

E.P. Thompson (1924–1993)

Edward Thompson, socialist, political activist, historian, was one of the outstanding English intellectuals of the twentieth century. The British Left has lost a great personality and a brilliant scholar; a man whose vision was never parochial but always world-wide in its internationalism; whose dedication to the aims and purposes of the socialist Commonwealth never weakened or wavered. He was an embattled philosopher who will be remembered for his work as well as his writings, and above all else for his authorship of one of the seminal books of the twentieth century: *The Making of the English Working Class*.

Edward Palmer Thompson was born 3 February 1924, the son of a Methodist missionary who worked for a number of years in India. His American mother had also been a missionary, in the Lebanon. His father was a scholar and a poet, a friend of Mahatma Gandhi, of the Nehrus and of Rabindranath Tagore, and in his last decade or so he was Reader in Sanskrit at the University of Oxford. The young Edward Thompson was educated at a famous (private) preparatory school in Oxford – a good beginning for a future radical. He had one brother, Frank, who was sent into the Balkans during the Second World War by the special Operations Executive, was captured by the Bulgarian security forces, and executed. Edward himself, as did many of his generation, had a war divided between university and the army. He became a junior officer in a tank regiment, and saw service in North Africa and Italy. After the British intervened in Greece at the end of 1944 in order to defeat the EAM coalition – the first occasion when arms were taken up against a resistance movement – there was a possibility that Edward Thompson's regiment would be sent to Greece; and this brought about, so he told the present writer, an intense debate about the morality of accepting orders to fight against an active anti-Nazi resistance movement. Refusal would, of course, have been mutiny under army law. In the event the regiment was not required.

After the war ended Edward returned to Cambridge. He had taken First Class Honours in Part I of the History Tripos and he spent his final year reading and researching independently, mostly in Elizabethan history and literature. He had already joined the Communist Party at the age of sixteen and was beginning to be politically active on his return to civilian life. With his mother he produced a memoir of his brother Frank: a compilation of letters that Frank had written together with some of his poems under the title *There is a Spirit in Europe*. This was published in 1947 and in the same year Edward visited Bulgaria and then joined the well-known Yugoslav railway project that brought together young socialists from all over Europe and elsewhere to help construct the line from Samac to Sarajevo.

In 1948 he became a staff tutor in the Department of Adult Education at the University of Leeds. He was fortunate, for by this time the Cold

War was already influencing appointments in higher education, and it was becoming increasingly difficult for known communists to obtain positions. In Edward's case it was probably the fact that a family friend – and a liberally minded man – Guy Chapman, was Professor of Modern History at Leeds University, that helped this young dissenter to his first teaching job.

Edward and his wife Dorothy (whom he had met at Cambridge) lived in Halifax for seventeen years, and it was from this area of the West Riding of Yorkshire – one of the great seed-beds of working-class radicalism in the first half of the nineteenth century – that he developed a passionate concern with working-class history. The historical writings cannot be divorced from his daily work, or rather evening work, since almost all adult teaching was necessarily in the evenings, apart from day schools on Saturday or Sunday. He had two decades of teaching politically aware adult students in a region where houses, streets and moorland gave shape and meaning, at every turn of the road, to the radical past. At the same time, during his years until 1956, he became a prominent activist, as a communist, in the Yorkshire peace movement. Halifax developed into a main centre of communist activity in the West Riding, and Edward himself was elected to the District Committee of the Communist Party at a time when the majority of members were industrial militants.

It was during these years that he produced his first book: a volume of 900 pages entitled *William Morris. Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955). The book appeared during the worst period of the Cold War. Anything published by the communist publishing house of Lawrence & Wishart, as was this volume on Morris, could expect to be ignored or, exceptionally, reviewed in a hostile critique. An anonymous reviewer in the leading literary weekly, *The Times Literary Supplement*, referred to the “splenetic” tone of the volume throughout its 900 pages; the quotations showed how “fluffy were Morris's socialist views”, and the book as a whole “merely serves to emphasise aspects of Morris which are better left forgotten”. Only G.D.H. Cole offered a generous appraisal. For Edward Thompson William Morris remained a central fount of ideas and inspiration. In 1977 he published a revised version which shortened the original by 140 pages but which added a lengthy postscript discussing the later literature on Morris: a considered statement of certain of Thompson's theoretical ideas which had been somewhat neglected. Morris, for Thompson, was “the greatest moral initiator of communism within our tradition”; and in his last paragraph of the postscript he wrote that “Morris, by 1955, had claimed me [. . .]. The Morris/Marx argument has worked within me ever since.”

