among them Raymond Williams.

Thompson got a job as staff tutor in history and literature in the department of extramural studies at Leeds in 1948. This was probably through the help of a family friend who was Professor of Modern History at the University, for by 1948 communists no longer got any kind of academic jobs, although those who had been hired before the Berlin airlift remained undisturbed, but unpromoted. He worked in this post for the next seventeen years. Halifax, in the still-industrial West Riding of Yorkshire, where the family brought up its three children, was the background to *The Making of the English Working Class*. Yorkshire was also the basis of work in the Communist party, into which both Thompsons threw themselves. He was always essentially the activist-as-historian. He did not take much part in the activities of the C. P. Historians' Group—probably less than Dorothy—though both were members, but he had a close relationship with one of its gurus, an old lady of impeccable gentry background, deep Marxist learning, and a writer's block, who was admired by some of the young Marxist historians she took up: Dona Torr.

Edward's politics were central to his work as a historian. So they must be considered first. Like many members of the C. P. Historians' group, which emerged as a center of opposition when the British party refused to face the issues raised by Khrushchev's famous anti-Stalin speech, he left the party in 1956. He did so with more public éclat than most, because he (and John Saville, later founder and director of the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*) had edited a small dissident bulletin, *The Reasoner*. This be-

came the (printed) quarterly *The New Reasoner* in 1957 and, two years later, combined with another product of the ferment of 1956, the *University and Left Review* (animated by another ex-CP historian and later father of the *History Workshop Journal*, Raphael Samuel) to form the *New Left Review*, which is still in existence. From 1956 on, Edward was an independent socialist looking for an intellectual and political home, a situation not unfamiliar to some in the United States. Various attempts to establish a socialist position to the left of the Labour party, indispensable but disappointing, failed, for example, Raymond Williams's, Stuart Hall's, and Edward's *May Day Manifesto* (1966). The various Trotskyite or Trotsky-derived groups and parties were not to his taste. The British New Left after 1956 never managed to become a political force, as distinct from an intellectual one. Eventually, after a period of relative political quiescence in the 1970s, Edward discovered a new political vocation in the antinuclear movement, of which he became a leading spokesman in the 1980s, occupying the same sort of position as Bertrand Russell had 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.

Intellectually Edward also found himself somewhat isolated, except—both by friendship and mindset—from the members of his 1940s–1950s Marxist historians' generation. As his own intellectual influence grew, he found himself, as he saw it, abandoned on two sides: by the *New Left Review*, from which he had been extruded by Perry Anderson and a group of younger Oxford Marxists who took over the journal in 1962, and by the post-1968 generation of the rebel young, some of whom tended to be attracted by a type of ahistorical or antihistorical Marxism which Thompson (like others of his generation) found profoundly distasteful, notably the Althusserian vogue. The controversies with the flag-carriers of the *New Left Review*, Anderson and Tom Nairn, were to produce important historical results (such as the 1965 *The Peculiarities of the English*), but though Edward's long engagement with the Althusserians produced a lengthy, powerful, and, as always, brilliant and intellectually rewarding putdown, it was not worth the time and intellectual effort he spent on it. In the present writer's opinion—and he told Edward so at the time—it diverted him from the enormously promising work on the eighteenth century in which he was engaged in the early 1970s, and to which he only returned in his last years. By the time *The Poverty of Theory* was published (1978), Althusser was on the way to oblivion, but Edward's *Customs in Common*, announced from the early 1970s, remained but a torso (a few pathbreaking papers were published at that time) even when it was finally published in 1991. Edward's own position remained suspended somewhere between remembering and distancing himself from Marx. He defended the Marxist heritage, and even the intellectual value of his CP experience, against the anti-reds,

but not Leninism, Stalinism, and CP centralism, which he had rejected forever in 1956.

