Labour/Le Travailleur

Homage to Edward Thompson, Part II

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Volume 33, 1994

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt33art01

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)
1911-4842 (digital)

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Cite this article

Palmer, B. D. (1994). Homage to Edward Thompson, Part II. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, *33*, 13–68.

ARTICLES

Homage to Edward Thompson, Part II

Bryan D. Palmer

Making Histories

AS THE EDITORIAL DIRECTION of the *New Left Review* shifted in the early-to-mid 1960s, Edward Thompson was putting the finishing touches on the book that would eventually make his name commonplace in academic seminars and statements of historiography. Late in 1962 Thompson spent two weeks on some final researches at the British Museum, living in Perry Anderson's London apartment. The two sparred occasionally, debating the virtues of historical and sociological modes of thinking, but they sidestepped the widening political and interpretive gulfs that were now obviously separating the editorial board of the review. For all the apparent harshness of the eventual fallout that drove Thompson away from the journal he had helped to found and into an acidic debate with his new left successors, who by 1964 were in unchallenged control of the Carlisle Street offices of the *NLR*, there was, at the face-to-face level, remarkably little personal animosity. Anderson recalls the odd 'explosion,' but remembers of Thompson: "his attitude to the youngsters was fundamentally generous, and when the time came he ensured a clear hand-over of the old board to them, without rancour. Whatever his forebodings, he was not possessive." Years later, the swords of Anderson, Tom Nairn, and Thompson having crossed and clashed in the pages of *Socialist Register* and *New Left Review*, the two major protagonists bumped into each other in a London pub. Edward was "good nature itself," recalled Anderson. The indignations of the polemical page were kept separate from the still fraternal impulses of

Bryan D. Palmer, "Homage to Edward Thompson, Part II," *Labour/Le Travail* 33 (Spring 1994), 13-68.

sociability, the hand of experience extended welcomingly to youthful rebels. Thompson was now a personage of stature in the milieu of English radicalism, yet when he finished *The Making of the English Working Class* he was a mere 38 years of age. The book further consolidated his reputation on the left, but it catapulted him into the international world of historical scholarship.[1]

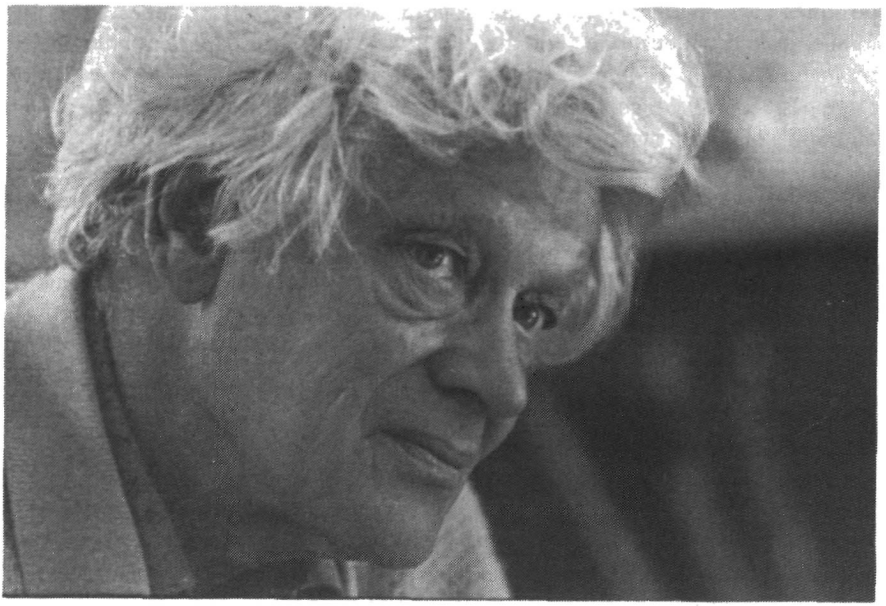
"I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity," Thompson wrote in the Preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*. I have never before quoted these lines, precisely because they have been reproduced by *everybody* with an interest in the dispossessed and the marginalized. They are undoubtedly the most cited set of words in the making of social history. But it is appropriate to allude to this passage here, for in many ways it captured the essence of Thompson's efforts to remake historical sensitivities. His Morris volume, whatever its value as a rereading of Victorian socialism and the importance of the romantic critique of capitalism, focused on a figure long recognized as important, however that importance was mistakenly fragmented, its parts isolated and drawn apart rather than integrated and understood in their relationships (arts and craft; poetry; architecture; socialism). In the post-*William Morris* years, Thompson's historical writing turned to the obscure and obscured history of class *experience*: he was increasingly involved in projects, not of Morrisian-like politicization through *reinterpretation*, but in reinterpretation and politicization through *excavation*. This moved from the subject terrain of the Industrial Revolution, where there was an abundance of comment in antiquarian texts, newspapers, state sources, and established historical writing, from the sympathetic but far from unproblematic commentary of the Hammonds and the Webbs through the dry detachments of the *Economic History Review*, to the work on the eighteenth century, where the writing increasingly turned on closer and closer interrogations of the unmined record of 'plebeian' life and its reciprocal ties to 'patrician' rule.[2]

This historiographic production gave rise to a virtual industry of Thompson comment, some descriptive, much increasingly critical.[3] From almost every corner

[1]Perry Anderson, "Diary," *London Review of Books*, 21 October 1993, 24-5.

[2]Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1968), 13 (all references to this text in this section will be to this edition). Hobsbawm points out that according to the Arts and Humanities Citation Index, Thompson was cited more frequently than any other historian in the twentieth-century world and that he was, indeed, one of the 250 most-frequently cited authors of all time. Hobsbawm, "E.P. Thompson: Obituary," *The Independent*, 30 August 1993.

[3]On the descriptive side see especially Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (Oxford 1984), 167-220; Kaye, *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History* (New York 1992), 98-115; E.K. Trimberger, "E.P. Thompson: Understanding the Process of History," in Theda Skocpol, ed., *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge 1984), 211-43. For the influence on American social history see Alan Dawley, "E.P.



has come the push to assimilate Thompson, be it to sociology or anthropology as academic disciplines or to the turn to 'new' cultural history.[4] Coincident with the publication of *The Poverty of Theory* a deluge of commentary descended on Thompson, insistent on forcing consideration of the theoretical purity of Thompson's method within the context of an historiographic moment of fixation on Marxism's supposedly interpretive structuralist core.[5] Engaging and penetrating

Thompson and the Peculiarities of the Americans," *Radical History Review*, 19 (1978-79), 33-59. Note, as well, F.K. Donnelly, "Ideology and Early English Working-Class History: Edward Thompson and His Critics," *Social History*, 3 (1976), 219-38.

[4]Anthony Giddens, "Out of the Orrery: E.P. Thompson on consciousness and history," in Giddens, *Social Theory and Modern Sociology* (Stanford 1987), 203-24; Renato Rosaldo, "Celebrating Thompson's Heroes: Social analysis in History and Anthropology," in Kaye and McClelland, ed., *E.P. Thompson*, 103-24; Suzanne Desan, "Crowds, Community, and Ritual in the Work of E.P. Thompson and Natalie Davis," in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley 1989), 47-71.

[5]See, for instance, Richard Johnson, "Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History," *History Workshop Journal*, 6 (Autumn 1978), 79-100; Johnson, "Culture and the Historians," and "Three Problematics: Elements of a Theory of Working-Class Culture," in John Clarke, Chas Critcher, and Richard Johnson, ed., *Working-Class Culture: Studies in history and theory* (London 1979), 41-71, 201-37; Gregor McLennan, "E.P. Thompson and the discipline of historical context," and "Philosophy and history: some issues in recent marxist history," and Richard Johnson, "Reading for the best Marx: history-writing and historical abstraction," in Richard Johnson *et al.*, ed., *Making Histories: Studies in history-writing and politics* (London 1982), 96-204.

critiques of "experience" as a touchstone of historical analysis appeared in the 1980s, as did a questioning of the selectiveness and perhaps chronologically premature basis of Thompson's understanding of class formation.[6] More recently there has been sustained discussion of the gendered understanding (historical and authorial) of consciousness and class implicit in Thompson's *Making*.[7]

[6]Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, esp. 16-58; Geoff Eley, "Edward Thompson, Social History and Political Culture: The Making of a Working-Class Public, 1780-1850," and William H. Sewell, "How Classes Are Made: Critical Reflections on E.P. Thompson's Theory of Working-Class Formation," in Kaye and McClelland, ed., *E.P. Thompson*, 12-77; Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism During the Industrial Revolution* (Chicago 1982); E.J. Hobsbawm, "The Formation of British Working-Class Culture," and "The Making of the Working Class, 1870-1914," in Hobsbawm, *Workers: Worlds of Labor* (New York 1984), 176-213.

[7]I regard as useful Catherine Hall, "The Tale of Samuel and Jemima: Gender and Working-class Culture in Nineteenth-century England," in Kaye and McClelland, ed., *E.P. Thompson*, 78-102; James Epstein, "Understanding the Cap of Liberty: Symbolic Practice and Social Conflict in Early Nineteenth-Century England," *Past & Present*, 122 (1989), 75-118. If there is indeed a point in Joan W. Scott, "Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*," in Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York 1988), 68-92 and Scott, "Experience," in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, ed., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York 1992), 22-40, *and there is*, it is nevertheless squandered in obscurantism and a disturbing capacity to misread. My own views are put forward in Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia 1990), 78-86, and I remain unrepentant. Thompson, of course, would have replied to Scott had ill-health and pressing political and writing commitments in the last years of his life not made this impossible. It is perhaps therefore appropriate to quote from personal correspondence. "I've glanced through Joan *very* fast, and it's a quite different piece from her first shot at this at the AHA. Indeed at several places she's arguing opposite points. She's obviously heard on the gossip network that I was cross about her misquotes. So she's taken those out. It's a more intelligent, more interesting piece, and she's determined to get me, one way or the other. She's introduced one or two *new* misquotations & I'm convinced she's a victim of word-blindness, which is to be pitied in her since it makes preoccupation with Language & Discourse difficult. ... Her book hasn't got to this side yet. I *will* someday write a comment." Thompson to Palmer, 17 March 1989. "This Scott is better than first version, & she has a point about gendered class. I didn't do it. ... it *was* so gendered. As regards Barbara Taylor, her women (of course I didn't know 1/4 as much as she found out) didn't appear in *Making* for the boring academic reason they weren't "my period" — they mostly got going after 1830 and I could only wave a hand toward them. Scott's version 1 was even sillier on Joanna Southcott. I'm convinced she hasn't even read John Harrison's sane and sympathetic account of her. I liked v. much the way you exposed her mis-use of "paradox of feeling." But all you do is expose yourself as an Idiot, brother: there's NO Way you can win against that on-rolling fashion-machine — you simply point yourself out to be rolled over next. I accept Jim Epstein's review of *Making* on women ... in recent *P & P*." Thompson to Palmer, 26 May 1989.

This enduring engagement with Thompson's writings suggests their importance. Certainly much can be learned from this literature of critique: about historical process; about the construction of historiography; about the silences and thundering loudness of choice in Thompson's own formulation of what emerges out of the evidence; about the shifting sands of political and intellectual concern in our own time. In their relentless engagement with Thompson *on their own terms*, in which his project is repeatedly scrutinized with a kind of reverse-referentiality, to what concerns the *critic*, much is gained. But there are also points of loss and, even, tendencies to violate matters of political and intellectual substance in a ruthless suppression of interest in WHY *The Making* ended up looking like it did. There has been little enough of this probing curiosity in the manufacture of Thompson comment, which rolls off the academic assembly line with only the most irregular instances of the kind of sabotage that would take analysis back into the confluence of streams that actually structured Thompson's approach.[8]

These streams have already been alluded to here. Thompson's engagement with adult education remained in place as he researched and wrote *The Making* and, earlier, his important revisionist piece on Tom Maguire, socialism, and the Leeds Independent Labour Party. Living in Halifax in the late 1950s, Thompson was now an experienced extra-mural tutor. "You got to know the members of the classes very well," he recalled in 1988, "and also they told you a great deal from their own oral traditions." Hard up for money, and cognizant of the need for a text that might reach these student workers, teachers, and trade unionists and the left milieu that he was trying to transform, Thompson agreed to a publisher's request to write a history of the British labour movement from 1832-1945. He convinced the press to push the chronological beginning point back to 1790, and what became *The Making of the English Working Class* was in fact to be the first chapter of this never completed survey text. "I was trying to express the theoretical and philosophical preoccupations of 10 years of extra-mural work," he noted in 1980, the book being aimed "at the good extra-mural student." It was also driven by the political context, where Thompson's creative adaptation of the Blake/ Morris courting/marriage of Romanticism and Marxism, his eventual repudiation of Stalinism's destructive denials of human agency, and his efforts to build a new left, all culminated in "a polemic against abbreviated economistic notations of Marxism" in which "the creation of the working class was that of a determined process: steam power plus the factory system equals the working class." Embedded in local sources, oral traditions, and the distinct socialist past of the West Riding, Thompson remembered being largely innocent of academic preoccupations and proprieties as

[8]For exceptions, see Henry Abelove's brief but often suggestive comments in his review of *The Poverty of Theory* in *History and Theory*, 21 (1980), 132-142; and McShane's "'History and Hope': E.P. Thompson and *The Making of the English Working Class*," which, while overly in the mode of intellectual history, does try to excavate the relationship of Romanticism, Marxism, and Thompson's writing of working-class history.

he began the research and writing of *The Making*. "My material was more likely to come from Batley library than the *Economic History Review*." And this evidence, in what would be a recurring theme in Thompson's research, overtook him. Far from planning almost 1000 pages on this initial chapter (1790-1832), "the material took command of me, far more than I ever expected." Later Thompson would draw the conclusion that, "I would have to say that the historian has got to be listening all the time. ... If he listens, then the material itself will begin to speak through him. And I think this happens." It would also speak through and to others. Sheila Rowbotham remembers pouring over the collections of books assembled by Edward and Dorothy, and how that moved her in the direction of the social and sexual radicalism of Edward Carpenter:

> I must have been about twenty-one when Edward Thompson showed me his 'Homage to Tom Maguire', the account he had written of the emergence of socialism in Leeds. Carpenter appears tangentially in this. He was a friend of Maguire's and of Alf Mattison, who helped Maguire organise the gas workers and was a frequent visitor to Millthorpe. Through Dorothy and Edward Thompson there was a living connection to those early days of West Riding socialism. Among others they had met Alf's wife Florence Mattison, still active in the Leeds labour movement. Edward Thompson started to tell me about that northern socialism, how for a time preoccupation with changing all forms of human relationships had been central in a working-class movement. Somehow the connection had been broken and people like Carpenter drifted away, became slightly cranky and inturned. I didn't really understand what he was saying then but could feel from the way he said it that it was somehow important.

"I think I wrote *The Making of the English Working Class* rather faster than seems probable," Thompson would tell an interviewer almost three decades later. "I must have had a lot of energy in those days that I don't have now." That energy was driven by passions and commitments, feeding off of the sources and localized human connections to a past worth recovering. "History is the memory of a culture," Thompson later claimed, "and memory can never be free from passions and commitments. I am not in any sense inhibited by the fact that my own passions and commitments are clear."[9]

Those passions and commitments drove the form of presentation in *The Making* in specific directions. Irreverent and unpholding unambiguously the case

[9]E.P. Thompson, "Homage to Tom Maguire," in Asa Briggs and John Saville, eds., *Essays in Labour History* (London 1960), 276-316; Hogben, "E.P. Thompson, Historian and Peace Activist," *Whig-Standard Magazine*, 4 June 1988, 9; Scott, "Voluntary Exile from History's Mainstream," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 27 June 1980, 7; "E.P. Thompson: Interview," *Visions of History*, 6-7, 14-5; Sheila Rowbotham, "In Search of Carpenter," in Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas: Collected Writings* (London 1983), 242-3, explaining her and Jeffrey Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life: The Personal and Sexual Politics of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis* (London 1977). Note also, Rowbotham's comment in "Search and Subject, Threading Circumstance," *Dreams and Dilemmas*, 171-2 and, on listening, Bess, "E.P. Thompson: the Historian as Activist," 19-38.

for the human costs paid over the course of the Industrial Revolution, Thompson's book was almost unique in the clarity, not so much of what it was *for*, but of what it stood *against*. Consider the simple matter of concluding sentences for specific chapters: on the field labourers "As for this litel fire," the writer concluded with equable ill-humour, "Don't be alarmed it will be a damd deal wors when we burn down your barn ..."; on artisans and others "A notable victory for Dr. Kay and Mr Plum! [ed: workhouse administrators] ... 78,536 workhouse inmates. By 1843 the figure had rise to 197,179. The most eloquent testimony to the depths of poverty is in the fact that they were tenanted at all"; on the weavers: "For those who suffered, this retrospective comfort is cold." Or, this comment on the standard of living and the 'average' working man: "His own share in the 'benefits of economic progress' consisted of more potatoes, a few articles of cotton clothing for his family, soap and candles, some tea and sugar, and a great many articles in the *Economic History Review*." Against the jaundiced cynicism of R.M. Hartwell, who viewed the experience of child labour against a twentieth-century familiarity with concentration camps to proclaim himself "comparatively unmoved," Thompson offered words of opposition: "We may be allowed to reaffirm a more traditional view: that the exploitation of little children, on this scale and with this intensity, was one of the most shameful events in our history." As Thompson himself pointed out in the case of Cobbett, *tone* matters, and it was the style and persistently charged language of *The Making*, in conjuncture with its emphasis in content on the self-activity of labouring people, that established its enduring political relevance. "Which argument, which truths?" was scratched into every line of detail, punctuating the *refusal* of complacencies, be they of past or present. Decades later, in an epic poem, Thompson would return to this theme:

However many the Emperor slew
The scientific historian
(While taking note of contradiction)
Affirms that productive forces grew.