It was in the year which followed the publication of his *William Morris* that Edward Thompson became involved in the most intense political and moral debate of his whole life. Whatever his previous doubts, he had been an active, committed member of the British Communist Party. Now, with

the secret speech of Khrushchev to the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, there could no longer be grounds for refusing to ask the most searching questions. The leadership of the British Communist Party were exceedingly reluctant to permit serious discussion of the historical and political issues involved, and it was because of the refusal of the editors of the communist press to allow a full range of letters and articles to be published that Edward Thompson and the present writer decided to bring out an internal party journal entitled *The Reasoner*. It was a duplicated journal of 32 pages, with a quotation from Marx on its title page: "To leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality."

There were three numbers, from July to early November 1956. The purpose was to provide a discussion platform *within* the Communist Party, and there was no intention on the part of the editors to encourage the formation of an internal faction. What was being emphasised was the urgent need for an honest evaluation of the history of Stalinism in Russia and of its repercussions upon the political life of communist parties the world over. The authors were given firm instructions to cease publication, first by the Yorkshire District Committee and then by the Politbureau – the highest political committee within the Communist Party. Both requests were refused on the grounds that no unequivocal assurances had been given concerning open discussion. The third number, appearing just after the Soviet invasion of Hungary, called for the total repudiation of the Soviet action and for solidarity with those resisting the Russian troops. Both editors were then suspended by the leadership of the British Party and both then resigned.

The detailed story of what was to become the beginnings of the New Left in Britain has been told in part in the 1976 *Socialist Register* and in a number of other writings and interviews. For Edward Thompson, whose contacts with the dissidents of Eastern Europe were to foreshadow his later, much closer relations during the 1980s, the first years of the break with Stalinism were to develop the ideas, and ideals, which he had discovered in William Morris; and his own writings on socialist humanism developed a subtlety of analysis and a wide-ranging appraisal of socialist morality that offered the somewhat variegated New Left a powerful philosophy of praxis. *The Reasoner* was followed by ten issues of a printed quarterly, *The New Reasoner*, which then amalgamated with the *Universities and Left Review* to become *The New Left Review*, a journal which within a year or so was taken over by Perry Anderson as editor. From that time Edward Thompson was not associated, in any editorial capacity, with any periodical journal.

By late 1956 he had broken decisively with the Stalinism of the Communist Party although he always acknowledged the dedication of so many of the members of the Party, and he always missed the comradeship which he had enjoyed with fellow-intellectuals and with the working-class members; especially of his beloved West Riding. In 1963 he published the work

for which he will be remembered above all others: *The Making of the English Working Class*, and this was the beginning of years of intensive research and writing, ended only by his total involvement in the campaign for European Nuclear Disarmament in the 1980s. *The Making* did not come out of an historical vacuum, for the intellectual climate was already beginning to change. The Communist Party Historian's Group had been increasingly active since the end of the Second World War, and it included such personalities as Christopher Hill, Victor Kiernan, Eric Hobsbawm, George Rudé, A.L. Morton, Rodney Hilton, a number of classical scholars including Robert Browning, with Maurice Dobb and Dona Torr as their respected mentors. There had been published in 1954 a collection of historical essays under the title *Democracy and the Labour Movement*; Eric Hobsbawm produced his *Primitive Rebels* in 1959; the first volume of *Essays in Labour History* appeared a year later, in which Edward himself published a famous article "Homage to Tom Maguire", and about the same time there was founded the Society for the Study of Labour History in which all the leading Marxist historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries took an active part. Christopher Hill had been writing on the seventeenth century throughout the years since 1945 – his first essay on the English Revolution having appeared in 1940. The intellectual and political debates around the crisis in the Communist Party and the rapid growth of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament at the end of the 1950s added to the ferment of ideas, among especially the younger age groups.

