

VOICES FROM THE CROWD

Some outside comments on the conference



The Uses of Elegy: 'E. P. Thompson and the Uses of History' Conference, July 1994

In writing about a conference centred on a man celebrated for the force and elegance of his rhetoric, let me begin with a classical gesture of unworthiness: I have not been a great reader of Thompson. *The Making of the English Working Class*, read many years ago; more recently a fascinating (for me at least) conversation with a Thompson scholar; a general sense of Thompson as a towering and rebarbative figure on the left; the involvement in European Nuclear Disarmament; and, of course, the recent 'E. P. Thompson and the Uses of History' Conference last July itself; these are the extent of my knowledge. I am not qualified to write about Edward Thompson, whether Thompson the man (who appeared as 'Edward' at the July *History Workshop* Conference) or Thompson as a collection of texts ('the younger generation's Thompson', as Scott McCracken put it).

I do not presume, therefore, to write about Edward Thompson in these two senses at all, but rather – writing as a sort of outsider – I would like to write about the Edward Thompson who, it seemed to me, the July conference was struggling to produce. Sally Alexander, in opening the conference, and several speakers subsequently, referred to a desire for the conference *not* to be a memorial. This had, she said, already been done, and what was wanted was a moving beyond the act of memorialization to, I think, the E. P. Thompson who, in some sense, might continue to live in the present and for the future.

This desired E. P. Thompson was to be, therefore, a necessarily transformed figure, a figure of productive figures for a future he could no longer share. In a sense, the conference was directed – from its opening – to undertake a task which is long familiar to all mourners, that of finding a language in which the treasured object of our love and investment, now lost, can be symbolically transformed. In finding this language – or these figures – the elegist makes the symbolic substitutions of word for thing, and thus derives the consolation which is necessary to any act of mourning.

The purpose of elegy – and of elegiac procedures more generally – is to produce from the ruins of a world shattered by loss, a new – radically altered – world capable of bringing something good (because ‘alive’) from the badness of death. This is, of course, a semantic task (nothing worse than a meaningless death), which means it is a symbolic, substitutive task of language.

For this reason, I would like to write about the E. P. Thompson that the languages of the conference (or the parts of it that I was able to hear) worked, I believe, to produce. It seemed to me that – as is quite proper for elegists – a great many of the contributors focused upon Thompson’s own languages, upon his modes of communication, his own documentary and rhetorical resources, his own ability to transform the past and to live in the languages of history and politics, and upon his own ways with languages of all sorts in general.

A second theme, if I can paraphrase it, was an anxiety that ‘we’ the conference goers should not be seeking guidance from the dead – asking ‘Thompson’ to tell us how to do history and cultural criticism and politics ‘now’. There is, of course, a long and ancient tradition of seeking guidance from the dead, but the dead, famously, always speak in tropes and riddles which must be translated by the living. It is precisely this work of translation, transformation and symbolic substitution that I understood the conference to have been undertaking.

To say, as one member of the audience in one of the sessions did, ‘Thompson is dead. He is of no use to the present’ seems to me to be fundamentally misguided – and very un-Thompsonian – in its understanding of the relationship between the past and the present. The examples of the past are given life by, and in, the present. The good historian is a ventriloquist – a producer of many voices and languages – whose ventriloquism and ability to make every image of the past speak in its own particular voice *for* the present is one which recognizes, to borrow from Walter Benjamin, that ‘every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably . . . Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.’¹

So who or what might be the E. P. Thompson which the conference sought to translate for the present? This question was, perhaps, most forcefully addressed in the afternoon session on ‘E. P. Thompson, Politics and Culture Today’ (Michel Kenny, Miles Ogborn and Scott McCracken), which itself suffered some translation, re-emerging as ‘Interdisciplinary Thompson’. This session to some extent worked to crystallize the Thomp-sons who had earlier appeared in other sessions.

What emerged there were two strong images. The first concerned the way in which Thompson was, himself, a vibrant ventriloquist – a producer of many voices to challenge the grey drone of consensus which Benjamin called ‘historicism’, and a determined tracker-down of those productive

'dead-ends' which drove his obsessive search for the last Muggleonian. The second was a kind of coherence – not a rationality, but an ethics – between his site of many voices and a certain social and political commitment in the life he lived.