Thompson's tone made historical writing and the process and events of history *one*: making history was an interpretive intervention that linked past, present, and future; understanding what made history reordered appreciation of these reciprocal chronologies and opened out into new appreciations of how history could be remade; writing history therefore mattered, as did the living of it, both of which related to its future. This, in part, explains why even critics of Thompson acknowledge that the book "awoke labour history from its long dogmatic slumbers."[10]

[10]Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 258, 296, 346, 351, 384, 820. Also Thompson, "Blake's Tone," *London Review of Books*; Sewell, "Thompson's Theory of Working-Class Formation," 75. Thompson, "Powers and Names," *London Review of Books*, 23 January 1986, 10.

Because the book is now centrally recognized as a pivotal text within the field of working-class history, and because, as well, I am relatively unconcerned about the particular details of Thompson's argument, as opposed to the way he constructed it, what influences came to bear on that construction, and how his general approach moved the historiography so decisively forward, it is not vitally important to stop and ponder every specific case study developed in *The Making*. This, ironically, has been the strategy of critics, be they Marxist, feminist, or mainstream. Yet in the end it matters far less that Thompson's claims *for* the working-class of early nineteenth century England rest too lightly on an understanding of accumulation and capitalism's uneven march, privilege artisanal debasements and efforts to deflect proletarianization, focus attention on the resisting side of experience -- be it the London Corresponding Society or Luddism -- and understate accommodation, elevate unnecessarily the question of consciousness to the detriment of an appreciation of socio-economic structure, reproduce and valorize the masculinist understanding of the politics and workplace meanings of class, and overstate the level of class cohesion in a chronologically premature insistence that the working class was in fact made by 1832, than that the book opened interpretive eyes to a new way of seeing class. *The Making's* success is not in this or that particular argument, and whether they are, rigidly understood, *right* or *wrong*. Its meaning, rather, and its consequent great achievement, lies in the unmistakable rupture it forced in the historical literature, where class formation could no longer simply be posed, by radicals and reactionaries alike, as a mechanical reflection of economic change. Those who want to call into question the so-called Thompsonian attraction to aspects of historical process, such as 'culture' or 'experience', usually point to legitimate areas of ambiguity. But they, too, miss the fundamental and undeniable analytic edge and advance of Thompson's book: whatever the difficulties in defining with precision such conceptual terms, their utilization in *The Making* allowed entry to whole areas of neglected importance in the lives of workers, areas that could never again be ignored in negotiating the slippery slopes that connect being and consciousness. Moreover, a massive interpretive work such as Thompson's never denied that it selected partially and incompletely from the infinite range of events and processes that, patched together, comprised some kind of quantifiable sum total of class experience. The argument was coloured by West Riding sources, many of the twists and turns needed more research and, upon completion of such inquiry, Thompson was quick to acknowledge that his own admittedly limited project had been surpassed. Yet Thompson's book rightly insisted on generalization, against the fragmenting impulses of a social history that, by the 1990s, would too often measure its maturity in regression into a kind of senile fixation on the particular, denying the very value of integrating experience into an understanding of connections and powerful influences. "The new social history is becoming," Thompson worried in 1973, "a series of prints, snapshots, stasis upon stasis. As a gain is registered, in the new dimension of social history, at the same time whole territories of established economic and political history are

evacuated. The central concern of history, as a relevant humane study -- to generalize and integrate and to attain a comprehension of the full social and cultural process -- becomes lost." *The Making of the English Working Class* refused such evacuations, *assuming* much in the way of economic context, to be sure, recasting the understanding of politics to include the reciprocities of state and class formation. Reductionist efforts to boil Thompson down to a particular rhetorical flourish -- "the working class made itself as much as it was made" -- inevitably caricature the richness of his account. For much of working-class consciousness in this period, as a reading of Thompson will show, was indeed forged from above, in the crucibles of state panic and repression that reach from the Jacobin agitations of the 1790s through the underground threats of the first years of the 19th century into Peterloo (1819). Some of the most imaginative passages of Thompson's text emerge out of his exemplary interrogation of the very sources of fear and loathing generated by the state informers' reports which allow the judicious historian to get past the self-serving exaggerations of paid spies into the insurrectionary underground that conservatives and constitutionally-inclined Fabians have both tended to discount. As the imperatives of capital and the counter-revolutionary panic of the ruling classes expressed themselves, simultaneously, in every corner of life, within the political economy of the Industrial and French Revolutions, the English working class came to consciousness of itself against a dual threat: "as new techniques and forms of industrial organization advanced, so political and social rights receded." John Thelwall's *Rights of Nature* (1796) recognized the formative possibility present in this moment of danger: "Every large workshop and manufactory is a sort of political society, which no act of parliament can silence, and no magistrate disperse."[11]

"Orphans we are, and bastards of society," wrote James Morrison in 1834, in a quote that appears on the last page of *The Making of the English Working Class.* "The tone is not one of resignation," Thompson states, "but of pride." In attending to the history of class formation in ways that looked seriously to the active making of such self-identifications, Thompson's book was obviously related to the politics of his repudiation of Stalinism and articulation of socialist humanism. It drew directly on the Romantic tradition's assault on the formative moment of capitalist consolidation, situating much of the moral authority of antagonism to the Industrial Revolution in the powerful Jacobin indictments of the 1790s, but it acknowledged the failure to forge a common front of poetic and proletarian alternative:

[11]Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 195, 203; Tim Mason, "The Making of the English Working Class," *History Workshop Journal*, 7 (1979), 224-5; Thompson, "Responses to reality," *New Society* (4 October 1973), 33-5; and, for Thompson's own understandings of where other work has surpassed his own: Thompson, "The very type of the 'respectable' artisan," *New Society* (3 May 1979), 275-7 (reviewing Prothero's *Artisans and Politics in Early 19th Century London: John Gast and his times*) or, in the case of an even more critical review, Thompson, "Testing Class Struggle," *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 March 1974 (reviewing Foster's *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution*).

Such men met Utilitarianism in their daily lives, and they sought to throw it back, not blindly, but with intelligence and moral passion. They fought, not the machine, but the exploitative and oppressive relationships intrinsic to industrial capitalism. In these same years, the great Romantic criticism of Utilitarianism was running its parallel but altogether separate course. After William Blake, no mind was at home in both cultures, nor had the genious to interpret the two traditions to each other. ... Hence these years appear at times to display, not a revolutionary challenge, but a resistance movement, in which both the Romantics and the Radical craftsmen opposed the annunciation of Acquisitive Man. In the failure of the two traditions to come to a point of juncture, something was lost. How much we cannot be sure, for we are among the losers.

Thompson's history was thus an attempt to come to grips with the explanatory puzzle of the failure of revolution in nineteenth-century England and its relationship to more contemporary political failures of the left. But it did so in ways that, however attentive to ideas and immiseration, the capitulations to capital's ideological power and the conflicts of street and workplace, never shunted the subjects aside, their defeats registering only in dismissive marginalization. Instead, Thompson thanked those who were organized in the dead of night, who fell at Peterloo, who hawked the radical press, who did thousands of things and thought thousands of thoughts against the grain of Albion's fatal tree and stood tall for liberty. In this, as well as in the disciplines of capitalist development, class was made, a happening marked always with the blows of conflict.[12]

The Making of the English Working Class, like Thompson's teaching in adult education, was thus constructed on the battleground of class conflict. It was a conscious intervention in the long process of the making of the working class from above, that was also an attempt to unmake any realization of class consciousness or identification of class grievance and potential power from below. In a Mansbridge Memorial Lecture at Leeds in the mid-to-late 1960s Thompson noted that,

The desire to dominate and shape the intellectual and cultural growth of the people towards predetermined and safe ends remains extremely strong right through the Victorian years: and it survives today. ... From the 1790s, then one can see the 'march of the intellect,' with its mutual improvement societies, its mechanic's institutes, and its Sunday lectures, beginning to move forward: but at the same time, it was leaving behind it the customary experiential culture of the people. ... The self-educated working man who dedicated his nights and his Sundays to the pursuit of knowledge was also asked at every turn to reject the entire human lore of his childhood and of his fellow workers as uncouth, immoral, ignorant.

At his own point of production, Thompson taught workers themselves that this was not the kind of politico-intellectual trade they need make, just as *The Making*

[12]Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 915.

showed that it was not what had necessarily happened historically.[13] By the mid-1960s Thompson's historical understanding of English class experience was relatively firmly grounded, theoretically, historiographically, and in terms of his own considerable immersion in specific source materials. It confirmed, for Thompson, the importance of class, further convincing him of the aridity of the abstract Marxism of the second new left, epitomized by the Anderson-Nairn position that in the class defeats of English society the revolutionary potential of the working class was sacrificed on the altar of a bourgeoisie that failed to win a decisive political victory over the aristocracy in the 1640s, further compromising itself in 1688 and 1832. In Anderson's words " a supine bourgeoisie produced a subordinate proletariat." Yet this did not fit at all with Thompson's own appreciation of the depth of class struggles and the range of working-class resources in nineteenth-century England. He was not starry-eyed in his assessment of the working class, the left, and their respective defeats and shortcomings, particularly with respect to imperialism and a jingoistic nationalism. But the platonic models of the Anderson-Nairn thesis tidied up all the messiness of class struggles in a kind of tunnel-vision that could only scope in the linear sightings of one-dimensional boundaries of hegemony. What this missed, for Thompson, was the extent to which, even in defeat, the working-class proceeded to "warren" capitalist society "from end to end," building and supporting a network of trade unions, cooperative societies, fraternal associations, and self-help movements. Making histories demanded recognition of this. In a 1973 review of Dyos' and Wolff's *The Victorian City* Thompson would return to this point:

> This is a city without trade unions, republican clubs, friendly societies, strikes, Reform Bill demonstrations, workingmen's clubs, co-ops, acclaims for Garibaldi and rough-musicking of General Heinau, female reformers, or any street corner agitators. The poor are in this city, and middle class responses to the poor; but the working class and its movements are not.

This was the academic "blindspot," the scholastic equivalent of the reification of *the* model evident in the Anderson-Nairn encounter with class. University-ensconced academics, however liberal and humane, were, Thompson suggested, "alienated from the people as a mass ... deeply skeptical about working-class movements ... impotent in social or political terms." As a result there were inevitably gaps of considerable importance in much academic writing:

> Capitalism, class conflict these are two of the absentees from this book. ... we cannot simply set those problems aside, in the interests of a more comfortable seminar. ... What ghost was

[13]Thompson, *Education and Experience*, 13-4 and, for an interesting statement on experiential vs experience see Sewell, "Thompson's Theory of Working-class Formation," 67-8. It is perhaps within an appreciation of this context of ideological pressure that Jacques Ranciere's *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia 1989) can be read against its author's interpretive grain.

inside that Victorian machine? What drove the railways and slums here but not there, starved these artists and rewarded those, fueled the ideologies, made the image of 'city' and of 'community' appear as antagonists? ... Those Victorian moralists and literary men who as many contributors insist turned their backs on the city, yearned nostalgically for 'nature', allowed protest to petrify in escapism, may still be seen as negative voices. But within their negativity, may also be seen a resistance to utilitarian definitions that sustained values which, transmitted to us, are a major resource for human survival.

Ironically enough the democratization of education in the 1960s, the mixed academic response to *The Making of the English Working Class*, as well, perhaps, as the book's influence abroad and within the general post-1965 rise of social history, placed Thompson in an increasingly proximate relation to academic research and writing. He had become, through no intention of his own, an historian captivated by research possibilities. Driven by his sources and personal and political circumstances to particular areas where histories could be made in ways that related to the English working-class he had long embraced as central to the values and meanings of alternative and possibility, he was moved, step by unanticipated step, in new directions.[14]

In 1965 Edward and Dorothy Thompson moved to the West Midlands where Edward would become Director of the Centre for the Study of Social History at the newly-established University of Warwick; three years later Dorothy would join the History Department of the University of Birmingham. The Centre quickly attracted a number of talented graduate students, many of them from North America, and Edward's drawing power as a thesis supervisor and teacher were accentuated by lively seminars with guest speakers and a resident visiting professor from the United States. Thompson was increasingly drawn into the milieu of History as an academic discipline, in part because his own work had now entered into the professional discourse and was subjected to sometimes searing critique, in part because in training young apprentice historians he was responsible for insuring that their education took slightly different directions than that with which he had been involved in extra-mural adult education classes through Leeds. Yet the recollections of his academic graduate students from this period seem not to be markedly different from those of his Leeds adult learners. Edward's teaching remained marked by its rigour and passion, its fairness in the face of difference, its generosity in sharing ideas and sources. And Edward continued to learn from his students, whose labours in the field work of historical reconstruction he regularly acknowledged and supported. If teaching at Warwick did not present the same need to

[14]Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," *Socialist Register 1965*, 311-62, and for an extension of the "warrening" argument, John Saville, *1848: The British State and the Chartist Movement* (Cambridge 1987), 208-10; Palmer, *Making of E.P. Thompson*, 65-82 and Stuart Macintyre, "The Making of the Australian working class: an historiographical survey," *Historical Studies*, 18 (1978), 233-53 (for influence of *The Making* abroad); Thompson, "Responses to Reality," *New Society* (4 October 1973), 33-5.

impress upon working-class adult students that their experiences mattered, it led in at least one similar direction: Thompson's students were aware, in the words of Bob Malcolmson and John Rule, that, "Writing history was a life-enhancing activity ... done with a deep sense of commitment ... vital to the health of society." This was something that has stayed with many of them for the remainder of their lives.[15]

At Warwick Thompson's historical work moved back in time, into the eighteenth century. Unlike the Morris volume or the study of the early working class, these eighteenth-century explorations were undertaken against the backdrop of established academic scholarship. There were in fact two histories being made in this period.

The first, involving Thompson's pursuit of some themes first elaborated in the discussion of "community" in *The Making of the English Working Class*, drew Thompson into the customary culture of the plebeian masses. Much of this new research actually overturned assumptions and prejudices buried in undeveloped lines of *The Making*, where Thompson had too easily bought into the very condescension he sought to overcome, accepting at face value the often incomplete and usually 'improving' views of the socially superior, be they novelists, folklorists, or respectable constitutionalist radicals/reformers. Often, Thompson's entry into this material showed him how partial had been his understanding of the available historical evidence. He would later "confess with shame" that he had written *The Making* without having read John Brand's *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (1777). In his increasingly critical engagement with anthropology, Thompson may -- although this is largely conjecture -- have been influenced by his father's interest in Indian custom, an interpretation that draws some support from the locale where he chose to present his views on folklore, anthropology, and social history: the Indian Historical Congress. What was developing in this period, carrying through into the 1970s, was a close reading of rituals such as the wife sale and rough music as well as increasing attention to the dispossessed's convictions of common right to the land. These studies, gestured to in general statements on historical method or social history, or presented in edited collections of essays or foreign journals, for the most part started as research projects in this period of the late 1960s but only found their way into print later. Two lengthy and hugely

[15]On Thompson's teaching at Warwick I rely on the relevant discussion in Robert W. Malcolmson, John Rule, and Peter Searby, "Edward Thompson as a teacher: Yorkshire and Warwick," in Malcolmson and Rule, eds., *Protest and Survival*, esp. 17-8; Douglas Hay, "Edward Thompson as a Teacher," comments at a Memorial for E.P. Thompson, York University, 15 September 1993. To suggest, as does Anderson's *London Review of Books* "Diary," that the move from industrial-capitalist Halifax, Yorkshire to the countryside of Wick Episcopi, Worcestershire implied a shift in political sensitivities that prefigured Thompson's increasing distance from class and a consequent "modulation in his writing" is to push a geographical determinism rather far. Anderson's interesting abbreviations concerning Thompson's intellectual and political voice can of course be interpreted differently.

influential articles, published in *Past & Present*, had more of an immediate impact. "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism" (1967) and "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century" (1971) were carefully formed statements that, more than any other writings, placed Thompson in the forefront of *academic* social history. The first became an undisputed classic, cited routinely around the world as scholars addressed the tensions of peasant, protoindustrial, and early proletarian communities reacting to the disciplines and new work rhythms of capitalist social formations. More controversial was Thompson's discussion of the moral economy of the crowd, which generated an intensive industry of analysis and study. Taken together, these researches and writings all revolved around a reinterpretation of the whole of eighteenth-century society in which patricians and plebeians were locked in the reciprocal embrace of paternalism, an argument that received an abbreviated airing in the American *Journal of Social History* in 1974. As late as 1992, one of Thompson's students, working in South Africa, remembered this Warwick moment of eighteenth-century discovery: "In my head I keep hearing Edward Thompson giving his lectures on eighteenth-century paternalism. His voice inspires me still -- even in this very different place." Christopher Hitchens claims that in a police cell in Oxford in 1969 he, Raph Samuel, and a number of others arrested during a mass demonstration against "some Tory racist demagogue" had found to their surprise that they had all attended "Edward Thompson's bravura talk on the Enclosure Acts a few weeks previously." Conscious of a common bond, there was no other topic of conversation in their jail cell. As the chants of opposition outside the cop shop rose and fell, blood congealing on battered faces, Hitchens and his comrades were drawn back into "a tremendous account of the lost world of the common land and the common people," which Thompson had closed with poetic lines from John Clare. "All the cliches about bringing history to life had become, for those who listened, vividly and properly true," Hitchens suggested.[16]

[16]Consider the case of Thompson's shifting interpretation of the wife sale. In *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), 410-1 the practice is acknowledged to have been used as a form of divorce when no other possibilities existed for the poor to address marital breakdown. But in the main, Thompson considered the ritual barbaric. Five years later in the 1968 edition, 451, these comments were excised. More considered comment was later offered piecemeal in a series of essays: Thompson, "Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context," 52, 55; Thompson, "Folklore, Anthropology, and Social History," *Indian Historical Review*, 3 (1978), 247-66, with comment on the wife sale on 252-3, and on Brand, 248-51; Thompson, "Eighteenth-century English society: class struggle without class," *Social History*, 3 (1978), 156. Other work: "Rough Music: Le charivari anglais," *Annales: E.S.C.*, 27 (1972), 285-312; "The Grid of Inheritance: A Comment," in Jack Goody *et al.*, eds., *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200-1800* (London 1976), 328-60; "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," *Society for the Study of Labour History Bulletin*, 27 (1973), 26-7; "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974), 381-405; "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present*, 38

This work, later to form the core essays in *Customs in Common* (1991), was supplemented by other historical writing, most of which broke only lightly from conventional academic proprieties.[17] But the second project of the Warwick period proceeded in ways marked by Thompson's own peculiar engagement with professional historical scholarship.

