

A Definitive 'And fookin' Amen to that!

David Levine

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by applying his methods to another group of ordinary people – those who were in the position of exercising power over others on behalf of the state – we can see where those fissures were and how they were created. While they were often bridged or avoided, they also had the potential to trip up the unsuspecting state agent, interrupting history's trajectory.

But there are other reasons to pursue the kind of historical materialist approach that *The Making* exemplifies. Humanizing power, giving it a face, does not just enrich our understanding of the past; it also cultivates empathy and a sense of ourselves as historical actors. The people who read the history we write include the social workers and the planners of the future, people who find themselves, as we do, acting in the world, imperfectly, butting up against structures as we exercise our agency. While it is important to understand the sometimes brutal consequences of wielding power, recognizing that which we possess – albeit in different amounts – and the circumstances that shape how we use it, is also vital to making the world we would like.

A Definitive 'And fookin' Amen to that!

David Levine

IN THE FALL OF 1967, I was in my fourth year at the University of British Columbia and had enrolled in Jim Winter's History 418 course – “modern Britain”. I was excited – and rather trepidatious – especially when I saw his reading list. The very first item was a massive book – published by Vintage in New York – that “everyone” had heard about, but only some had bought and very few had read. So it was that I first encountered *The Making of the English Working Class*.

I read the big orange/black tome diligently but did not really understand – or appreciate – much of what Thompson was arguing for and against. Some of that misunderstanding was due to my callowness but most of my incomprehension was due to the reality that the study of history is wasted on the young. I did not know the period and had no familiarity whatsoever with the nuances of the historical literature. Having read the book – and really struggled with the long final section on working-class intellectual life called “Class Consciousness” – I completed the assignment and promptly forgot most of what I had poured over.

Fast forward to 1975. Now I had a doctorate-in-hand and – against all odds – a job. My thesis was a study of the demographic implications of rural industrialization in England, using the then-novel technique of family reconstitution to explicate fertility, nuptiality, and mortality statistics with fine-toothed precision. My first course was inherited from Doug Myers – “Canadian Working-Class History and the Schools”. I did not know Myers

or what he had used for his students' reading assignments, but I was shocked to find that there was little available secondary-literature on Canadian working-class history beyond a few institutional studies of unions and labour organizations as well as a smattering of materials on working-class living standards in Montreal and Toronto, supplemented by Judith Fingard's excellent article, "The Winter's Tale: Contours of Pre-Industrial Poverty in British America, 1815–1860," published in 1974.

Remember, this was a time before Labour/Le Travailleur – nowadays, there is a rich literature on the subject of working-class history comprising scores of monographs and many hundreds of scholarly articles. Much of this writing has been quite self-conscious in appropriating a Thompsonian perspective on class, class formation, and class consciousness in the Great White North. Back then – in the mid-1970s – Canadian working-class history was a kind of *terra incognita*, waiting to be discovered. In any event, that course – OISE 1425 – might have been the worst travesty ever perpetrated on a collection of graduate students.

Over the next dozen years, my teaching got better and it morphed – away from any Canadian focus, towards subjects for which I was better-prepared: the educational connections with family history and historical demography, popular cultural history, and English history. I still retained a focus on "working-class history" and, indeed, it was in that context that I purchased a new copy of the 1968 Penguin edition of *The Making* and re-read it several times – but, I have to confess, I never had the stomach to work through that long, dreary chapter on working-class intellectual life. In fact, the whole third section of *The Making*, "The Working-Class Presence," had come to strike me as tendentious special-pleading, over-reaching in its claims for mass mobilization and widespread class-consciousness. So, for me and my students, the book was abridged – my focus was on the middle section concerned with "working class experience."