The ground was therefore being prepared, but the publication of *The Making of the English Working Class* drove long and deep furrows into the soil of history. Thompson went far beyond chronology into an imaginative re-creation of the past in which ordinary people were making something of themselves other than that which history was making, or trying to make, of them. In words which are constantly being quoted:

I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, the "Utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and, if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties. Our only criterion of judgement should not be whether or not a man's actions are justified in the light of subsequent evolution. After all, we are not at the end of social evolution ourselves. In some of the lost causes of the people of the Industrial Revolution we may discover insights into social evils which we have yet to cure.

The Making has had an extraordinary influence. With his other writings Thompson became in the 1980s, according to the Arts and Humanities Citations Index, the most widely cited twentieth-century historian in the

world. His approach was influential with social anthropologists as well as social historians, with the historians of law as well as those who work in literary studies. And as soon as he had finished *The Making*, whose subject covered the years from the 1780s to 1832, “when most English people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers” he turned back to the eighteenth century to dissect and analyse the history of the common people in the decades before the factory began to be built. There appeared in succession a series of essays which began to provide the framework for a wholly new interpretation of the eighteenth century. These, in order were “The Peculiarities of the English” (1965); “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism” (1967); and “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the 18th Century” (1971). This last essay has probably been more discussed round the world – by historians, sociologists, and social anthropologists – than any of his other writings, including *The Making*.

For six years he was Reader in Social History at the University of Warwick and Director of the new Centre for Social History. During these years, 1965 to 1971, he gathered around him a group of very able young historians who worked mainly on eighteenth-century themes. He himself produced *Whigs and Hunters* in 1975 and in the same year was co-editor of *Albion's Fatal Tree*. But the rewriting of eighteenth-century history remained unfinished. Edward was partly deflected by his brilliant polemic against Althusser in *The Poverty of Theory* (1978) and also by the fact that he was a witty, funny, savage critic of society, and in the 1970s there were editors who offered him space. Some of these essays were reprinted in *Writing By Candlelight*. No one else was writing with such astringency, with such dazzling bravura.

The completed history of the eighteenth century remained unfinished, and not in the sense that all historical writing remains unfinished. It was unfinished because, in his own words “the whole grotesque carnival of annihilation is still on the road. Time is not on our side”; and from the end of the 1970s through the 1980s he devoted his immense abilities to the European movement for nuclear disarmament and the ending of the Cold War. In 1980 he published the pamphlet *Protest and Survive* which examined the utter absurdities of the doctrine of nuclear war fighting; and he drafted the European Nuclear Disarmament Appeal which insisted on the responsibility of both sides, East and West, for the arms race and the threat of nuclear annihilation. The signatories to the appeal included Olaf Palme, Vaclav Havel, Jiří Dienstbier, Bärbel Bohley and Rainer Eppelmann. He and his wife Dorothy were tireless in their campaigning, inside Britain and within Europe. Especially did they reach out to the countries of the Eastern bloc.

In the last six years of his life he became seriously ill. There were periods of recovery, but the general physical decline was obvious. What is so extraordinary about this extraordinary man is that he kept on working and

writing. In 1991, two years before his death, he published a volume of essays, only some of which had been published before, and with a ninety pages essay commenting on the original “Moral Economy of the English Crowd” now also reprinted. The volume, *Customs in Common*, was followed in the year of his death by a monograph on the relations between his father and Rabindranath Tagore. The great volume on William Blake was already with his publishers before he died.

Edward Thompson was widely recognised during his lifetime as a man of outstanding gifts and as one of the major intellectual figures of the twentieth century. But not by what in Britain is known as the Establishment. The British Academy delayed electing him to a Fellowship until 1992, the year before his death. Just over a decade earlier he had been invited to deliver the televised Richard Dimbleby lecture and when the Director General of the BBC heard about it, the invitation was withdrawn.

He married his wife Dorothy early in their lives. She was very active during the *Reasoner* period, in spite of family commitments, and of major importance in the movement for European Nuclear Disarmament. In all his writings Edward Thompson gave full tribute to her contribution. A considerable historian herself, she offered help of many kinds. This is what he wrote at the end of the acknowledgements to *The Making of the English Working Class*:

I have also to thank Mrs Dorothy Thompson, an historian to whom I am related by the accident of marriage. Each chapter has been discussed with her, and I have been well placed to borrow not only her ideas but material from her notebooks. Her collaboration is to be found, not in this or that particular, but in the way the whole problem has been seen.

Edward Thompson died on 28 August 1993.

John Saville