There seems to have been a cooperative equality linking Thompson and his students throughout this period of the later 1960s. They moved toward the eighteenth-century studies, especially in a collective focus on law and crime, *together*, in collaborative consultation in which teacher and student shared the excitement of uncertainty as to what would be found. Thompson was at this time balancing a set of creatively destabilizing impulses. In a series of important, and often lengthy, reviews and prefaces Thompson confirmed his continuing interest in the subject of the *The Making of the English Working Class*, especially Peterloo; restated his sensitivities to class difference and the politics of making histories in ways that demanded attention to sexuality, gender oppression, and rural labour; charted an opening foray into the historiography of crime; and grappled, through engagement with the first instalment of Laslett's Cambridge Group for the History of Population, with an emerging, quantitatively-driven "demographic determinism" that threatened to displace histories concerned with something other than numbers. As early as 1966 Thompson was simultaneously enthusiastic and cautious about the prospect of labour history becoming a "great testing-ground for historical sociology," embracing the break from traditional confinements as liberation, but insisting that new methodologies must not obliterate older traditions of inquiry and that the traffic between history and sociology run in two mutually-respectful directions. But if Thompson was increasingly attuned to concerns of academic historians, he was far from overtaken by them, as his Preface to a collection of essays by the American radical historian and 'outsider', Staughton Lynd, suggests. Describing himself as a fellow 'objector', Thompson linked himself with Lynd in "our brotherhood in the shadowy international of revolutionary humanism." Both, moreover, exhibited the concern with "actualities" that immersed their thinking in the particular and "primary discipline of history," that of context. They nevertheless stood apart from both "the long conservative ascendancy" that denied agency except in its most "trivialised and personalised expression" and the dual dangers

(December 1967), 56-97; "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present*, 50 (1971), 76-136. The student is quoted in Malcolmson, Rule, and Searby, "Edward Thompson as a teacher: Yorkshire and Warwick," 18; and note, as well, Christopher Hitchens, "Minority Report," *The Nation* (27 September 1993), 306. For the intellectual impact of this period see the creative applications of Thompson's insights in two books by James C. Scott: *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven 1985); *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven 1990).

[17]See, for instance, E.P. Thompson, "Mayhew and the *Morning Chronicle*," in Eileen Yeo and E. P. Thompson, eds., *The Unknown Mayhew* (New York 1971), 11-50.

on the left of radical sentimentalism and model-driven Marxist mechanical idealism. The key was context and the 'contradictoriness of culture'; but to "challenge established positions in this way requires, in the challenger, something of the awkwardness of an Objector." The meaning of this awkwardness of objection was registered most decisively in the way history was conceived and written, but it also seemed, to many, present in Edward's own physical being. One student remembered his first 'formal' meeting with Thompson: "The man who greeted me -- I mostly remember his wild, prematurely-greying hair -- was different from any other academic I had observed. He looked ... well, he looked like he had just strolled in from the moors, or returned from a meeting at the pithead. He was intense and energetic and had piercing eyes."[18]

This awkwardness was almost intrinsic to Thompson's method as a teacher, which blurred deliberately the often compartmentalized areas of research and teaching. As Thompson and his students collectively entered into an eighteenth-century world where crime and society overlapped in histories of domination and resistance, they apparently decided to produce a volume of essays. Thompson promised an article-length treatment of the draconian Black Act of 1723, which dramatically extended the number of capital offences. Preliminary research indicated that this was a rash commitment. In the end the chapter grew into Thompson's book *Whigs and Hunters* (1975) and he contributed to the collected essays, *Albion's Fatal Tree* (1975), an evocative account of the crime of the anonymous threatening letter. Yet again Thompson was seized by the material, his capacity to listen opening out into an appreciation of long suppressed and silenced voices. "One source led me to the next; but, also, one problem led me to another," he noted, somewhat exasperated. "What made this exercise more hazardous was that I had neither read nor researched very much on any aspect of social history before 1750," he continued, "I was like a parachutist coming down in unknown territory: at first knowing only a few yards of land around me, and gradually extending my explorations in each direction." Avoiding the actual historical writing in the field until quite late in his researches, Thompson was following his analytic instincts,

[18]See the often anonymous reviews: Thompson, "Man Bites Yeoman," *Times Literary Supplement* (11 December 1969), 1413-6; Thompson, "Glandular Aggression," *New Society* (19 January 1967), 100-1; Thompson, "Land of Our Fathers," *Times Literary Supplement* (16 February 1967), 117-8; Thompson, "Law as Part of a Culture," *Times Literary Supplement* (24 April 1969), 425-7; Thompson, "The Book of Numbers," *Times Literary Supplement* (9 December 1965), 1117-8, and note for a later statement on another Laslett text: "Under the same roof-tree," *Times Literary Supplement* (4 May 1973), 485-7; Thompson, "History from Below," *Times Literary Supplement* (7 April 1966), 279-80; and E.P. Thompson, "Preface," in Staughton Lynd, *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution* (New York 1967), ix-xiii. For more on the discipline of historical context see Thompson, "Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context," *Midland History*, 1 (1972), 41-55. On Thompson's appearance note Robert Malcolmson, "E.P. Thompson, 1924-1993: Mentor Extraordinaire," forthcoming, *Queen's Quarterly*, 1993.

cultivated over years of adult education teaching and debate on the left. Instead of starting with the conventional academic wisdom, looking first at Walpole and his Court, the Whig architects of the Act, and then, briefly at best, at the people and places subject to this new criminalization, Thompson reversed methodological direction. He began his researches with the Windsor and Hampshire deer forests and episodes of poaching transgression, moving into the shadowy underbrush of the masked hunters and foresters themselves, their networks and often raucous defiance of the King's law, closing with a look at the personnel and politics of administration and interest. These studies generated immense scholarly concern: they stimulated fruitful debate and the best of intellectual exchange, but they also upset the gentlemanly balance of English eighteenth-century studies, where deference to the grace and goodwill of lordly rule had long been accepted as a part of the curriculum. Disgruntled critics ravaged Thompson's footnotes to find errors of citation only to commit worse blunders themselves. "He is rather like a woodman, setting out to do a rigorous hatchet job, and coming back proudly with a couple of twigs and his own severed hand," Thompson rightly replied to one such conservative challenger. Another saw the publication of Thompson and his students and the odd complementary book in the United States as the thin edge of an ideological wedge, insinuating itself into the fortress of eighteenth-century historiography, bringing the walls down in a tumult of falling interpretive standards, and blasting away the mortar of free criticism. Manipulating this lever was the "charismatic leader" of a new school, orthodox in its convictions, threatening in its capacity to "pervert the historiography of eighteenth-century England for a generation." E.P. Thompson had become, from his post at a small provincial university, commanding an army of a dozen graduate students, the combat general of an interpretive war over domination of the eighteenth century. He would settle for nothing less than the imposition of "a Namierism of the Marxist left."[19]

[19]See Douglas Hay, *et al.*, *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York 1975); E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (London 1977), this second edition offering on 301-311 Thompson's response to hostile critics, especially John Cannon, *History* (October 1976); J.C.D. Clark, "The Namierism of the Left," *Cambridge Review* (22 October 1976). Valued exchanges took place around Alexander Pope and the Windsor Blacks. See Pat Rogers, "A Pope Family Scandal," *Times Literary Supplement* (31 August 1973), 1005; Thompson, "Alexander Pope and the Windsor Blacks," *ibid.* (7 September 1973), 1031-3; Howard Erskine-Hill, "Alexander Pope and the Windsor Forest Blacks," *ibid.* (14 September 1973), 1056; Andrew Varney, "Pope and the Windsor Blacks," *ibid.* (21 September 1973). Stone, "Whigs, Marxists, and Poachers," *New York Review of Books*, is, in its American distanced way, more good-humoured than much of the antagonistic conservatism of Clark-Cannon. See, for more elaboration on the content of this work, Palmer, *Making of E.P. Thompson*, 83-103.

The 1970s: Rethinking Marxism, Returning to 1956, and the Politics of Democracy

HISTORIANS, especially those comfortable in the confines of academic conservatism, are often the last to look the process of intellectual and political change in the face. No sooner was Thompson's influence as an eighteenth-century historian attacked as "Marxist" than his own debate with Marxism intensified, drawing him, unplanned I would argue, into a more critical dialogue with Marxisms that would eventually serve as his own point of departure from Marxism as both theory and practice. But Thompson would never become a crude anti-Marxist and, like his American friend Herbert G. Gutman, he would remain committed to historical materialism precisely because Marxism's conceptualization of how to question the past remained, for him, valid:

> What is left when you clear away the determinist and teleological elements are good questions that direct your attention to critical ways of looking at on-going historical processes. A fundamental contribution of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Marxist thinking is a set of questions having to do with the way in which one examines class relations and how they change, the way in which one examines the institutionalization of power, the way in which one examines popular oppositional movements, the way in which one examines the integration of subordinate or exploited groups into a social system. These are some of the very useful questions.

"Which arguments, which truths," would always, for Thompson, be answered out of some part of historical materialism, where Marxist concerns could never be *only* a matter of crude dismissal.[20]

Thompson's time at Warwick was destined to be short. Whatever his obvious and admirable merits as a teacher, he always considered himself a *writer*, and was growing impatient, as early as 1968, with the ways in which a University post, with its administrative and teaching responsibilities, seemed to curtail that activity (although, in hindsight, it also stimulated much creative work). In his own words, Thompson's brief tenure at Warwick was commemorated in "a bulky file full of my own fatuous and long-winded attempts at resignation." As his children grew up, necessitating less direct parental care, and with Dorothy taking up a teaching position at Birmingham, doors opened out into new possibilities and full-time writing had a pressing allure for Edward.[21]

Thompson would eventually leave Warwick, but not, ironically, before a moment of student rebellion shattered his political isolation and brought him back into the public limelight in ways that may have forced a slightly more charitable

[20]"Herbert G. Gutman: Interview," *Visions of History*, 201.

[21]E.P. Thompson, "Highly Confidential: A Personal Comment by the Editor," in Thompson, ed., *Warwick University Ltd: Industry, Management and the Universities* (Middlesex 1970), 157; "E.P. Thompson: Interview," *Visions of History*, 14; Dorothy Thompson, "Introduction," *Outsiders*.

reading of the excesses of American-style student rebellion and new left politics. Writing in 1971, Thompson referred to the radicalism of the 1960s as "more a matter of gesture and style than of practice ... [in which] satire became a means of disguising a general ambivalence of political and social stance." By no means uncritical in his admiration of youth, he often deplored its indiscipline and indulgence, especially as these related to politics: "Youth, if left to its own devices, tends to become very hairy, to lie in bed till lunch-time, to miss seminars, to be more concerned with the style rather than the consequence of actions, and to commit various sins of self-righteous political purism and intellectual arrogance." Presumably these views were translated, unevenly and awkwardly, into the personal relationships of Edward and his students, perhaps embellished in the relentless gossip that characterizes friendships among students and teachers, especially when teachers do not necessarily cultivate distance and detachment, which Edward did not. But these views probably intruded only lightly, if at all, precisely because the political atmosphere at Warwick, while linked to the campus revolts of 1968, remained one of modest disenchantment. Protest was likely to be symbolic (elaborate graffiti) or supportive (endorsement of London School of Economics actions) or directed outward, to a wider, non-University, non-Warwick world (anti-Vietnam War activity).[22]

This changed during the second term of the 1970 academic year, when students, including a number from the Centre for the Study of Social History, occupied the Vice-Chancellor's office and the main building of university administration, the Registry. The sit-in followed three years of protests concerning control of the student building, segregation of the informal space afforded students and staff, and the barren utilitarianism of the learning environment. In the course of this student-led occupation, which was driven by awareness that powerful capitalist interests associated with Rootes Motors Ltd., long a vital player in the funding and governance of Warwick University, were stonewalling on the issue of student buildings and student autonomy, minor discontents opened up into a larger critique of the tight connective links between capitalist industry and academic institutions. This original occupation lasted 24 hours. When nothing substantial in the way of change occurred, a second, indefinite occupation, emerging spontaneously out of a mass meeting of students, occurred on 11 February 1970. The militants agreed that there would be no damage to University property, and the secretarial staff vacated their offices, leaving all doors open. Hours later a student, thumbing through a file on 'Student-University Relations' in an unlocked cabinet, came across a disturbing document. Marked 'strictly confidential' it was addressed

[22]Thompson, "Mayhew and the *Morning Chronicle*," in Yeo and Thompson, eds., *The Unknown Mayhew*, 16; Thompson, "Highly Confidential," in *Warwick*, 155. On British universities and the student revolt of 1968 see David Caute, *The Year of the Barricades: A Journey Through 1968* (New York 1988), 345-74. For a personal account of one of Thompson's first North American students see Peter Linebaugh, "From the Upper West Side to Wick Episcopi," *New Left Review*, 201 (September/October 1993), 18-25.

to the University Vice-Chancellor, indicating that Gilbert Hunt, a Director of Rootes Motors, member of the University Council, and Chairman of its Building Committee, had sent his corporate Director of Legal Affairs, accompanied by a security officer, to a meeting of the Coventry Labour Party addressed by Dr. David Montgomery, an American working-class historian visiting Warwick's Centre for the Study of Social History for two years. The object of this surveillance was apparently to ascertain if Montgomery's talk provided grounds for prosecution under the 1919 Aliens Restriction Act. Montgomery had no doubt come to Hunt's attention precisely because he appeared to be a unique blend of academic and activist. Himself once a machinist, Montgomery's scholarship was distinguished, but he ventured outside of universities to establish relations with unionists and workers on a regular basis. In Coventry he had advised a group of striking Pakistani workers on the mechanics of securing union recognization, and regularly spoke to political and trade union gatherings on matters such as automation. He was, in the eyes of the industrial magnates, a man to monitor. Such spying contravened University assurances that no political information was ever kept on faculty/students/staff. It prompted the students to do a larger, disciplined search of other confidential files, and in the process cabinets were carefully opened with a minimum of physical force. Other objectionable materials came to light, but the weight of damaging confidential correspondence was hardly overwhelming. The political cat was now out of the proverbial bag, however, with earnest debate sweeping the University about the validity of invading 'private' communications and student assessments. The University countered with an injunction prohibiting dissemination of such 'illegally' acquired materials. Protest raged for weeks, and spread to other universities; there was a demonstration outside of parliament; and trade unionists mounted their own protests against such uses of the university.[23]

Where was Edward Thompson? Whatever unease he may have felt around the need to chart a path of moderation that could result in restoring impartiality to University procedures evaporated before the political necessities of the moment. Melvyn Dubofsky, then the Warwick Visiting Professor of Comparative Labour History, recalls Thompson telling those students occupying University property who requested their class to be held that they could be "either students or revolutionaries." As long as the occupation was on, classes were off. Thompson was phoned by the student who discovered the incriminating Montgomery file, came to the occupied building to secure the documents, and quickly reproduced and disseminated them to the entire faculty. He challenged the University injunction with a journalistic broadside, was featured prominently in media coverage of the event, and later worked with students to present the history of the Warwick struggle and expose the close relations of power that connected capitalism and higher education at the points of production where ideology and accumulation met. In a recent article in the *American Historical Review*, Michael D. Bess, in what

[23]The above paragraph draws on Thompson, *Warwick*.

seems an attempt to assimilate Thompson to an uncomplicated liberalism, suggests that Thompson's publication of the 'illegal' Montgomery documents was "a basic error of judgment." He rather disingenuously suggests that Thompson, who would later in the 1970s oppose the state using illegally-secured information to prosecute dissidents (whom Bess designates "criminal suspects"), could hardly endorse such use at Warwick. Bess is wrong. There was no error, and Thompson himself would never had conceded that there was, however much he might acknowledge that the case of the 'Warwick files' posed particular dilemmas. But for Thompson the politics *and* the morality of the situation were clear. The students behaved with responsible discipline; they uncovered a document that proved the existence of a deplorable act, and that caught the University out in a lie; they looked for more evidence of this kind of wrongdoing, with its *public* implications, and it was only this kind of material that they circulated; they went about their business without making a large matter of the many personal items and issues that must have tumbled out of filing cabinets onto the carpeted Vice-Chancellor's floors and into their range of vision, although they no doubt got an eyeful of the self-important verbosity of their professors. The politics of conscience demanded a specific course. There must be opposition to the University's complicity in gathering political information on members of the university community: a widening climate of outraged democratic opinion that would *act* to remind the instigators that their surveillance practices were intolerable. This did not mean, in some decontextualized vacuum of absolute liberal values, à la Bess, that any and all opening of files was to be commended, or that the defence of constitutionalist political methods was always to be deplored and ridiculed as a sham. But in the much publicized instance of the Warwick files, Thompson thought the case clear enough. As it was. To suggest, as does Bess, that students who, virtually by accident (the purpose of the occupation *not* being to rifle through files) came across clear indications of University wrongdoing and made that evidence public are somehow comparable to an ostensibly democratic *state* that utilizes its vast resources and personnel secretly and illegally to gather surveillance on people who have committed no crimes the better to prosecute them when and if they do, are somehow equatable in their violation of principle, deserving of our condemnation, is actually absurd. "Only a really subtle and unworldly academic mind," Thompson noted in response to the critics of the early 1970s, could engage in argument such as this.[24]

[24] Note E.P. Thompson, "The Business University," and "A Report on Lord Radcliffe," articles which originally appeared in *New Society* in 1970, reprinted in Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (London 1980), 30-8; Melvyn Dubofsky, unpublished recollection of E.P. Thompson, Conversational Monitor System, September 1993; Bess, "E.P. Thompson: The Historian as Activist," 25-6, where Bess draws obliquely on Thompson's journalistic comment on the 1978 Official Secrets Trial against Crispin Aubrey, John Berry, and Duncan Campbell (The ABC Trial). This writing is now conveniently gathered together in "An Elizabethan Diary," "The State versus its 'Enemies,'" and "A State of Blackmail," in *Writing by Candlelight*, 91-134. Thompson, *Warwick*, esp. for reply to Bess, 152-8.