For my own reasons, Thompson's use (and misuse) of aggregated demographic statistics – the conventional method of the 1950s and 1960s which had been superseded by the more precise analyses provided by family reconstitution that distinguished the impact of radical declines in female ages at first marriage from a roughly-stable rate of age-specific marital fertility to combine unequally in producing a rising birth rate – came in for critical discussion. Over time, that Penguin-book became dog-eared and the "index" I created inside its front cover was a jumbled confusion of page-numbers and hieroglyphics, denoting critical points or pithy quotes. In later years all those markers were supplemented with a forest of multi-coloured "stickies" so that the book came to resemble a harlequinesque pin-cushion.

Fast forward again to 1987. Now, I had again re-read *The Making*, with the aim of incorporating it into a new course on "Historiography" that was mandated for our program by the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (leave

this side-story at that !). In any event, the first two-thirds of Thompson's masterpiece took pride of place. Alongside it, among other celebrated studies by famous historians, I assigned Carlo Ginzburg's micro-history, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*; Marina Warner's brilliant *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism*; and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's rescue of the light coming to us from the dead star that was *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*.

This syllabus worked OK, but like the relationship between Woody Allen and Annie Hall, after a couple of iterations it was like a dead shark. It needed to keep moving – so I ventured into a new way of looking at the issue of historiography and historical interpretation by focusing the reading list – for a couple of iterations, the class all read and discussed *The Making* in its first two or three meetings but, then, rather than taking the students on a Cook's Tour of other luminaries, I narrowed the materials to studies written on English history in the wake of Thompson's magisterial book, then twenty-five years old. This meant that the students who knew little English history – most of them – felt unfairly disadvantaged and expressed that feeling to me. The up-side of down, as it were, was that this was a most valuable teaching experience. It sharpened my critical position on *The Making* by again rubbing against its grain. This proved to be beneficial in drawing out the issues of which apprentice-historiographers must be aware – representativeness, documentary selection, and – perhaps most of all – definitiveness.

Fast forward once more – 2011. Having dismantled the History of Education program at OISE/University of Toronto (for reasons that are best known to “educational administrators” [ahem !]), this was going to be the last time I would discuss *The Making* in a classroom setting: I was moving to a new department in which my interests in various manifestations of cultural literacy could best be located. The last scheduled session of OISE 1419 – “Historiography” – met in the fall term/2011, but one student had missed that course and she needed it to meet the requirements for her degree program. So, for the last time, in June 2012, I once again cracked open *The Making*. How different my reading of this work had become!

Now, the key meaning of the work had radically devolved into that famous paragraph from the preface:

I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” handloom weaver, the “utopian” artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backwards-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and, if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties.

The rest of the discussion turned on those classic issues of historiography: representativeness, documentary selection, and definitiveness. Let me expand.

My main concern was to show the “narrowness” of Thompson’s reading of the period in terms of his coverage of the various regions, economies, and local societies that existed in the 1780–1832 period. Because of my own interest in mining in the north-eastern Tyneside coal fields, I was struck that this subject was missing in *The Making*. Thompson has very little to say about miners even though coal-mining was the largest capital-intensive enterprise in industrial England, employing roughly 10 per cent of the adult male labour force between 1780 and 1914.¹

Looking at mines and miners in the period Thompson studied brings into sharp relief the important interface of environmental factors and technological developments in class formation. More significant, perhaps, it was on the Tyneside coal-fields of Durham County that one can properly locate the birth of class and, most especially, class consciousness as well as widespread collective struggles over wages and working conditions. The key moment in this transformation was, ironically, quite Thompsonian in its blend of older mentalities confronting new structural realities.

Labour relations on the Durham coal field were dominated by the archaic laws of master-and-servant and, more especially, miners were employed at annual hiring fairs to work in mines that were usually run as part of a landowner’s estate. So, in a crucial way, miners were no different from servants-in-husbandry insofar as the law regarded them as part of the human-furniture of a great man’s estate. However, this backwards-looking legal system had a number of radical, forwards-looking implications. First, of course, there was new wine being put into old bottles or, to use an academic idiom, the cultural practices of the older social relations of production were adapted to a new set of structural circumstances. What this meant was that miners had several new opportunities to transform themselves from servants to mobile proletarians who could move about the whole coal-field in search of better working conditions. There is evidence for such labour mobility in the estate papers of the early eighteenth century, so it was not a big step for miners to decide to bargain collectively – rather than individually – at the annual hiring fairs. Moreover – and again ironically – the cartel of mine-owners (called “The Grand Allies”) made it easier for miners to bargain collectively since they could do so with a small coterie of estate-owners/managers and /or capitalist entrepreneurs.