The historical work falls into three parts, centered on *William Morris* (1955, revised 1976), *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), and the work on the eighteenth century, which produced only one complete book, *Whigs and Hunters* (1975), but several important articles and contributions to books, notably *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century* (1971) and *Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism* (1967), both memorials to his association with the journal *Past and Present*, whose board he joined in 1969 and which has published his last article posthumously. All are united essentially by one central theme: the history of the laboring men and women of England. They are, however, united by something else: Edward's spectacular inability to plan or control the length of his writings. The 900 pages of *William Morris* began as a review of a long-forgotten book that had annoyed him. *The Making* was to have been the first chapter of a modestly sized textbook on British working-class history from 1790 to 1900. *Whigs and Hunters*—again according to Dorothy Thompson—started as a contribution to the book of studies on eighteenth-century crime he edited with some former students (*Albion's Fatal Tree*, 1975). All, fortunately, got out of hand.

However, there was another strand in Edward's writings that takes us from his first book to his last, the posthumously published study on William Blake, who, with Marx, Vico, and Morris, was a central influence on him. Literature, or more precisely poetry, was a central concern to one who was himself a poet (*Infant and Emperor*, 1983) and a novelist (*The Sykaos Papers*, 1988). Probably the major unpublished part of his work consists of the studies of the early Romantics, especially Wordsworth, in the 1890s, which formed the subject of his brilliant Northcliffe Lectures at London University.

The Making made him instantly famous, though it did not convert him into an academic for more than a few years (1965–1972), during which time he founded and directed the Centre for the Study of Social History at the new University of Warwick. He resigned to settle down as a freelance writer, with occasional spells of teaching at universities in the United States and other parts of the world. While this suited his independence—nobody was less of an organization man—it was also intended to enable Dorothy to build the independent academic career at the University of Birmingham which she had so long foregone during the Yorkshire years. The book, which appeared suddenly on the historical horizon like a rainbow, owed its influence not least to the extraordinary and deep passion with which it was written and to the sense of commitment to a cause, which excited and inspired readers, while raising the eyebrows of the orthodox establishment. Such political-ideological resistance prevented Thompson's election to the British Academy until 1992, although the American Academy of Arts and

Sciences had made him an honorary foreign member in 1979. The combination of scholarship, intellectual originality, literary and ideological appeal, and sheer star quality was reflected in the *Arts and Humanities Citations Index*, which recorded him (for the period 1976–1983) as among the 100 most-cited twentieth-century authors, and the most cited of the four names in the list described as “historians.” There probably has been no book within the range of interest of this journal which has made a more sudden and larger impact than *The Making*. Nor was this impact confined to the English-speaking world. In spite of his purely English subjects and—until his leadership of the END (European Nuclear Disarmament movement)—lack of sympathy with affairs across the Channel, he became a kingpin of the Round Tables on Social History organized, largely around him, by the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme in Paris, a valued contributor to Bourdieu’s *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, and a major influence on social historians in at least two other European countries.

Intellectually he was probably at his peak from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, both as a historian and as a writer of a marvelous, stormy prose, which made him, in his day, into the finest twentieth-century writer of polemics in the English language. The pieces collected together in *Writing by Candlelight* (1980) should prove the point. The great public campaigns against the second Cold War in the 1980s diverted his mind from history and theory. Later illness, which in the end kept him close to death’s door for some years, left him without the energy to carry on his history where he had left off in the 1970s, although he tried. The last books, shadows of what he might have done, though far better than what most of us could do, were written in a race against death. More precisely, they helped him postpone the death that reached him before the biblical age of seventy. When I saw him last, a few days before the end, he still had plans, but I got the impression that he no longer felt—as he had done earlier—that there were things he *had* to get finished.

He was a man of extraordinary gifts: a powerful, sometimes obsessive researcher with a first-class intellect, who could have intuitions like a poet; a man who combined the talents of the great prima donna and the composer. He had the looks, the voice, the presence, the brains, and the charm. He was both passionate and funny. He had no sense of careerism, but loved to garden and dreamed of utopia. His political projects were unsuccessful, but they caused him to write the books by which he will be remembered as a major historian and a major figure on the Left when those of us who knew him are long gone. The death of no other living historian could have produced the sheer sense of grief and loss, of a star extinguished, after E. P. Thompson’s death at the end of August 1993. Nobody who has read him will forget him.

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