Thompson's moment of contact with student radicalism was thus one of support rather than hostility. While the Warwick student strike and the resulting turmoil were perhaps not the direct cause of Thompson's desire to resign from the Warwick Centre, those reasons being personal, they no doubt hastened and confirmed his exit. Relatively isolated from politics for the better part of a decade, Thompson moved in academic circles from the time of his Warwick appointment in 1965. But he did not move easily and comfortably; he wanted out, and at a moment of rebellion he was with the insurgents as, indeed, temperamentally he would almost always be. When he left formal teaching in 1970 Thompson took his exit to write. He no doubt had in mind many projects, including a study of Blake, which he would progress through sufficiently to deliver the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto in 1978; and finishing the eighteenth-century studies that he had commenced in the mid-1960s. But there was a dual irony in this attempt to move into seemingly ever-widening circles of isolation: from the intense political atmosphere of the late 1950s and early 1960s, where his teaching was centred in adult education; to the largely academic environment of a new university and its Thompson-directed Centre; to the quietudes of the archives, the library, and the study -- "I go back to my desk. If it could fight/Or dream or mate, what other creature would/Sit making marks on paper through the night?"[25] First, the supposed final retreat into writing had been made on the coattails of a re-entry into politics, his notoriety during the Warwick days recalling, certainly, his disdain for the sanctimoniousness of much of academic life, and rekindling the fires of appreciation for labour and the unkept press. Second, if Thompson's eye, and a good part of his mind, were on the historical writing that he desired to do, his hand was never quite able to shake free from the necessity of breaking through barriers of political isolation.

For Thompson, the 1970s would, to be sure, encompass a period of research and reflection in fundamentally *historical* questions, but his writing in this field, for the most part, carried old projects through to fruition (as in *Whigs and Hunters*, *Albion's Fatal Tree* and the essay on rough music or charivari), compressed the beginnings of conceptual and empirical labours into the tight container of a suggestive essay, or offered stimulating insights in important book reviews. This was a period when, aside from his longstanding interest in Blake, he was relentlessly pursuing, against the anthropological discourse and method, a concern with the anthropological subject, insisting on the integrity and worth of the cultural creations and everyday struggles of the poor. Reviews touched down with characteristic flourish on topics such as food riots, transported trade unionists, Eleanor Marx, artisan radicalism in London, and the labour aristocracy. Typical was this injunction on the state of 'family' history late in the decade:

[25]Thompson, "My Study" (September 1973) in *The Heavy Dancers*, 339. A first published statement on Blake appeared in Thompson, "London," in Phillips, ed., *Interpreting Blake*, 5-31.

> The history of the 'lower sort of people' between 1500 and 1800 discloses many different familial modes: some may seem to us to be rough, lacking in any foresight, picaresque: others may seem to be cold and bound to elemental needs. But the point of history is not to see their occasions through the mist of our feelings, nor to measure them against the Modern Us. It is first of all to understand the past: to reconstruct those forgotten norms, decode the obsolete rituals, and detect the hidden gestures. Because peasant marriages were arranged out of circumstance and necessity, it does not mean that many families did not learn a profound mutual dependence, a habit of love. ... As a quantitative certainty we all of us have more leisure to examine our own feelings than all except a small elite used to have; but it is less certain that, in those days, hearts broke less painfully or lifted with less joy then, than they do now. It annoys me that Professor Stone and Professor Shorter leave their readers to feel so complacent about their own modernity. It annoys me even more that both should indict the poor, on so little evidence, of indifference to their children and of callous complicity in their high rate of mortality.[26]

These ideas and commitments, as well as this annoyance, would figure prominently in what was perhaps the central Thompson writing of the 1970s, that which played itself out in a political duality of interrogating Marxism and demanding democracy.

Early in the decade Thompson saw a revival of "the pure vitriol of class politics." It awakened in him an "enhanced contempt for parliamentarians, and for the parliamentary Labour Party in particular." In the widespread alienation with what he dubbed "managerial politics" Thompson glimpsed new possibilities of health for the popular body politics. Struggles of power workers, miners, and nurses drew his support, and his marshalling of historical evidence in defence of their beleaguered rights. Reviewing Harold Wilson's self-serving account of the Labour Government (1964-70), Thompson bemoaned the book's "devaluation of the traditions of the labour movement, of politics as a dignified human preoccupation." He closed his angry denunciation of Wilson with the comment that, "The art of the possible can only be retained from engrossing the whole universe if the impossible can find ways of breaking back into politics, again and again."[27] This, I would argue, was what Edward Thompson's *political* project in the 1970s was all about. Against the mechanical idealism of 'modeled' Marxism he proposed the oppositions of

[26]Many earlier citations could be marshalled here. The following should suffice. On the compressed essay see in particular: Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society: class struggle without class," *Social History*, 3 (1978), 133-65; Thompson, "Folklore, Anthropology, and Social History," *Indian Historical Review*, 3 (1978), 247-66. Among the reviews by Thompson: "Happy Families," *New Society* (8 September 1977), 499-501; "Sold Like a Sheep for a Pound," *New Society* (14 December 1978), 645-8; "The very type of the 'respectable artisan,'" *New Society* (3 May 1979), 275-7; "English Daughter," *New Society* (3 March 1977), 455-8; "Review of *English Hunger and Industrial Disorders*," *Economic History Review*, 27 (1974), 480-4; "Testing Class Struggle," *Times Higher Education Supplement* (8 March 1974).

[27]Some relevant writings — "Sir, Writing by Candlelight," "Yesterday's manikin," "A Special Case," and "A Question of Manners," — appear in Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight*, 39-84.

historical materialism and human agency, the very same kinds of challenges he would throw journalistically in the face of the debasement of democratic politics.

Thompson's "Open Letter to Kolakowski" signalled his coming out of isolation, an attempt to clarify where 1956 had gone and how. Up to this point Thompson stood "critical and affirmative" to the Marxist tradition, determined to rehabilitate the utopian energies within socialism. He had looked to the Kolakowski of the 1950s for inspiration and guidance. But he saw in the Polish Marxist's writings and views of the early 1970s, and in the places where those thoughts were propounded or published, such as *Encounter*, a disappointing capitulation to the ideological closures of the Cold War. Thompson acknowledged in his discursive discussion that there were different kinds of Marxism, different Marxisms. Yet his allegiance remained, after 30 years, "to the Marxist tradition," *in the singular:*

> We can not impose our will upon history in any way we choose. We *ought* not to surrender to its circumstantial logic. We can hope and act only as 'gardeners of our circumstance.' In writing to you I have been, in one way, casting some thirty years of my own private accounts. I have been meditating not only on the meanings of 'history' but on the meanings of people whom I have known and trusted. I have been encountering the paradox that many of those whom 'reality' has proved to be wrong, still seem to me to have been better people than those who were, with a facile and conformist realism, right. I would still wish to justify the aspirations of those whom 'history', at this point in time, appears to have refuted.

Thompson closed his long letter with words of renewal: to internationalism; to common struggle; to the fulfilment of aspiration; to 1956.[28]

A brief year later there were hints that Thompson's reengagement with Marxism was taking on a new awareness of differentiation. In an important review of an important book, John Foster's *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution*, Thompson wrestled with Marxist historical method. He concluded, and strongly so, that Foster's book, for which he had considerable respect, was a statement of "platonist Marxism": orchestrated around a 'true' or 'correct' model of class organization, consciousness, and strategy, it often rode roughshod over the actual ideas, values, and motivations of the historical subjects under study, not unlike earlier and more abstract writings on class by Anderson-Nairn. The saving grace of Foster was that, while his platonism weakened his understanding of the complexity of consciousness, the scrupulousness of his materialist method insured that even if his understanding of social being was skewed, it advanced knowledge and placed whole realms of experience within a more precise, quantifiable realm of historical appreciation. This empirical weight had never burdened the writings of Anderson-Nairn. A similar preoccupation with this Marxist problematic of being/consciousness animated Thompson's creative reengagement with Christopher Caudwell, in whose writings there was a direct challenge to platonism and

[28]Thompson, "An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski," originally in *The Socialist Register 1973*, reprinted in *The Poverty of Theory*, 93-192, esp. 124, 186-7.

reductionist idealism. Caudwell, unlike much 'theorizing' in 1970s Marxism, was not, Thompson insisted, "retreating into the introverted security where Marxists speak only to Marxists in a universe of self-validating texts." As Thompson resurfaced within Marxist debate in the 1970s he rehabilitated the sources of his longstanding Marxist strength at the same time as he turned them toward an internal critique of trends in Marxism that he opposed, from Stalinism to platonism. Nowhere was this more apparent that in Thompson's revival of Morris, which appeared in 1977 edited away from its earlier complicity with Stalinism, and with Morris' voices of romanticism and utopianism speaking loudly to the needs of Marxism. At this historic juncture Thompson reentered the pages of the *New Left Review*, taking up, where he had left off, with the case of Raymond Williams. Twenty-five years later, with Williams moving more decidedly in the language and interpretive field of force of Marxism, Thompson was an advocate and a defender, rather than a critic and questioner. And it was apparent that Thompson considered himself a Marxist who was now *back* in the polemical and political fray:

> It may have been thought once, by the Althusserian anti-'humanists,' that those of us who acknowledge our continuing relation to the transformed Romantic tradition could simply be read out of the intellectual Left: we belonged somewhere else. But that attempt has failed. We are still here: we do not mean to go. Neither the Left nor Marxism can ever belong to any set of people who put up fences and proprietary signs; it can belong only to all those who choose to stay in that 'terrain' and who mix it with their labour.

With the mention of Althusser came a hint of things to come.[29]

Thompson's 1978 demolition of Althusser, "The Poverty of Theory: or an Orrery of Errors," commenced, I am certain, as Thompson's effort to *revive* what was positive in Marxism, but the consequences of consequences are not always straightforward and intention sometimes, in the maelstrom of historical context, gets displaced as new directions are taken up. This happens in practice; it can also take place in thought. Reaching back within the Marxist tradition, Thompson drew on Marx's anti-Proudhon polemic, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, for his title, sus-

[29]Thompson, "Testing Class Struggle," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 3 March 1974; Thompson, "Caudwell," *Socialist Register 1977*, esp. 271; Thompson, *Morris* (1977); Thompson, "Romanticism, Utopianism and Moralism," 83-112, esp. "Afternote," 112. For Williams and Marxism see, among many possible texts: Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *New Left Review*, 82 (1973), 3-16; Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (London 1977); Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London 1979); Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London 1980). For the Thompson-Williams relation see Thompson's reviews and obituary: "The Long Revolution I," *New Left Review*, 9 (1961), 24-33; "The Long Revolution II," *New Left Review*, 10 (1961), 34-9; "A Nice Place to Visit," *New York Review of Books*, 22 (6 February 1975), 34-7; "Last Dispatches from the Border Country: Raymond Williams," *The Nation* (5 March 1988), 310-2, where Thompson notes that in his *NYRB* review of Williams' *The Country and The City* the editors excised all references to capitalism.

tained his arguments with wide reading in the texts of classical Marxism and the researches of historical materialism, prefaced his publication with the masthead quote from the *New Reasoner*, Marx's "To leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality," and defended Marxism as a theory and a practice rooted in specific commitments: to the radicalized Enlightenment cause of reason; to the practical process of change; and to the fundamental importance of grasping the meaning of material relations and their historical development. If the credentials were Marxist, the tone was that of Swift. Biting satire, hyperbole, flights of rhetoric, and refusal to let the seemingly squirming subject off the hook of relentless punishment, all made the text unique in the annals of contemporary Marxist criticism. Counterposing Althusser's *theoretical practice* to the method of historical materialism, Thompson insisted on reclaiming the historical and the materialist *for* Marxism, challenging not this or that flaw in the Althusserian project, but the entirety of its premises, arguments, conclusions, and political meanings. The Althusserian orrery was seen as a circular philosophical system that proclaims itself Marxist, but was in fact an *ideology* that approached *theology* in its idealist distance from any dialogue with an actual historical subject or process. Louis Althusser thus stood as surrogate for the irrationalist degeneration of a Western Marxism encased in the category and divorced from practice or, even, an analytic approach that could explain and integrate human agency into its understanding of the world of conflictual relations, exploitation, and oppression:

> This mode of thought is *exactly* what has commonly been designated, in the Marxist tradition, as idealism. Such idealism consists, not in the positing or denial of the primacy of an ulterior material world, but in a self-generating conceptual universe which imposes its own ideality upon the phenomena of material and social existence, rather than engaging in continual dialogue with these.

If Althusserian structuralism could be summed up in a few words, Thompson's position was that: "The category has attained to a primacy over its material referent; the conceptual structure hangs above and dominates social being." In the violence of its mechanical idealism, Althusserianism was the theoretical articulation of excess: in denying agency to the superstructural realm it reified the economic base, which was understood only as static model, rather than as relations of change and transformation; what moved this *stasis* was not conscious human activity, but the motor of an, again, agencyless category, class struggle (which knew no trade union organizations, radical agendas, or historic balance of victories and defeats). As a "retreat into the privacy of a complacent internal discourse," Althusserian structuralism represented a "*dis*engagement from the actual political and intellectual contests of our time." Because Althusser courted no challenges or contradictions to his model, which for Thompson coincided with the intellectual practice of Stalinism, with which the French philosopher was intimately linked, modes of thought and alternative such as moralism and humanism were ruthlessly suppressed

as little more than liberal blows meant to undermine Marxist 'science.' To look at the left in the 1970s through the prism of Althusser, Thompson suggested, was to see that, "Stalinism was the empire, and theoretical practice is the vocabulary."[30]

Thompson thus stood in a new, schizophrenic relation to a bifurcated tradition, one that now contained, for him, two Marxisms. Content in 1973 to proclaim his allegiance to *the* Marxist tradition, albeit as an "outlaw," Thompson's ground of intellectual and political grasp had shifted with his 1978 inspection of the Althusserian orrery. On the one side of Marxism stood reason, materialism, empirical investigation, open critique, moral concerns, human values, and a dialogue between consciousness and being, past and present; on the other side of Marxism was arrayed theology, idealism, closure, and blistering denial of history itself and any semblance of agency and choice in its making. This was a divide that could not be bridged: "I must therefore state without equivocation that I can no longer speak of a single, common Marxist tradition. There are *two* traditions, whose bifurcation and disengagement from each other has been slow, and whose final declaration of irreconcilable antagonism was delayed as an historical event until 1956. ... Between theology and reason there can be no room left for negotiation." Reading Althusser thus sharpened Thompson's sense of that place of choice *within* Marxism. He had always located his choice, as a stand of opposition, outside of Marxism, *against* capitalism. This he would not change. But he now faced the realization that, for him, a second front had appeared inside what had long been his tradition of allegiance. Against Marxisms of the Althusserian, Stalinist stripe Thompson now declared "unrelenting intellectual war."[31]

Yet "The Poverty of Theory" remained a Marxist text. Thompson entered the Althusserian orrery a Marxist and he left it a Marxist. This must be said, whatever one's disagreements with Thompson's text. His tenacity was striking. When Conor Cruise O'Brien used the pages of *The Observer* to propagate the view that Marxism was little more than a contagious hate, destroying the Labour Party, Thompson rose to Marxism's public defence. Whatever the 'crisis' of Marxism, however many crimes were committed by Stalinist regimes in the name of Marxism, this did not negate Marxism's historical contribution and potential. Thompson saw in O'Brien's article the rancour of the *grande peur*, "a psycho-social class spasm of irrationality," the first victim of which was always reason, the end result "an 'abyss' in which the humane restraints of our society would not survive."[32] Through two decades of intense engagement with the Marxist left, often culminating in disappointment if not defeat, Thompson had returned to rethink Marxism and resuscitate it in the face of the perceived suffocating dangers of theoretical absolutism and

[30]E.P. Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory: or an Orrery of Errors," in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, 193-397, esp. 205, 373.

[31]*Ibid.*, 380, 384.

[32]See Conor Cruise O'Brien, "No to a nauseous Marxist-Methodist cocktail," *The Observer*, 28 January 1979; Thompson, "The acceptable faces of Marxism," *The Observer*, 4 February 1979, reprinted in "The Great Fear of Marxism," *Writing by Candlelight*, 181-6.

abstentionism from actual socialist practice and to defend it against the ugly face of reaction. Within a matter of a few short years, however, this longstanding commitment to Marxism would soften, weaken, and, ultimately, fade quietly away. Why? An answer lies in the context of the late 1970s, where a series of related political and intellectual developments converged.