Matters came to a head in 1765 when there was a protracted strike which ended in defeat (alas, don’t they always end in defeat ?) but a crucial right was won: in the future, the “miner’s bond” took place in the context of collective bargaining. Furthermore, it was at about this time that the size of

1. Thompson argues that he has privileged the field labourers, the urban artisans, and the hand-loom weavers because “their experience seems most to colour the social consciousness of the working class in the first half of the nineteenth century. The miners and metal-workers do not make their influence fully felt until later in the century.” E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1968), 232.

mines radically changed because the more efficient Boulton/Watt engines could drain deeper pits that ran underground below the River Tyne. With the mining engineers no longer limited by the vagaries of underground drainage systems (and the inefficient, first-generation Newcomen engines) in following the coal seam, mines became much, much larger – much, much more capital intensive and much, much more labour-intensive, too. The transformation happened quickly – between 1765 and 1800. This new set of circumstances created profoundly class-conscious miners – sometimes referred to by contemporary observers as “a breed apart” – whose community stretched across the biggest coal field in England.

The Making is completely silent about this development, even though it could have dovetailed with Thompson's larger argument. Similar lines of criticism could be levied in regards to the non-treatment of workers in the Admiralty ship-yards in Portsmouth and Chatham – which were the largest units of production in “pre-industrial England”. In addition, tens-of-thousands laboured in what Linebaugh and Rediker have called “the deep-sea proletariat.” These, and other, social changes, including the development of the first proletarian factories, took place outside Thompson's research centers – the West Riding of Yorkshire and London. Thus, his research choices led him to neglect them. He could not do everything, of course, but Thompson did make choices and those choices had implications for his treatment of the political economy of the labour process.

It is, indeed, quite remarkable that while *The Making* has a little to say about how the original members of the factory proletariat were recruited from among workhouse children and paupers who were sold into bondage by poor-law officials eager to lower the charges on the local rates, the book has next-to-nothing to say about how these early recruits reproduced themselves – both demographically and socially. Famously, Manchester's skyline boasted one factory chimney in 1787, whereas by the 1830s its skyline was dominated by these smoke-stacks. When young Friedrich Engels first visited his family's business connections in Manchester, in 1839, the original factory proletarians of the 1780s had become the grandparents (and even the great-grandparents) of the men and women, boys and girls, who toiled fourteen hours a day in the Dark Satanic Mills (many of which have been converted into trendy lofts along the canals of re-nascent Manchester).

Thompson's discussion of the labour market now seems to be primitive – in particular, it contains no analysis of the ways in which managers and mill-owners coped with the recurrent booms/slumps that plagued the early industrial economy and, most especially, the spinning and weaving manufacturing in Manchester. Did mill-managers/owners practice a dual-market policy of keeping some trusted workers (often Methodists) while hiring-and-firing those whose behaviour was either un-deferential or unpredictable? This seems to have been the case, but the question is not raised. Nor is our understanding of Methodism and its role in working-class life furthered beyond Thompson's

rage against its collaborationist tendencies. In this regard, Thompson's analysis of labour-market organization and proletarianization seems to be remarkably similar to his discussion of capitalists – a hegemonic phalanx rather than a series of competing interest groups.