As Thompson reengaged with Marxism he was also earning his living from his writing, shoring up his insecure income in this area with teaching stints and public lectures in North America (University of Pittsburgh and Rutgers in 1976; University of Toronto in 1978; Brown in 1980). Alongside his letter to Kolakowski and the Althusserian polemic -- the Thompson of socialist humanism and 1956 -- appeared a journalistic Thompson, concerned with 'the state of the nation.' Writing regularly for *New Society*, with other pieces appearing in newspapers from the *Observer* to the *New York Times* and magazines such as *New Statesman*, Thompson took on an increasingly public face. While Marxism and socialist values figured in this consciously-constructed popular appeal to reaffirm democratic rights, curtail the incursions of a state draped in cloaks of secrecy and clandestine acts, bent on perverting traditions of popular justice, and recultivate a Liberty Tree long overshadowed by the Tree of Money, these writings drew less on the heritage of 1956 than they did on the tradition of 'the freeborn Englishman.' In tone and substance, Thompson's public interventions of the 1970s turned towards Cobbett and Paine in an effort to stimulate resistance to a very old set of Corruptions proceeding in new, 'modernized' directions. Quoting Yeats, he asked: "What if the Church and the State/Are the mob that howls at the door!" Carrying his views on the rule of law, first voiced against an overly mechanistic model-driven Marxism in the concluding pages of *Whigs and Hunters*, into more public forums, Thompson defended the traditions of the English commoner, especially the right to trial by jury. This had become an inconvenience to the state which, by 1977, "quietly mugged" seven centuries of legal tradition, unleashing a set of discounting, vetting, and tampering innovations. "Modernizing authority finds democratic practice to be inconvenient," concluded Thompson. "It can manage us better in the dark, where it has put all our rights." Such "miscreants ... seeking to undo the rule of law" were expressing their "contempt for the people of [the] country," "tearing down the structures of the past," and hoping to inculcate "amnesia." Against this "approaching ... state of anarchy, or arbitrary and unaccountable administrative rule," Thompson offered a stream of refusals. He was playing an old role, that of radical dissenter, out to the end. One commentator, under the title "Thompson and Liberty!," insisted that Thompson had become "the best political essayist today in the tradition of Swift, Hazlitt, Cobbett and Orwell."[33]

[33]See the conveniently assembled pieces of journalism in *Writing by Candlelight*, noting, as well, Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters* (1975), 258-69. Earlier interventions include Thompson's effort to stave off the privatization of the public library, saving old books from the clutches of the market, and his materialist commentary on the American Bi-centennial: "In Citizen's Bad Books," *New Society* (28 March 1974), 778-80; "C is for Country, A is

None of this repudiated Marxism. But it did mark a departure, as Perry Anderson has suggested, in emphasis and political understanding. Thompson's journalism of the 1970s turned on defensive tactics, leaving the wider strategy for socialist transformation in abeyance. As he indicated in a 1979 interview, Thompson through the horizon of political possibility shrinking, with the last decades of the twentieth century turning inevitably on "control of a very powerful State machine." To do this democracy had to be demanded, and there was, in Thompson's view, obviously no better ammunition to fire at the architects of the new 'statism' than arrows from the past, drawn out of a quiver full of the history of democratic constraints on power's prerogatives.[34]

Thompson's essentially *political* writing -- it is necessary to say essentially, for his political and historical texts were never distinguished by rigid separation -- of the 1970s was thus Janus-faced. In one direction Marxism and 1956 came into focus; in another direction the politics of democracy and calling notions of freedom and rights within a bourgeois state to order loomed. Had context made this possible, I suspect Edward Thompson could have negotiated these diverging politics. With time he might well have constructed a convergence. But the climate and the political space, in Thompson's view, did not allow this.

An avalanche of Marxist criticism came down on Thompson's head in the aftermath of *The Poverty of Theory*. This *reaction* (response is too tame a description) was no kinder and no more fraternal than the original anti-Althusser polemic. Edward could have expected nothing less. Regardless of the content of this body of commentary, the form was a deluge of antagonism. It hardened the fragmentations within what Thompson perceived as the two Marxisms, but it did so in ways that made any dialogue almost impossible. Thompson's rhetoric of an uncompromising war, of exposing and driving out the Althusserian error, was replied to in the pages of almost every left press and journal, the flood of criticism inundating

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for Anniversary, S is for Solicitude, H is for History," *New York Times*, 26 April 1976. The jury system would later be the subject of Thompson's Meiklejohn Lecture, Brown University, 1980. See "Subduing the Jury, I," *London Review of Books* (4 December 1986), 7-9; "Subduing the Jury, II," *London Review of Books* (18 December 1986), 12-3. Note Bernard Crick, "Thompson and Liberty!" (a review of *Writing by Candlelight*) *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 11 May 1980.

[34]Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, 201-5; Interview with E.P. Thompson, "Recovering the Libertarian Tradition," *The Leveller* (22 January 1979), 20-2. Anderson points out that Thompson's position in the late 1970s differed in emphasis from that of the very early 1970s, where he specifically rejected the limitation of oppositional politics to defensive containment. He quotes Thompson, *Warwick*, 159: "The logic of the whole conflict leads not just to defensive position (of establishing traditional safeguards for 'academic freedom'), but must lead on to a positive and far-reaching reconstruction of the University's self-government and of its relations to the community. We have forced matters to a point where we must demand a more democratic constitution than any existing university enjoys, or nothing — and perhaps something very much worse than nothing — will have been won."

a wide array of academic disciplines (history, sociology, political science, literary criticism). Some of this came to a head in the mythical encounter at St. Paul's Church, where a 1979 History Workshop gathering of upwards of 1,000 witnessed the digging in of position and the subsequent blazing battle: theoretical practice in one corner; historical materialism in the other. Perry Anderson watched from the pews. In the damp cold of the dilapidated religious edifice Thompson "rose like some wrathful divine to warn the congregation once more of the dangers of Gallican dogma. ... Disputation followed, before a rapt, shivering audience." According to Raphael Samuel, Thompson "proceeded on a demolition job on his critics which caused evident personal pain and discomfort to many of those present." Delivered with his usual polemical arsenal of "maximum theatrical force," the result was "that subsequent discussion was impossible. The aftermath of the ... fusillade hung like a pall of smoke over the rest of the conference." This smoke remained for years, and to this day there are those who will still choke on it. The blame is, outside a small circle of old Reasoners, almost universally attributed to Edward: he had violated the fundamentals of fraternity; his tone, *this time*, had gone too far. Perhaps. But those who think in such ways should consider not only what was at stake, which was in intellectual and political terms, considerable, but also contexts, then and now. Many former Althusserians who called Thompson to task for the 'violence' of his polemic, insisting on the need for a quieter, more caring, discourse of differentiation, have now in the anti-Marxist stampede of the late 1980s and early 1990s attributed to Althusser the very crimes Thompson pilloried. But they neglect to mention where they, and Thompson, were in the late 1970s and before. Finally, there is the important issue of the material resources of the combatants. To be sure, Thompson had allies, but for the most part he was alone. An independent writer, of limited and insecure income, with no research assistants, secretaries, and connections to granting agencies and university largesse faced an *army* of, for the most part, professional academics. When you fight on this kind of terrain, where your opponent can draw on so much more, how are the lines of fraternity to be drawn? In the end they were faint indeed. When it was all over and done with, Edward, I suspect, had had enough. His engagement with Marxism, now of decades duration, was over. As he closed his book on Althusser, and theoretical Marxism closed its many lavishly-funded, elegantly bound, books on him, Thompson was irrevocably distanced from Marxism for the first time in his adult life. He would never attack it, turning his words into State Department bullets, but he put aside his own lengthy relationship to Marxism. In 1980 he wrote to me from Brown University, perhaps using me as a conduit to apologize to people whom he thought I would know in Toronto: "I'm afraid I *did* misbehave myself when a man rang me from Toronto from some Marxist Institute and asked me if I would be interested in going up there to talk about 'the present state of Marxism': I told him that subject bored me out of my mind, and he seemed a little hurt."[35]

[35]There is no need to cite every reply to Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory*. Anderson's *Arguments within English Marxism* is still among the most useful. For a sample of this

The final straw pushing Thompson off the Marxist ledge he occupied in the 1970s would not, however, come from 'theory' and its debates. This should come as no surprise, for Thompson was always a Marxist of words *and* deeds. It would be the necessity to act in opposition that increasingly moved Thompson to boredom with Marxism as theory. For the furor around the Thompson/Althusser clash happened at precisely the time that a renewed arms race threatened, in Thompson's view, global annihilation. Making peace became more important than making history; making a space for survival was far more of a political necessity than making Marxism human; 1956 would mean little if the year 2000 never happened.

Making Peace

THOMPSON'S AUDIENCE had never, since 1956, been negligible, be it academic or political. But it had not been large. Referring to the first new left and the original Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, he once noted that it was difficult to appreciate "how few we were, how limited our resources, how difficult it was to keep a journal, a London office, and a few Left Clubs in being." By 1981 this had changed. He stood before rallies of 250,000; he spoke to the world. At a massive gathering in Trafalgar Square he waited for the crowd to quiet and, then, into the hush of thousands he spoke the politics of a past he had long laboured to translate to the present: "Against the kingdom of the beast, we witnesses shall rise." Left-wing cynics winced at the "millenialism" of the presentation, but then looked up at Thompson with renewed interest as they heard snippets of sentences from those around them. "Say what?" asked one protester, confused as to the meaning and ancestry of this obviously antiquated language. "Blake, you idiot," replied his companion with irritation, "*William* Blake." A peace movement of colossal proportions, partly of Thompson's making, made him, in the early-to-mid 1980s, a figure with an immense public profile. Polls placed him high in the ranks of the most

literature see: Paul Q. Hirst, "The Necessity of Theory — A Critique of E.P. Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory*," in Hirst, *Marxism and Historical Writing* (London 1985), 57-90, first published in *Economy and Society* (1979); the contributions of Terry Eagleton and others in *Literature and History*, 5 (Autumn 1979), 139-64; a number of articles in *New Statesman* including Raphael Samuel, "History Workshop 1: Truth is Partisan," (15 February 1980), 247-9; Gavin Kitching, "History Workshop 5: A View from the Stalls," (14 March 1980), 398-9. The debate at St. Paul's, edited for publication, appears in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London 1981), 375-401. For an essay that steps back from the immediacy of the debate, considering it in the context of a different, later, time and alongside of other issues of theory, see Robert Gray, "History, Marxism, and Theory," in Kaye and McClelland, ed., *E.P. Thompson*, 153-82. Also, Thompson to Palmer, 13 October 1980. Note, as well, Anderson, "Diary," *London Review of Books*, 24; Philip Corrigan, "Bread and Knowledge Politics: E.P. Thompson (1924-1993)," *left history*, 1 (Fall 1993), 103-10.

admired, Thompson trailing only the 'first women' of the nation: Thatcher, Queen Elizabeth, and the Queen Mother.[36]

Thompson's protests for peace reached back decades and encompassed opposition to the Korean War, support for the World Peace Council's Stockholm Appeal to outlaw nuclear weapons, and dogged resistance to the imperial crusades of Britain, France, and others in Malaya, Cyprus, Kenya, Algeria, and British Guiana, all dutifully backed by the Cold War's respectable social democrats in the Labour Party. Thompson's direct circle of Yorkshire peace comrades turfed out of Labour included 80-year old veteran Florence Mattison, whose Leeds remembrances included ILP anti-Boer War rallies and music hall riots where the 'unpatriotic' were tossed from the gallery into the pit. With the exodus of Thompson and others from the Communist Party in 1956, much of this energy was transferred to the late 1950s/early 1960s Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, but not without attending to a series of complex political entanglements that tied up the work of protesting for peace in endless ideological knots. In all of this work *class* interests necessarily took a backseat to *human* issues of survival, but the two were never as easily dichotomized as it might superficially seem. This related directly to Thompson's longstanding refusal to see the English working class as somehow inferior to other superior class models. Reviewing two works on the history of the peace movement in Britain, Thompson took to task one author for reproducing the Orwellian caricature of the xenophobia of English labour: "In a reasonably long life I have not observed that the working class of Other Nations (for example, the French) is to be noted for its internationalism as contrasted with our own. ... it is very much the fashion these days to take the Orwell view, especially among Leftist intellectuals who *wish* to see the working class as racist, chauvinist, and (if male) sexist. I am pissed off with this stereotyping which obscures contrary evidence from view."[37]

Thompson's peace campaigns of the 1980s, then, while definitely altering the terrain of his relationship to Marxism, hardly constituted a wholesale abandonment of his longstanding commitments.[38] Late in 1979, Thompson's journalistic writing

[36]Thompson, "Protest and Revive," *END Journal*, 37 (1989), 38; Hitchens, "Minority Report," *The Nation* (27 September 1993), 306; Kazin, "The Last Socialist," *Washington Post*; and, for an account of the huge anti-nuclear peace rallies of 1981, *Morning Star*, 26 October 1981. The quote is not actually from Blake, but is adapted from a seventeenth-century New Model Army marching song, which Thompson locates within a general antinomian impulse. See E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York 1993), 23.

[37]Thompson, "Protest and Revise," 37-41, quote from 36-7, this review essay being one of the best short introductions to Thompson's account of his early peace movement activities. On the history of the peace movement see, besides this review, Richard Taylor and Nigel Young, eds., *Campaigns for Peace: British Peace Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester 1987).

[38]For brief introductions to Thompson and these years see Michael D. Bess, "E.P. Thompson: Historian as Activist," 29-38; Martin Shaw, "From Total War to Democratic Peace: Exter-

kicked off questions of jury tampering and the secret state and into what he called "the doomsday consensus." It was announced in November that Britain was to be the favoured recipient of some 160 NATO Cruise missiles, armed with nuclear warheads. This announcement was followed with the usual leaks of "official secrets," and the conventional media replied by literally constructing acceptance of the state's assertions of its intention to house the new weapons, which would remain in the control of United States forces. Without a ripple of debate in parliament, the British people were being presented with a *fait accompli*. Thompson pointed out that the deployment of Cruise missiles in Britain, scheduled for 1983, served distinct purposes: to localize nuclear war within a particular 'theatre', primarily Western and Eastern Europe and Great Britain; to stifle dissent in an "Official-Secrecy-cum-Prepackaged-Official-Information" double-speak that allowed citizen involvement only within the constructed oppositional boundaries of patriotic consensus and treason. While voices of protest against the new NATO initiatives rose throughout Europe, from Holland to Italy, *nothing* had been heard from Britain. Thompson saw the British people "publicly shamed," the "breath in the lungs of British democracy" stale and seemingly spent. When, within a matter of weeks, NATO ratified its plans for nuclear escalation, and the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, it was clear to Thompson that the Cold War's militaristic guard dogs were now unleashed, running hawkish in a soon-to-be-out-of-control set of reciprocal provocations. Thompson called for protests in the name of human survival; stopping the nuclear warheads was a common cause that linked the people of East and West. Against the "hawkish interest groups and ideological jamming" of the Cold War's frozen imperviousness to rationality the only hope for humanity lay in the "internal exile" of dissidence.[39]

Within a matter of months Thompson was at the centre of a new politics of European Nuclear Disarmament, or END. Working with the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation and a revived CND, Thompson replied to a short letter appearing in *The Times* late in January 1980. Authored by Oxford's Chichelle Professor of the History of War, M.E. Howard, the letter bought into the British state's assumptions that the 'modernized' weapons scheduled to be housed at Lakenheath, Upper Heyford, and Sculthorpe were necessary, and that it was possible to speak, in a post-Hiroshima age, of deterrence and "limited" nuclear "strikes." What Howard objected to was the total lack of any serious civil defence policy, which left the British people insecure and enemy forces certain of their capacity to create the utmost social, economic, and political turbulence through a nuclear targeting of specific weapons-holding sites. Thompson's pamphlet, *Protest and Survive*, op-

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minism and Historical Pacifism," in Kaye and McClelland, eds., *E.P. Thompson*, 233-51. There is a rather sterile account of the revived Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Great Britain in Paul Byrne, *The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament* (London 1988).

[39]The initial writings "The Doomsday Consensus" and "European Nuclear Disarmament" are now reprinted in *Writing by Candlelight*, 259-86.

posed this logic, insisting on the need to break out of the "deep structure of the Cold War." It sought to stop the destructive march of deterrence thinking before the deployment of Cruise missiles convinced many in the war machines of East and West that 'limited' war could indeed be fought in a European theatre, with the Soviet and American authors of destruction free to peer down on the spectacle without having the disruption of nuclear "strikes" against their own elevated seats. To do this required *refusals*: of the belligerent and aggressive content of the policies and practices of the capitalist west; of the reactionary response of the ostensibly communist bloc; of the right of bureaucratized, ossified structures of unaccountable militaristic might to have their fingers on the buttons of nuclear arsenals, while the people remained uninformed and manipulated with misinformation, a language of degenerative placation, and the rigid political categories of Cold War ideology. "Three decades of 'deterrence,' of mutual fear, mystery, and state-endorsed stagnant hostility," Thompson wrote, "have backed up into our culture and ideology. Information has been numbed, language and values have been fouled, by the postures and expectations of the 'deterrent' state." The solution was not that of Professor Howard. "We must throw whatever resources still exist in human culture across the path of this degenerative logic," continued Thompson, his message of resistance to a "normality" that had been allowed to spawn "hideous cultural abnormalities" drawing yet again on the poetic interpretive power of Blake:

And mutual fear brings peace;
Till the selfish loves increase.
Then Cruelty knits a snare,
And spreads his baits with care ...

Soon spreads the dismal shade
Of mystery over his head;
And the Caterpillar and Fly
Feed on the Mystery.

And it bears the fruit of Deceit,
Ruddy and sweet to eat;
And the Raven his nest has made
In its thickest shade.

In the contorted face of this kind of threat, a policy of civil defence was little more than capitulation and appeasement. "We must protest if we are to survive," thundered Thompson. He drafted a much-publicized "Appeal for A Nuclear Free Europe," which became, after input from his wife Dorothy and countless others, the programmatic statement of END. First announced at a special press conference in the House of Commons, 28 April 1980, and in four other European capitals, the appeal received massive European support, reaching across a wide swath of opinion and through numerous long-established political identities. Against the logic of

deterrence, Thompson called for a counter-logic of nuclear disarmament. "It would be nicer to have a quiet life. But they are not going to let us have that," Thompson argued. "Which end is it to be?" he asked.[40]

Thompson moved quickly to the organizational core of the new anti-nuclear mobilization: he was soon on the National Council of CND, occupied a Vice-Presidential chair, and was a founder-member of the more recently-established END. But it was as a publicist and campaigner that he came constantly before the British and European peoples. Between 1980 and 1982 he was never far from battling the logic of deterrence: he reviewed the literature on the nuclear age extensively; penned countless letters of protest to newspaper editors and journals; was interviewed repeatedly on television and the radio; and, most significantly, spoke at hundreds of meetings, rallies, and tours. "I am scarcely at home for more than two days on end, and have had to stop my own historical work completely," he wrote to me in June 1980. Three years later it was no better. "You can't imagine how hectic everything here is just now," Dorothy commented in 1983. Thompson's own estimate was that he appeared to give speeches at public forums of one sort or another roughly ten times a month for an entire two year period, covering the length and breadth of Great Britain and touching down in fourteen other countries including Canada, the United States, Iceland, and Greece. One such appearance was an Oxford debate with Professor Howard and others. Paul Flather described the "duel":

> Thompson, silver white hair flying, lean and hungry, all fire and brimstone ... once guru of the New Left, now in self-imposed exile in Worcester ... 'left his desk' last year to rouse popular conscience to the imminent dangers of nuclear war. ... Howard, quieter, less used to the hurly burly of polemical argument, but none the less digging into his ground ... matched against the polemical equivalent of Bjorn Borg on the Centre Court ... [gratified] that he, as the other gladiator, was at least assured of immortality, 'preserved for posterity as the dim professor plucked from deserved obscurity' by the formidable Thompson. ... the real difference between Howard and Thompson comes in the language and framework each man adopts: military parlance leads to deterrence, Marxist roots lead to populist approaches.

Thompson was now selling newspapers. He was also overwhelmed with responsibilities; his personal correspondence was often handled by his fellow anti-nuclear advocate, Eveline King; and most letters were responded to with an apologetic "quite overwhelmed here with work so please excuse this brief acknowledgement."

[40]See E.P. Thompson, *Protest and Survive* (London 1980), esp. 28-33. My copy of the pamphlet, a second edition and fourth printing, contains a copy of the END appeal as a centrepiece. This statement and the original pamphlet also appeared in E.P. Thompson and Dan Smith, eds., *Protest and Survive* (Harmondsworth 1980), a Penguin edition with a number of additional essays by END advocates. See, as well, "European Nuclear Disarmament: An Interview with E.P. Thompson," *Socialist Review*, 58 (1981), 9-34; "Thompson's Doomsday Warning," *The Sunday Times*, 8 June 1980.

But the peace efforts were paying dividends. *Protest and Survive* sold 50,000 copies in less than a year and when it reappeared in the company of other anti-nuclear arms essays as a Penguin Special, 36,000 books were sold in the same period. Protest rallies surged into the millions across Western Europe (Thompson himself estimated that not since 1848 had demonstrations been so endemic to society and mass action so popular), discontentment with the arms race swelled behind the Iron Curtain, and polls showed that anywhere from 25 to 68 per cent of the populations of given West European countries opposed the basing of new American nuclear missiles.[41]

Thompson's notoriety as END's unofficial spokesperson and the leading theoretician of the new disarmament movement fed on itself. One informal poll conducted by *The Times* ranked him the second-most-influential British intellectual in the post-World War II period, A.J.P. Taylor being the first. In August 1981 the British Broadcasting Corporation suggested that Thompson give the prestigious Dimbleby Lecture, which usually commanded an audience of several million people. The proposal was withdrawn on the insistence of the BBC's director-general, Sir Ian Trethowan, who pleaded that the talk would have been too controversial (translation: there would have been a price to pay for airing it). Eventually presented in the Worcester City Guildhall 26 November 1981 as a kind of unofficial Dimbleby Lecture (the BBC decided to forego the talk entirely for the year), Thompson's remarks were preceded by two months of intense media attention and received widespread dissemination in the form of newspaper articles and interviews, a published pamphlet entitled *Beyond the Cold War: NOT the Dimbleby Lecture*, and a core statement in a collection of Thompson's disarmament essays. Calling for an end to the addiction and habit of the Cold War, Thompson, reaching back to the language of his brother, argued that, "There must be that kind

[41]The sources that could be cited here are enormous. For a general statement and selected citation of evidence see Bess, "E.P. Thompson: The Historian as Activist," 33-4. On the Oxford debate with Howard, which drew a crowd of over 1,000, see Paul Flather, "When the worst form of defence is the best form of attack," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 20 February 1981. From my own files I can pull the following: "An Interview with E.P. Thompson," A Communiqué program broadcast on 28 August 1981 by National Public Radio; E.P. Thompson, "The END of the Line," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (January 1981), 6-13; Thompson, "Double Standards," *Morning Star*, 1 February 1982; Thompson, "A Letter to America," *The Nation* (24 January 1981), 68-75; Jeffrey Simpson, "Shelving anti-arms talks backfires," *Globe*, 5 September 1981; Beth Richards, "Canada Can Be Leader: E.P. Thompson tells Toronto audience," *The Peace Calendar*, 1 (September 1983), 1, 4; Jane Gadd, "Peace Activist at loss on failure of protests," *Globe*, 26 August 1983; Olivia Ward, "Perspective: Peace: A Pessimist Soldiers On," *Toronto Star*, 28 August 1983. Typical correspondence: Thompson to Palmer, 7 June 1980; 20 November 1981; 16 August 1982; Dorothy Thompson to Palmer, 4 June 1983. On the early 1980s disarmament campaign and 1848 see David Held, "Power and Legitimacy in Contemporary Britain," in Gregor McLennan, David Held, and Stuart Hall, eds., *State and Society in Contemporary Britain: A Critical Introduction* (London 1984), 346.

of spirit abroad in Europe once more. But this time it must arise, not in the wake of war and repression, but before these take place. Five minutes afterwards, and it will be too late." The enemy 'other' was an ideological perversion humanity could no longer afford. "Humankind must at last grow up," Thompson concluded, "We must recognise that the Other is ourselves." A sequel to *Protest and Survive* appeared in the middle of the 1983 General Election under the title *The Defence of Britain*. It was packaged as a nineteenth-century political tract, presented, in a manner reminiscent of Cobbett, as "Published for the Defence of the Common People of this Nation." Like other of Thompson's writings of this period it argued for the "third way," active neutrality in the arms race, with no support given to either ideological side of the Cold War. Again the notoriety grew, especially as Thompson railed against "the war of Margaret Thatcher's face," leaning into the potent patriotic 'Rule Britannia' tide of the embarrassingly one-sided Falkland Islands war with words of condemnation. Few wanted to hear of 'imperial atavisms' in this moment of supposed national glory and nostalgic militarism. For Thompson the lessons of the Falklands were clear: "it tells us all that we need to know about the behaviour of great persons of state, and the way in which, around some other issue, in some other year, we may drift into World War III."[42]

The politics of peace in the nuclear age thus turned, for Thompson, primarily on breaking the ideological chains of Cold War allegiance. Proliferating nuclear armaments were fueled by the adversarial blocs themselves as NATO's hawks fed the hawks of the Warsaw Pact: the process was one of reciprocity. Throughout the mid-1980s he campaigned tirelessly for this "double exposure" of the reciprocal responsibilities of East and West. Largely because of Thompson's prodding, END twinned what so many anti-nuclear arms protesters had obscured and denied: a powerful Western disarmament movement had to connect up with the exiled and incarcerated voices of Eastern European and Soviet dissidence, creating a space for dialogue around disarmament by stopping Western weapons and freeing up and supporting like-minded persons behind the Iron Curtain, who could then wage the struggle for peace within their own societies. Mass public protests against nuclear arms buildup in the West would be complemented by support for Poland's Solidarity, Czechoslovakia's Charter 77, and other dissident groups, calls for conventional arms reductions within the Eastern bloc, propagandizing around issues of human rights, and efforts to solidify cultural ties across the gulf that cut Europe with the knife of Cold War division. This, of course, brought the wrath of Natopolitan generals and Soviet bears down around Thompson's head, which was

[42]Thompson, *Beyond the Cold War: Not the Dimebleby Lecture* (London 1982), esp. 17, 35-6; Thompson, *Beyond the Cold War: A New Approach to the Arms Race and Nuclear Annihilation* (New York 1982), which also contains "The War of Thatcher's Face," from *The Times*, 29 April 1982, reprinted on 189-96; Jeffrey Simpson, "Shelving anti-arms talk backfires on BBC," *Globe*, 5 September 1981; Thompson, *The Defence of Britain* (London 1983), reprinted in Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers*, 69-106.

presented on various ideological platters to partisan audiences of the conventional "Only Two Sides" schools.[43]

But it also reintroduced the issues of nuclear disarmament and the peace movement to those on the left unaligned with the Soviet Union. Once pivotal in the politics of the first British new left, nuclear arms and the question of global peace had fallen by the wayside with the modifications of East-West Cold War posturing occasioned by Khruschev's quest for detente, the popular demand for peace arising out of brushes with nuclear catastrophe such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the tilt in left approaches to war and peace occasioned by the anti-imperialist struggles of the 1960s. Thompson reintroduced these themes in the pages of *New Left Review* with an original formulation of the nuclear-arms driven Cold War logic of exterminism and the Marxist left's immobilism:

> *exterminism* can only be confronted by the broadest possible popular alliance: that is, by every affirmative resource in our culture. Secondary differences must be subordinated to the human ecological imperative. The immobilism sometimes found on the Marxist Left is founded on a great error: that theoretical rigour, or throwing oneself into a 'revolutionary' posture, is the end of politics. The end of politics is to act, and to act *with effect*. Those voices which pipe, in shrill tones of militancy, that 'the Bomb' (which they have not looked behind) is 'a class question'; that we must get back to the dramas of confrontation and spurn the contamination of Christians, neutralists, pacifists and other class enemies -- these voices are only a falsetto descant in the choir of exterminism.

The Poverty of Theory must have been close at hand as these words were written. In the politics of mobilization, Thompson saw not only the necessity of survival, but also the desire of possibility, "a new space for politics." "Within the threatening shadow of exterminist crisis," Thompson concluded, "European consciousness is alerted, and a moment of opportunity appears." There was a vigorous response to Thompson, one that brought into question his own views, addressed the extent to which Europe was indeed the weak link in the Cold War, suggested the need to

[43]In particular note the essays in Thompson, *Beyond the Cold War* (1982), published in Great Britain as *Zero Option* (London 1982); Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers*; and, most explicitly, Thompson, *Double Exposure* (London 1985). See, as well, "Charter 77 Document No 5/85: The Prague Appeal," 11 March 1985, distributed by Palach Press, Ltd., London; Thompson, "Beyond the Blocs," *END: Journal of European Nuclear Disarmament*, 12 (October-November 1984), 12-5. Background on the question of Eastern European/Soviet dissidents appears in Thompson, "Detente and Dissent," in Roy Medvedev, ed., *Detente & Socialist Democracy* (New York 1976), 119-38, while a useful discussion appears in Thompson and Racek, "Freedom and the Bomb," *New Statesman* (24 April 1981), 6-13. For the opposition to Thompson note the brief discussion and citations in Bess, "E.P. Thompson: The Historian as Activist," 35-36; Alun Chalfont, "Arguing About War & Peace: Thompson's 'Ban-the-Bomb' Army," *Encounter* (January 1981), 79-87; and, for the Soviet Peace Council attack: Mark Solomon, *Death Waltz To Armageddon: E.P. Thompson and the Peace Movement* (New York 1984).

attend more directly to the struggles of the Third World if *socialism* was to capture the rising consciousness of oppositional politics, and challenged some of Thompson's assessment of the role of the Soviet Union in the arms race. Thompson responded with notable restraint and openness. He had written in the pages of *New Left Review* to encourage discussion and debate, not polemically to terminate it. "I will not fight for the category of 'exterminism'," he wrote, "provided that the problem it indicates is not tidied away." An end of an epoch had come. A new discourse was being made. But the point, as ever, was to interpret the world so that it could be *changed*, and in the context of the 1980s, *saved*. "We cannot write our recipes at leisure in the drawing-room and pass them on to the servants' hall (although some try to do that still): we must improvise our recipes as we sweat before the kitchen fires." Thinking and doing were mutually-related undertakings. Left-wing intellectuals had the responsibility to cultivate the new internationalism, being "the couriers who must take the first message across the frontiers of ideologies."[44]

This, in effect, was what Thompson was doing for much of the early 1980s. It did not bring immediate or easy results and the NATO missiles were in place on schedule in 1984. The situation actually worsened in March 1983, with Reagan's Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI), the tragically ludicrous proposal, driven by the rapacious military-industrial-academic complex, that came to be known as Star Wars. Centred on the proclaimed possibility of creating an impermeable shield of ballistic missile defense, antisatellite weapons, and laser research, the pie in the sky of Star Wars was a fleeting, but immensely threatening, moment of nuclear neurosis. It spoke directly to what Thompson had long addressed as the degenerative logic of deterrence. Space-based death rays were said to be "the longest 'big stick' in history," and one that would insure "unilateral control of outer space and consequent domination of the earth." The very Reaganite notion that the nuclear militarization of outer space would prevent nuclear war, that more and more ominous weapons would enforce a truly secure peace, was itself confirmation that any semblance of political morality in the nuclear age had long since succumbed to the blindness of ideology incarcerated in its own self-referentiality and the hundreds of billions of dollars that were up for grabs in the race for SDI largesse. "When a trillion dollars is waved at the U.S. aerospace industry," wrote a group of scientists in a letter to the *Wall Street Journal*, "the project in question will rapidly acquire a life of its own." Thompson tried to counter this 'life' with more writing and research, increasingly detailed in its explorations of the technologies, budgets, and corporate connections behind the large lie of Star Wars. The powerful and heady mix of American isolationism, technological solutions, material avarice, and ideological ossification threatened a new atmospheric annihilation. It was a "ter-

[44]Edward Thompson, "Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilization," *New Left Review*, 121 (1980), 31, and E.P. Thompson, *et al.*, *Exterminism and Cold War* (London 1982), esp. 348-9.

rifying signal of our human predicament." "There will never be an impermeable shield against nuclear evil," Thompson concluded. Star Wars, the logical extension of deterrence dementia, was no protection against holocaust and chaos. The only barrier known to humanity was, to be sure, "pitifully weak ... as full of holes as a seive," but the continuity of civilization depended on it, not the 'zap' of SDI. Human conscience was the only hope, Thompson concluded, and it was "time to put it in repair."[45]

Thankfully, and somewhat ironically, the madness of the moment had, in terms of escalating technologies of nuclear destruction, reached its zenith with Star Wars. By the mid-1980s the hot flashes of technological and ideological outburst associated with the last half-decade had cooled and subdued considerably. One part of this was external to the peace movement, associated with Soviet and American internal developments. Barely capable of keeping its crumbling 'empire' together in the 1980s, the Soviet ruling caste was noticeably inept at subduing rebellious Pathan tribesmen in Afghanistan, had militarily to cuff the insurgent Poles, and seemed understandably preoccupied with holding out against the clamour of internal political dissent and growing popular discontent with the material chaos of everyday life. The writing was on the Soviet wall, and it spelled collapse, however shocking the rapidity of the final demise would later be. It was hard to even regard the Soviets as much of a 'superpower' anymore. They looked increasingly unlikely to challenge America to a nuclear standoff. The United States, meanwhile, turned its bellicose countenace in the direction of "counter terrorism" bombing Libya in 1986 and expanding its nineteenth-century imperial vision of Manifest Destiny to the Middle East, with a preemptive conventional warfare strike against Iraq's Saddam Hussein. It was all bad enough, but the escalating logic of exterminism, threatening global destruction, seemed to have been held partially in check.

Thompson by no means vacated the cause of peace. He was central in protesting the US raids on Libya and in 1991 he would ponder the predicament of a peace movement faced with the Gulf War, writing to me that,

I am confused about the Gulf also (the press sometimes rings me still). I can't with any conscience cry enthusiastically "Hands Off Saddam Hussein," since he is a prime bastard, and a bloody one: worse than Galtieri or Noriega or other creatures of the CIA. But the sight of the world's most advanced military technologies unleashing thousands of tons of high explosives on Iraq and the sound of bought radio commentators assuring us that the brave-hearted Americans and British (And Canadian. Isn't it delightful to be brothers in arms?) will *never* allow a single ton to fall on a civilian sickens me. I think this war is of the pattern of the future, when the bits of the Third World involved turn out often to be Very

[45]Among many writings see E.P. Thompson, "Agenda: The ideological delirium which strikes chords in the worst traditions of American populism," *Guardian*, 18 February 1985; Thompson, ed., *Star Wars* (Harmondsworth 1985); Thompson, "The Pie Isn't in the Sky: Look Who's Really Behind Star Wars," *The Nation* (1 March 1986), 233-8.

Nasty, and we must find a strategy for war resistance less simplistic (and perhaps sometimes more revolutionary) than 'Hands Off.'