In *The Making*, then, we do not get a rounded analysis of labour relations among the factory proletarians, whereas we get huge chunks of text on the rise and fall of out-workers like the handloom workers and stockingers. This is a most curious vision of the history of the working class; even more curious because the factory proletariat has been seen by all kinds of Marxists as harbingers of the future, whereas the cottage-industrialists have been quite rightly understood to be a “by-product” of the first stage of modern industry – they worked on materials processed in factories because they were cheaper than machines but they were eliminated when their weaving skills or knitting dexterity were made obsolete by the advent of new production technologies. There is no question that the handloom weavers and stockingers underwent a protracted and agonizing experience of industrial dislocation, but their tragic story is in many ways marginal to the main-line of historical change that led to a new form of work, labour relations, and, perhaps, most of all, the new industrial city that Engels discovered. Furthermore, it seems that migration out of spinning, weaving, and knitting was age-specific so that the final death rattle of these proto-industries was experienced most keenly by those too old – or stuck in their ways – to adjust to new technologies of mechanized production. *Plus ça change, eh?*

In this regard, too, Anna Clarke's analysis in *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class*, of differentiation within, among, and between members of the working-class family indicated how developments in gendered history made Thompson's omission of this category seem strangely antiquated. This point might be extended in another direction since Thompson's promise of rescuing unknown proletarians – the “poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ handloom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott” – from the enormous condescension of posterity has little resonance in micro-historical reconstructions of their lives. David Vincent's book based on working-class autobiographies – *Bread, Knowledge, & Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Autobiography* – provides far superior insight into the peculiarities and variability of individual experiences. Here, then, we come to the central historiographical contradiction in Thompson's work – it purports to be a study of working-class “experience” but, in point of fact, it is really about the working-class movement. But the politics of class formation took place both in public and in private.

This contradiction is not surprising. Indeed, it speaks to the time/place that Thompson occupied when he was researching and writing *The Making*. Furthermore – and for me, most significantly – this contradiction underscores a fundamental point of historiography: no book is definitive. Every historian's

work is written by a specific person, living through specific experiences, at a specific time in history – it is not, therefore, “value free” nor can it be liberated from its historicist position. This line of argument begs another question – would a new version of *The Making*, revised to take on-board both criticisms and recent research – be the same book or something quite different? If such a book were to be published, of course it could not be shorter!

So, how do I make sense of the genius of *The Making*? To me, it all comes down to the implications of that famous paragraph in the preface. Before Thompson, there was a stonewall-of-silence in the institutional historiography, privileging those who reveled in the posthumous glorification of posterity, but afterwards – slowly, to be sure – new fields and new methods and new visions of history have not only rescued those whom previous historiography looked down upon in condescension but also re-configured the study of history in ways that one of Thompson's heroes – Thomas Rainsborough, a democratic Leveller (and maybe even a Muggle-tonian Marxist) who stood in opposition to Oliver Cromwell's oligarchic ambitions in the 1647 Putney Debates – would have applauded: “The poorest he (sic) that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he.”

Leaving aside the gendered nature of Rainsborough's statement, his famous comment focuses our attention on what I consider the lasting achievement of *The Making* – in it, E.P. Thompson showed us the way towards democratizing our study of the past. Yet, unlike Shakespeare who we are told is “our contemporary”, *The Making* is the charter-member of social history. Fifty years on, the book is in many ways dated – not definitive – but its importance is undiminished by the passage of time. It is still a book that callow students should read because in order to know where the study of history is going it is mandatory for them to know where it came from. It is crucial for them to know how the study of history (i.e., historiography) got to its present state.

Generations of historians have benefitted from – and expanded upon – the histories told by their predecessors and, rather like Newton, we have been enabled by standing on the shoulders of giants. Thompson is one of those giants. I would like to think that were he to be presented with this honourific today, Edward Thompson would brush back that shock of white hair and say, definitively, “And fookin' Amen to that!”²

2. This was how Thompson concluded a review of Robert Moore's *Pit-Men, Preachers and Politics: The Effects of Methodism in a Durham Mining Community*. See E.P. Thompson, “On history, sociology and historical relevance,” *British Journal of Sociology*, 27 (September 1976), 387–402.