END issued "An International Citizens Appeal for Peace and Democracy in the Middle East," calling for peace, democracy, and the right of national self-determination. Citing an appalling list of Hussein's crimes, the Appeal was nevertheless staunch in its insistence that, "Democracy and self-determination can never be imposed through war and violence." Thompson signed the statement, aware that it contained inner contradictions, not yet perhaps quite sure in his own mind of the more revolutionary strategy of war resistance that the complexities of the Middle East in the 1990s demanded. The issue of war and peace thus continued to be uppermost in Thompson's mind, well into the 1990s. Nevertheless, his *total* immersion in the peace movement and its cause of nuclear disarmament was, by 1985, easing. He and Dorothy went to China in April, and Edward was struggling, with difficulty, to reacquaint himself with the discipline of historical research and writing. "I MUST use the next twelve months to try and reactivate myself as a (writing) historian," he wrote in obvious frustration. "Here the peace movement is into quieter times, but polls (whatever they are worth?) oddly show a huge surge towards us: most strongly after Chernobyl. People are less activist, but if they are changing their minds it is our way," he commented in September 1986. Two months later, Edward and Dorothy were finalizing plans to spend a teaching semester at Queen's in 1988. They were still involved deeply with END, and the stress of raising money for the cause and organizing events such as book sales and fairs pressed on them both as they prepared to cross the Atlantic to teach. Hoping (in vain) to have *Customs in Common* in press by that time, Thompson was open to all kinds of suggestions about what he would lecture on and the kinds of seminars he could teach. He was adamant on only one point: "What I will not do is 'teach' my views on the 57 varieties of 'Marxism', which," he added, "tend to make me cross." After *The Poverty of Theory* and after half-a-decade of intense political campaigning, in which the end had been to heal the gaping wound separating East and West, Thompson had little patience left for what he regarded as "doctrinaire absolutisms," be they Marxist/anti-Marxist.[46]

Thompson had always believed that politics was about bodies; they needed to be placed *against* what threatened them. He had done this, leading with his mind, in the campaign to break from the orthodox rigidities of the ideologies of the Cold War. However much he was at his desk, he was also in the streets, and not always as a keynote speaker. He was a proud observer and car driver when Greenham Common was surrounded by 40,000 women; he was "lugged around" by police

[46]E.P. Thompson, Mary Kaldor, *et al.*, *Mad Dogs: The US Raids on Libya* (London 1986); Thompson to Palmer, 14 March 1985; 19 December 1991; 17 February 1991; 20 September 1986; 17 November 1986; 3 October 1987; Thompson and Racek, "Freedom and the Bomb," *New Statesman*, 8-9; Richard Falk and Mary Kaldor, "An International Citizens Appeal for Peace and Democracy in the Middle East," Emergency Gulf Appeal, END, 10 February 1991.

when, with thousands of other CNDers, he sat down in Oxford Street in protest against the bombing of Tripoli; he was not far from any effort to make peace in the 1980-86 years, in spirit *or* in body. With the publication of *Protest and Survive*, he passed from being "a private citizen and free-lance writer and historian into being a famous (or infamous) Public Person, 'Professor' (which I am not) E.P. Thompson, on call at any hour of the day and sometimes night for the service of a huge, untidy, sometimes quarrelsome but always high-spirited and dedicated movement arising in every part of the globe which is called 'the peace movement.'" Years later, when he could go back to his gardens, metaphorical and real, his body had been through a lot. Whether our bodies had been saved by his commitment and sacrifice is not a question that can be easily answered. But they had made a difference and Thompson left our world, in 1993, a safer place than he entered it, in 1979-80, with his urgent call to protest in order to survive.[47]

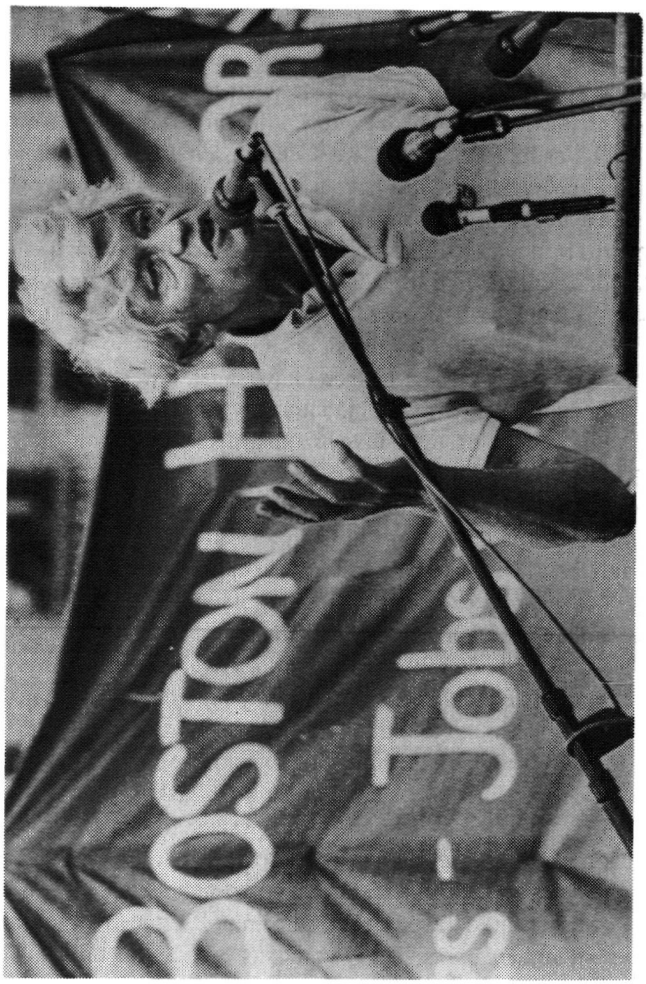
The End

THOMPSON'S LAST YEARS were ones of labouring against the clock. He knew he had so much to do, and the hands of time were ticking against him. What he wrote in the late 1980s and early 1990s must be placed firmly in this context. No doubt there are medical explanations for Edward's failing health, but the extent to which his intense giving of himself, which included constant wear and tear on his person (flying here and there, eating inadequately, sleeping irregularly, bent over the desk into the early hours of the morning, preparing for the public lectures that took so much energy), weakened his constitution is undeniable. Thompson himself attributed the beginnings of his health problems to "some bug" he came back from a conference in New Delhi with, and that landed him in the hospital for much of the winter of 1987.[48] Across my desk are scattered pictures from the early and late 1980s, images of an unmistakable physical deterioration. He remained, even in sickness, a man who could muster energy for his work and for his friendships, but what had come easily and naturally in the late 1970s, was an effort ten years later.

At this time he was battling colitis, worn down by the prescribed steroids, but hopeful that his rate of improvement would accelerate. At Queen's he threw himself into his teaching and public lectures with gusto, but he was obviously run-down and, his immune system weakened, highly susceptible. After a Sunday outing to the Kingston harness track with myself, Dorothy, and my five-year old daughter

[47]Thompson, *The Defence of Britain*, 2-3, 11-3; Thompson, "The View from Oxford Street," in *Mad Dogs*, 142-52. See, as well, Dorothy Thompson, ed., *Over our Dead Bodies: Women Against the Bomb* (London 1983); and the careful comments in Bess, "E.P. Thompson: The Historian as Activist," 36-8. Thompson's own assessment of END and the thawing of the second Cold War is found in Thompson, "Ends and Histories," in Mary Kaldor, ed., *Europe from Below: An East-West Dialogue* (London 1991), 7-25.

[48]Thompson to Palmer, 22 February 1987; Thompson to Don Akenson, 11 June 1987, copy to Palmer.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Beth, with whom Edward was in close playful contact, Beth came down with a dose of chicken pox; a week later Edward was afflicted with a bad case of shingles. Things worsened in 1989-1990, when Edward and Dorothy were at the Rutger's Centre for Historical Analysis. Hospitalized for one malady, Edward had a brush with what he was convinced was Legionnaire's disease. When I visited the Thompsons in New Jersey shortly after, he was on prescribed oxygen and so frail that he could barely get the roast to the table. Returning to England, his back gave out and he suffered loss of much of the use of his lungs. He continued to cherish improvement, the chances for increased work and small labours in the garden, and the freedom it would afford those, such as Dorothy and his sons and daughter, who were now caring for him. Well into 1991 he went into a tailspin. "Dorothy has pulled me through the latest illness," he wrote, alluding to how it "was much worse than any before I was more than three weeks unconscious and in intensive care." Afterwards, he improved enough to have a large and pleasant family Christmas, but "collapsed in exhaustion at the end of it." He was "a semi-invalid, full of drugs." Two bouts of viral pneumonia had pretty much done in his lungs, and he was plagued with sudden and debilitating fevers. There were neurological problems and loss of memory. Eventually he would suffer heart problems as well. But he took some good-humoured solace in his physician's comment that "I evidently must have some mission in the world still, since I have narrowly escaped death twice." And, as sick as he was, he didn't give in, but again offered his refusals.[49]

In these years he battled back into his historical writing on the eighteenth century. He felt insecure about his knowledge of eighteenth-century demographic, economic, industrial, and social history, deciding that he could not tackle teaching a graduate seminar around "Customs in Common" in 1988. Instead he opted for working through the 1790s, where he had sufficient grasp of the primary materials "that whatever duffer I prove to be on current scholarship [the students] are bound to spend some time in useful primary stuff." There was no need for such reticence. Thompson's lectures on themes in the social history of eighteenth-century England were superb, although he would later uncharitably regard some of them as "muddled" and "old hat." He found the literature on the moral economy of the crowd, in particular, to be overwhelming and had to abandon an initial attempt to redraft the essay on food riots in light of subsequent scholarship, opting to append a 100-page historiographic essay to his original statement. In the end, the final published version of *Customs in Common* was something of a scholarly landmark, bringing Thompson's views on eighteenth-century England into clearer focus. But it was not the book it would have been had he completed it as the momentum of his research and thought on the subject peaked just prior to his full-time entry into anti-nuclear politics. Lacking a conclusion and insufficiently integrating the dis-

[49]This draws upon personal correspondence: Thompson to Palmer, 15 September 1987; 3 October 1987; 2 November 1987; 9,10,11 November 1987; 4 March 1989; 20 September 1991; 19 December 1991; 1 February 1993; Dorothy Thompson to Palmer, Tuesday (1989?); 1 September (1991?).

crete discussions of ritual and custom, the text, whatever its substantial merits, suffered from the years it had been placed in the bottom drawer of Thompson's desk. Thompson chaffed against some of the revisionist scholarship on the eighteenth century and good-naturedly joked about other work, which he admired: "I have been very impressed by Nick [Roger's] *Whigs and Cities*," he wrote to me in 1991. "Indeed some of it is so good that I feel quite cross. It will make my *C in C* into a yawn and some of its interpretive arguments either preempt or improve upon my own. GRRRRR!" This only made the job of preparing the manuscript for publication, under the adverse conditions of ill-health (his back was at this point seized up and he walked in pain, with the aid of a stick), trying. "I can sit at my desk, type, etc., and the proofs of *C in C* are promised next week. I am a bit bored with the book, and fear that readers will be also." He was perhaps his harshest critic, and he was glad to be getting back to Blake.[50]

There were other projects on the go as well, and responsibilities to keep him busy even as his health faded. In 1988 he wrote me with boyish enthusiasm: "Oh, and did I tell you that I've got another JOB? A Simon Research Fellowship at Manchester from Oct to June, with a proper salary: duties are mainly being at Manchester for most of most weeks and giving odd lectures and seminars." After being shut out of the academic establishment for so long, he was actually surprised to land such posts. The Manchester fellowship was followed by more work, with Edward and Dorothy taking a teaching offer from Rutger's University. Upon his return to England he threw himself into finishing *Customs in Common*, exploring his father's relationship with Tagore (his new cat was called Rabindranath Tigger), returning to Blake (yet again), and exploring the intriguing legal, cultural, and economic ramifications of native people's battle to secure their land within the

[50]The above paragraph is perhaps too stark in its assessment of *Customs in Common* (London 1991). What is clear is that Thompson's essays themselves spawned a reinterpretation of eighteenth-century England. Had Thompson had the time and the health to keep abreast of the explosion in eighteenth-century English social history and to relate his own work to that expansive field, his text would no doubt have evolved differently. As it was, this was impossible and *Customs in Common* is the achievement of its chapter parts, rather than an achievement taking those parts beyond their own individual, and considerable, significance. So obvious is that significance, however, that most reviewers acknowledge the status of the text. See, for instance, Linda Colley, "Perpetual Commotion," *The Independent on Sunday*, 5 January 1992; John Saville, "Custom made," *Socialist Review*, January 1992; John Brewer, "Voice of the labouring poor," *Times Literary Supplement* (13 March 1992), 14-5; Peter Linebaugh, "Commonists of the World Unite!" *Radical History Review*, 56 (1993), 59-67. For Thompson's own assessments I rely on personal correspondence: Thompson to Palmer, 5 October 1987; 17 March 1989; 26 May 1989; 20 September 1991; 19 December 1991. Perhaps one of the most interesting critical reviews of *Customs in Common*, unique in its careful structuring of the possible relationship of the eighteenth-century essays to the interpretive positions of *The Making of the English Working Class*, is David Levine, "Proto-nothing," *Social History*, 18 (October 1993), 381-90.

interface of British imperialism and the displacements of revolutionary America. Structured around the leading role of one Sampson Occum, this case intrigued Edward, focused his attention increasingly on issues of North American aboriginal peoples, and occupied much of his thoughts. "My Blake is going through press, the Tagore sh[oul]d appear any day, and I must now turn to my Mohegans," he wrote early in 1993, just months before his death. Dorothy confirmed the point late in 1992: "Edward's health is holding up and even improving a bit in the last few weeks. Blake and Tagore are finished and he is muttering about Sampson Occum."[51]

Thompson's eighteenth-century studies and the book on Blake were awaited with much anticipation in certain circles. It was only to be expected that their appearance, especially *Customs in Common*, where many essays had already made their way into the pages of academic journals, would be somewhat anti-climactic. But the initial writing to appear in the late 1980s was unanticipated, Thompson drawing on a 1985 visit to China and his decades-old opposition to nuclear weapons to fashion statements in poetry and fictional prose. Both writings are centrally-concerned with power and its abuses, with despotism and destruction, with challenge and resistance, with language and its capacities to tyrannize *and* liberate.

In "Powers and Names," inspired by a reading of the poet Szuma Chien, Thompson addresses constituted authority, stating bluntly, "You have the power to name: Naming gives power over all," but follows with a rebellious query: "But who will name the power to name." Speech, art, and spirituality combined in acts of social construction not unlike those imagined by postmodernist theory:

And Chi his son hereditary
Owner of all under Heaven, he and his family
In perpetuity. From that ancestral power
Sprouted the state:
Armies invented slavery: astronomy
Led the stars captive through the calendar:
Taxes invented the poor.

But knowledge, as interpreted by the scholars, proved to be something less than power:

Says the Grand Historian:
It was a great mistake
To tutor power, for when
The law at last was learned
From legalist or mystic
By the Emperor of Chin
He ordered the imperial rule

[51]Thompson to Palmer, 15 June 1988; 1 February 1993; Dorothy Thompson to Palmer, 1 September 1992.

Of benevolence to begin:
He buried the scholars alive
And the *Book of Songs* was burned.

Centuries of exploitation ensued:

Heaven's mandate swarmed the land like locusts:
Taxation's inquisition racked the rocks and holes
Exacting the confession of their surplus.
The peasants hacked at famine with their hoes
And stirred the dirt to flower
A hundred million hoes held up the vault of power.

Against this historical record of structured human containment, Thompson posed the question of resistance and its sources of strength, of necessity and desire:

Or was it propped up by the arch of awe
Whose proper name is self-expropriation?
Is so, materialism turns a somersault:
We are the subjects of our own negation
And exploitation's basis floats
On the cold surface of our confiscated thought.

Past and present blurred as humanity's cause fused the ancient despotisms and dynasties with themes of ultimate contemporary destructiveness in 'the rectification of names':

Whose needs are the material habitus
From which the goddesses and dragons came,
Whose archers will shoot down the nuclear fire,
Whose nameless pillars are imagination's flames,
Whose arcane oracles proclaim
The rectification of the human name.

For all history there is but one 'charm against evil':

Throw the forbidden places open.
Let the dragons and the lions play.
Let us swallow the worm of power
And the name pass away.

As Thompson would later write, "At certain moments history turns on a hinge of new ideas." Those ideas and the corresponding acts of resistance are humankind's hope. Thompson was conveying, in these late 1980s lines of internationally-inspired verse, the lessons of his life: "We learn, for neither the first nor the last time,

that it is a terribly long and thankless task to try to influence the course of history by little movements 'from below.' Yet such minority positions, through most of recorded human history, have been the only honourable places to be; nor do they always fail in the long run."[52]

More pessimistic, but of a piece with the poetic vision of "Powers and Names," is a misunderstood futuristic Swiftian satire concerned, again, with what Perry Anderson neatly decodes as "the alien gaze of an incorporeal reason fall[ing] too late on the world of property and authority and war, as it moves towards nuclear destruction." Thompson's first and only novel, *The Sykaos Papers*, fused his longstanding concerns with history and disarmament in an account of the voyage to Earth (Sykaos) of Oi Paz, a poet-explorer dispatched from Oitar, a perfectly programmed computer-like social formation threatened with environmental collapse, to determine the suitability of colonizing the alien globe. Oi Paz is quickly made into an international celebrity, 'exploited' by a promotional huckster and painfully but brusquely introduced to the capitalist essentials of Western existence: commodification and alienation. Oi Paz soon grasped the meaning of life on earth, where "property is the rule ... 'money' is its messenger." He was also prophetic about earth's destiny: "Your species will end itself in nuclear war. Soon. It will not be your choice." The bureaucratized war machines of East and West take over, incarcerating Oi Paz and importing academics to decipher him. One such scientist is the anthropologist, Helena Sage, who eventually connects with Oi Paz, conceiving a child, christened, appropriately, Adam, later to be dubbed Ho Mo. As the superpowers follow their logic of exterminism, blowing up planet earth, Adam escapes to an Oitarian-outfitted moon, where he becomes the first rebel of a new intergalactic order. "There is nothing in the universe ... which is not cross-grained, contradictory, divided against itself, awkward, and at odds," declares this rebellious figure in opposition to Oitarian authority. He was speaking of historical process, but he was also speaking to Edward Thompson's life, to his *example*.[53]

[52]Thompson, "Powers and Names," *London Review of Books*, 23 January 1986, 9-10; Thompson, "Ends and Histories," in Kaldor, ed., *Europe from Below*, 23-4.

[53]E.P. Thompson, *The Sykaos Papers* (New York 1988), esp. 92-3, 118, 318-9, 359-361, 476-8; Paul Buhle, "Isn't it Romantic: E.P. Thompson's Global Agenda," *Voice Literary Supplement*, 76 (July 1989), 24-6; Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, 211-4; Benjamin DeMott, "The Poet Who Fell to Earth," *New York Times Book Review* (25 September 1988), 12-3. On 15 June 1988 Thompson wrote to me: "an incredibly mixed reception to *Sykaos*. Clearly I am not to be the flavor-of-the-month of the London trendy left. An assassination in the 'New Statesman' by a reviewer with your own philistine predilections, except that she supposed the book was sci-fic. But very nice reviews in the centrist press, 'Sunday Times' and 'Observer'. I suppose you will mutter that you're not surprised. Advance copies of the US edn shd be going out shortly, I'll ask them to send you one." See, as well, Perry Anderson, "Diary," *London Review of Books*, 24.

The Awkwardness of Antithesis

"TO WRITE OLD HISTORY AFRESH," Thompson once wrote, "cannot be done without un-writing other people's history." The statement can be read in many ways. To rewrite the history of the English working class, for instance, it was necessary not only to rewrite the history of the Hammonds and Hartwell, of Francis Place, Susan Thistlewood, and Joanna Southcott, but also of Oliver the Spy and William Pitt. Making history was not, for Thompson, so much an undertaking of objectivity (although he was imaginatively scrupulous in his handling of evidence), as it was an act of *objecting*, of *refusing*, of *opposing*. This, too, was how he made his politics (against the grains of convention, left *and* right) and, yes, *his* theory, which emerged and reemerged out of the continuous and confrontational dialogue of idea and actuality, concept and evidence.[54]

As Thompson argued in his letter to Kolakowski, and as his friend Christopher Hill insightfully emphasized in his obituary upon Thompson's death, standing this ground of refusal and objection was no easy matter. It was an awkward business. There was little stability to be found in this oppositional niche, where forces of incorporation and barriers to serious communication of principle were so thorny. "[I]f one is not to be pressed through the grid into the universal mish-mash of the received assumptions of the intellectual culture," Thompson said, "[o]ne must strain at every turn in one's thought to resist the assumption that what one observes and what one is is in the very course of nature." And this was doubly so when one faced into the winds of right and left, all the while resisting the comfort of the centre. This often left Thompson, as he himself acknowledged, out on his own lonely ledge. "How do you react to the circus which used to be the USSR? They always were pretty thin socialists, at any time after about 1921 anyway," he wrote to me in 1991. But he found little politically to cheer about in the actual implosion of the Stalinist state: "These great 'free market' converts on the other side piss me off: they just won't listen, won't get into a dialogue, think they know it all. About 1,000 miles to the right of Galbraith. I don't intend to bend my pen for them." Nor was there more congenial space on the broad western left: "I am also pissed off with those of my erstwhile lefty colleagues who think that nationalism is such a lovely thing Baltic, Georgian, even Croat!!!"[55]

His refuge, perhaps, was in poetry and laughter, which he embraced as foundations of "human civilization." Thompson turned to them continuously, deflecting his awkwardness, his fears and his angers with pleas for imagination and conscience or, if these were irretrievably backed up into the bowels of ideological

[54]E.P. Thompson, "Preface," in Lynd, *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution*, ix-xiii; Thompson, "Theory and Evidence," *History Workshop Journal*, 35 (Spring 1993), 274-5.

[55]Thompson, "An Open Letter to Kolakowski," 109, 183-4; Hill, "From the Awkward School," *Guardian*, 30 August 1993; Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters* (1975), 260; Thompson to Palmer, 20 September 1991.

constipation, barbs of irreverence and ridicule. He disliked lack of a sense of humour and considered such deficiency a failing in certain fields of historical research, where temperamental incapacity to grasp how laughter, mockery, or irony could have been used to extend and deepen meaning, could handcuff analysis in the wrist-lock of an overly deferential embrace of propriety. His own personal correspondence was peppered with light moments of mockery, some directed at his correspondent, others at himself. "Daughter Kate and son Ben will be coming in series to keep an eye on their old dad, in case he falls out of an apple tree. Which he is quite likely to do," he wrote with reference to his own health. When some valuable eighteenth-century books were lost in postal transit from Canada to England he offered a 'political' explanation: "Instituted high level enquiries about loss ages ago but have now accepted fatalistic resignation, knowing all is due to high level organisation of postal workers t.u. with Bryan Palmer's blessing."[56]

A measure of his awkwardness was Thompson's alienation from the academic milieu he nevertheless spent much of his time and writing within. He deplored "the modish subjectivism and idealism now so current." Amazed at "the unabashed regurgitation of laissez-faire apologies for the market" that swamped eighteenth-century studies in his absence, he was amused by the rise of an Empire of Discourse: a "mobile academic chat-show, self-admiring gossip circus moving from Kings College Cambridge ... to Washington DC to Bellagio ... which I suppose has some interest but which never touches down and which is the current form of idealism."

[56]Suzanne Cassidy, "A Historian's Alternative Culture," *New York Times Book Review* (25 September 1988), 13; Colley, "Perpetual Commotion," 26; Thompson, "Blake's Tone," 12-3; Thompson to Palmer, 20 September 1991; 30 November 1988.

While he had, by the mid-1980s, long since moved off anything resembling 'class politics,' he could not bear to see the postured cleverness of the university 'intellectual' marshalled against the idea and historical embeddedness of class.[57]

Indeed, "the enormous pomp and propriety of the self-important academic" always put Thompson's back up in awkward antipathy. This was a significant part of the importance of *tone* to Thompson who, after all, grew up in the shadow of Oxford. As early as 1961, he was moved to opposition in a review of Williams' *The Long Revolution*, noting the way in which a disengaged language detached ideas and arguments not only from socialism but from people themselves:

> I sometimes imagine this medium (and it is the church-going solemnity of the procession which provokes me to irreverence) as an elderly gentlewoman and near relative of Mr. Eliot, so distinguished as to have become an institution: The Tradition. There she sits, with that white starched affair on her head, knitting definitions without thought of recognition or reward (some of them will be parcelled up and sent to the Victims of Industry) and in her presence *how one must watch one's Language*! The first brash word, the least suspicion of laughter or polemic in her presence, and The Tradition might drop a stitch and have to start knitting all those definitions over again. ... But The Tradition has not been like this at all: Burke abused, Cobbett inveighed, Arnold was capable of malicious insinuation, Carlyle, Ruskin, and D.H. Lawrence, in their middle years, listened to no one. This may be regrettable: but I cannot see that the communication of anger, indignation, or even malice, is any less *genuine*. What is evident here is a concealed preference in the name of 'genuine communication' — for the language of the academy.

That language and that tone Thompson saw, at times, as carrying overtones which were "actively offensive." Those who felt the bite of Thompson's counter-tone often imagined themselves to have been bloodied in abuse. This, too, was part of the cause of his awkward 'otherness,' yet it was, as well, a large factor in his greatness as a historian and a polemicist, where his *refusals* were always registered in ways that separated him out from the passive propriety of the academic crowd.[58]

[57]Thompson, "Theory and Evidence," *History Workshop Journal*, 275; Thompson, "Table Talk about Class," *Listener*, 6 June 1985, 29; Thompson to Palmer, 30 November 1988. As I was writing this essay I was directed by a friend and colleague well-versed in Thompson's writings to one of his last reviews, a critical engagement with Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (1992), which I was told was Thompson's repudiation of class. In fact, it was anything but, and Thompson's statement with respect to his *The Making of the English Working Class* that, "'Class' was perhaps overworked in the 1960s and 1970s, and it has become merely boring," is a typical piece of Thompson ironic hyperbole, directed at "the prevalent view." On class and its eighteenth and nineteenth-century origins Thompson's views in this review are unambiguous: "I am not ready to capitulate." See Thompson, "The Making of A Ruling Class," *Dissent* (Summer 1993), 377-82.

[58]Thompson, "The Long Revolution I," *New Left Review*, 25. For an account of Williams' hurt response to the Thompson review see Anderson, "Diary," *London Review of Books*, 24. Thompson and Williams obviously mended the fences, and Thompson wrote a moving obituary upon Williams' death: Thompson, "Last Dispatches from the Border Country:

Of all species, *Academicus Superciliosus* was his least favoured:

He is inflated with self-esteem and perpetually self-congratulatory as to the high vocation of the university teacher; but he knows almost nothing about any other vocation, and he will lie down and let himself be walked over if anyone enters from the outer world who has money or power or even a tough line in realist talk. ... He can scurry furiously ... around in his committees, like a white mouse running in a wheel, while his master is carrying him, cage and all, to be sold at the local pet shop. These people annoy me a good deal .... Academic freedom is forever on their lips, and is forever disregarded in their actions. They are the last people to whom it can be safely entrusted, since the present moment is never the opportune moment to stand and fight. Show them the last ditch for the defence of liberty, and they will walk backwards into the sea, complaining that the ditch is very ill dug, that they cannot possibly be asked to defend it alongside such a ragged and seditious-looking set of fellows, and, in any case, it would surely be better to write out a tactful remonstrance and present it, on inscribed vellum, to the enemy.

Nor did *Academicus Superciliosus* think any better of 'Professor' Thompson. When I attempted to drum up support for a 1980s visit by Edward and Dorothy, I thought there would be enthusiastic welcome in some quarters for Thompson's work on Blake. I sent off tapes of a lecture he had delivered at Brown University, anticipating a warm response. I got some heat:

Thompson's approach might hold some interest for the historian, but I doubt whether even the literary historian could afford much sympathy for its methodology. Thompson clearly revels in being curmudgeonly in this respect and aligns himself with the traditions of 19th century scholarship. He freights his texts with so much historical evidence, and with such an exclusiveness, that it would appear that he assumes a work of literature is primarily and even solely a confluence of historical currents. ... The approach brings him closer to the literary approach of writers like Hippolyte Taine, whose influence did outlast the 19th century, but not by much. It is moreover, somewhat cranky and unproductive. His delivery is often maddeningly digressive, turning aside to plod interminably after the slightest digression. ... And it is, for all its melodramatics, largely boring because it is so centrifugal, undermining the authority and centrality of the text for any excuse to digress into peripheral matters.

My own *Academicus Superciliosus* closed his book on Thompson with a polite gesture to collegial sensibilities and a final burst of critical bravado: "I hope you

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Raymond Williams," *The Nation* (5 March 1988), 310-2. Given that Thompson's original polemical brush had tarred Williams with retreating in the face of the genteel politeness of the ruling-class academy, it is noteworthy that his last tribute to Williams stated, "Those of us who were Raymond's colleagues will miss that strenuous, patient, calming arguing voice very sorely. It is as if a fixed point from which we had been accustomed to take our bearings had suddenly dissolved, a point on the border country between the academy and the activist movement. We must thank him for his years of persistent inquiry."

won't be offended by my account, but I do find the performance in its arch-conservative crankiness somewhat eccentric and antediluvian."[59]

Thompson's study of Blake, which represented decades of research and thought, appeared posthumously in the fall of 1993. It is a remarkable book, and one that explains much about Edward Thompson and the hostility of his scholastic critics, as well as about William Blake. Concerned to situate Blake in terms of an antinomian tradition reaching back to the seventeenth-century ranting impulse of dissent, the book is a careful exercise in creative exploration, an education in the influences that worked on Blake and the milieu of London Dissent, where experience and textual learning rubbed against one another in ways that produced faiths, fragmentations, and frictions. Thompson looks to Blake's family and to associations, not of sect-like churches and scriptural works, but of images and rhetorics of faith, of antinomian impulses that saw in all proclamations of Moral Law the oppressive confinements of priests and powerful authorities "Who make up a Heaven of our misery." Against the weight of such proclamations of Law pushed the opposition of dissent -- Ranters, Quakers, Fifth Monarchists, Muggletonians -- which, as early as 1650, was being described in a language of levelling: "they maintain that God is essentially in every creature, and that there is as much of God in one creature, as in another, though he doth not manifest himself so much in one as in another." This loose tradition of thought and faith wafted through the seventeenth and into the early years of the eighteenth century, carrying "an unsettling and potentially subversive" tone linked tenuously to unbridled sexuality and the pursuit of worldly pleasures. Gatherings such as the Sweet Singers of Israel were noticed in 1706 as "very poetically given, turning all into Rhime, and singing all their Worship. They meet in an Ale-house and eat, drink and smoak. ... They hold that there is no Sin in them: that Eating and Drinking and Society is bles'd: That Death and Hell are a terror only to those that fear it." In his quest to relate this mood and religious movement of enthusiasm to Blake, Thompson located the last Muggletonian, uncovering in the process the Muggletonian Archive, suggesting that Blake's mother, Catherine, and her first husband, had possibly been followers of Ludowick Muggleton. This exploration of antinomianism comprises more than half of Thompson's discussion in *Witness Against the Beast*, the book closing with Blake's images -- of the New Jerusalem, of the divine human of Swedenborgian discourse, of innocence and experience, of London -- and their meaning. Arguing that Blake's vision was in direct opposition to the governance of man, to the uncontrolled rule of the Beast and the Whore (the state and priestcraft), Thompson lays continual stress on the intensity of Blake's faith in the liberation of human nature, a vast unrealised potential of alternative, repressed by Moral Law. Convinced that Blake never compromised his vision of hope with "the least sign of submission to 'Satan's Kingdom,'" Thompson ap-

[59]Thompson, *Warwick*, 153-4. I will spare the author of the anti-Thompson letter, dated 26 November 1984, citation.

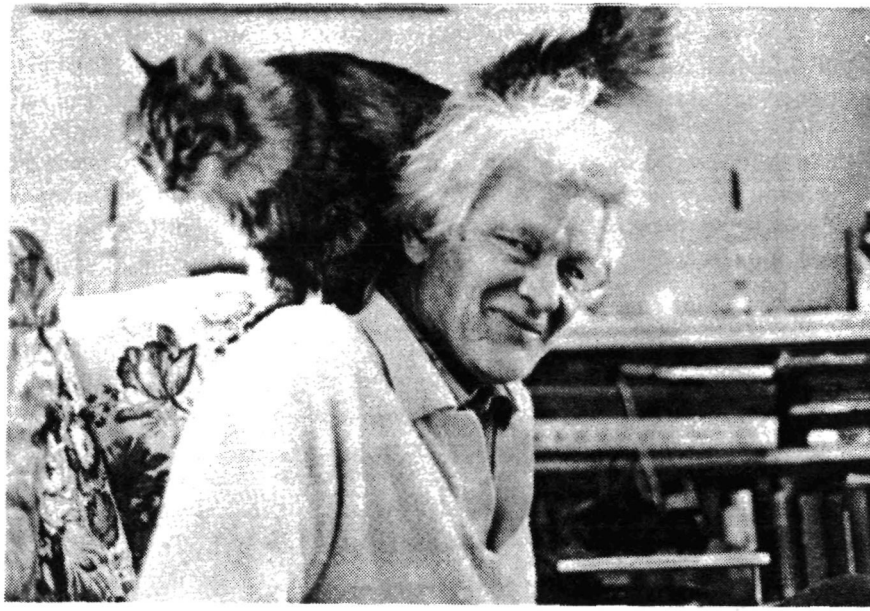
plauds Blake's refusal of "the least complicity with the kingdom of the Beast." It is a refusal as characteristic of Thompson himself as it was of Blake, the kind of refusal that Thompson saw too little of in certain quarters inhabited by *Academicus Superciliosus*. Thompson's willingness to read Blake against the decontextualized canonical grain, to see his prose as both beautiful and powerful because of its historicized message, rather than in spite of it, drew the ire of scholastic criticism, as did so much of Thompson's writing. For his part, Thompson saw in such petulance "the uncreative mediocrity of these latter days and also, perhaps, ... the encroaching Thatcherism of the upwardly-mobile historical mind." It was not a vision that necessarily aimed to please, and it did not.[60]

This was what Thompson lived with, in his awkward placement, now in the academic circle, now out of it. I know I have offered too many pages here, and I know, quite acutely, that they are likely to be dismissed, as have other pages I have written on Thompson, as "hagiographic." Thompson himself thought my 1980 book on him "too uncritical perhaps?" I have written these pages in what I tried to make Thompson's terms, rather than mine. My own criticisms seem, at the moment, rather unimportant. There will be others to do this kind of much-needed work. They should attend, however, to Thompson's own *history*, which this comment has pointed toward, and which the factory management of the Thompson academic industry has been lax in coaxing into production. They may find explanations and resonances in Thompson's past with those areas where legitimate difference arises out of his historical and political writings. The treatment of the Irish in *The Making of the English Working Class*, and Thompson's brief contemporary comment on "terrorism," the current Irish malaise, and "British imperialism," for instance, may benefit from engagement with Thompson's father's experience as a 'friend of India.' It is only a perhaps. But there are other long overgrown interpretive paths to walk. No doubt this criticism will be 'benevolent,' in the complex eighteenth-century senses of the word that Thompson discussed with respect to the wobbling Jacobin, William Goodwin, who carried the virtues and vices of an early enlightened intelligensia.[61]

I have looked at Thompson with my own sense of benevolence. It has not been as easy as some will assume. But it is now there to be considered, as, in many ways, Thompson considered others:

[60]E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York 1993); Thompson, "On the rant," *London Review of Books*, 9 July 1987, 9-10.

[61]Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson*; Gregor McLennan, "E.P. Thompson and the Discipline of Historical Context," in *Making Histories*, 343 n. 1; Thompson to Palmer, no date (1980); Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1968), 469-85; Thompson, "The Secret State," in *Writing by Candlelight*, 171-172; Thompson, "Benevolent Mr. Goodwin," *London Review of Books* (8 July 1993), 14-5.



If many of the ... young people had in fact got socialism 'inside of them,' then something of its quality -- the hostility to Grundyism, the warm espousal of sex equality, the rich internationalism -- owed much to [him.] It is time that this forgotten 'provincial' was admitted to first-class citizenship of history ... .

He didn't ask for intellectual allegiance, nor did he respect those who offered it too readily. His work provoked a critical admiration. We had come to assume his presence -- definitions, provocations, exhortations -- as a fixed point in the intellectual night-sky. His star stood above the ideological no-man's land between the orthodox emplacements of West and East, flashing urgent humanist messages. If we couldn't always follow it, we always stopped to take bearings.

You do not fall within
Our frames of reference. Transfixed by promises
Pledged to the poor in the high Andea pastures;
The crowd in Santiago; the clasped-hand of the metal-worker;
The earnest village schoolmistress, searching your face:
These brought their treaties. You signed them with your life

[He] was right. But that did him no kind of good. Come 1956 and all that, and surely [he] was at last liberated, freed from the Stalinist shackles, in touch once again with the new and ebullient radicalism of the 1960s, in accord with an audience once more? Well, no. That wasn't how it was.

Maguire, Wright Mills, Allende, McGrath -- awkward examples all; men, dead or largely lost from our sights, whom Thompson brought back to us with his words, reintroducing values that they espoused, enlarging and sustaining them in our present.[62]

"In the end we also will be dead," wrote Thompson, "and our own lives will lie inert within the finished process, our intentions assimilated within a past event which we never intended." All that could be hoped for was that "the men and women of the future will reach back to us, will affirm and renew our meanings, and make our history intelligible within their own present tense." Extending this humanity its own agency, Thompson declared: "They alone will have the power to select from the many meanings offered by our quarrelling present, and to transmute some part of our process into their progress."[63] This we can, awkwardly, try to do. We have, after all, your *example*. Homage to you Edward Thompson. You gave us so much of what we need.

"Homage to Edward Thompson, Part I" appeared in Labour/Le Travail, *32 (Fall 1993), 10-71. The author acknowledges the help of Robert Malcolmson in providing source material.*

[62]Thompson, "Homage to Tom Maguire," in *Essays in Labour History*, 315; Thompson, "Remembering C. Wright Mills," and "Homage to Salvadore Allende," in *The Heavy Dancers*, 261, 278; Thompson, "Homage to Thomas McGrath," *Triquarterly*, 122.
[63]Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, 234.