It is not, as some delegates seemed to think, that the conference produced any sense of asking 'How would Edward have understood what's happening now?', or of an imminent beatification, but rather that the E. P. Thompson this conference seemed to be producing – as one of the concerns of the present – was one that offered a model, not of a man, but of a way of speaking many voices in one, ethically coherent, language.

It is absolutely fitting that this E. P. Thompson was the Thompson which the conference began to make. The task of mourning – whether of a person or an idea to which we have been profoundly committed – consists in nothing less than the rebuilding of radically changed symbolic worlds and selves. But these selves and worlds, however contingent, cannot be built arbitrarily. As all mourners know, there must be a thread – not reducible to reason – joining the selves and worlds we have been with the selves and worlds we might become. There must, in other words, be a kind of history. Neither can the place we seek to come to be merely a repetition of where and what we were. That would be a dangerous melancholia (another word which surfaced at the conference more than once). Very often the history that mourning discovers does not link us to what we had thought of as our 'official' selves, but to what we had thought were our (repressed) dead-ends. And it is in the occluded languages found in 'dead-ends', and in interpreting the tropes in which they have been buried, that new selves can be spoken. It is also there, in retrieving lost threads from the ruins of the past and from the dead, that mourners can find the ethos of the new selves and worlds they need to make.

The Thompson which I found at the 'Uses of History' conference was one – ventriloquized by the contributors – who seemed to have something extremely pertinent to say to the present: that, to borrow from Benjamin again,

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.²

But it is not, as I understand this Thompson, that – for example – the *events* of the 1790s have something to tell the 1990s, but rather that the images and languages discovered or invented then can tell us something about the *forms*

of 'language' which resistance must take, and about the ways in which new worlds and selves might be made.

This Thompson, then, was very much a Thompson of languages, but also and importantly, a Thompson of an ethical (not moral) language which both binds together all those other languages, and also forges real historical connections between what is thought and said and what is, and can be, properly and politically done.

Wendy Wheeler

NOTES

1 W. Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, tr. H. Zohn, (New York, Schocken Books, 1969), p. 255.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 263.



Dear Gareth Stedman Jones,

I am writing in response to Raphael Samuel's call for reports on yesterday's E. P. Thompson conference. I am a PhD student here, working on the mid-Eighteenth century debates on the corn laws, corn trade, 'police' and food-rioting (concentrating largely on English debates). Basically I see myself as having been influenced in my choice of research topic by Thompson and the 'moral economy' thesis on one hand and the Hont and Ignatieff approach of *Wealth and Virtue* on the other. Both, I feel gain a substantial purchase on Eighteenth-century reality, albeit from different viewpoints, and it is a shame that the two traditions have not effectively engaged, and that nor has anyone attempted to synthesise their positions. In general I feel that the criticism of Thompson by Hont and Ignatieff was somewhat misjudged, and that Thompson's reply, though starting in a

promising manner, finishes in an uncharacteristic lapse into bluster. In short I think that there is a lot more to say on the subject. Do you know of anyone else who is currently working on these ideas that I might contact?

To return to the conference: you will not be surprised in the light of the above to hear that I thought that one of the best contributions to the conference was that of Peter Burke, who stressed the on-going vitality and relevance of Thompson's work, in particular the 'moral economy'. His comments on the possible influence of Polanyi on Thompson were also fascinating. (I know that Eric Hobsbawm has occasionally cited the work of Polanyi, do you know anything about his influence on the post WWII Marxists?) I think it would have been a good idea if the conference organisers could have invited a contribution from a scholar still working on Eighteenth-Century customs or the moral economy.

At times during the conference I was frustrated by the feeling that we were laying Thompson to rest as an active presence and transforming him into a nice, safe English Heritage radical. This was particularly so in Joanna Innes's seminar on the Eighteenth-century, where Thompson was credited with a remarkable influence in the 60s and 70s, but then criticised at extraordinary length by Innes and by John Styles for not having worked enough on 'politeness' and the middle class or at all on consumption.

A fascinating snippet of anecdotal history was revealed by Jonathan Rée in the session on 'political rhetorics' who explained the origins of *The Poverty of Theory* as an overgrown response to an invitation to write a piece for *Radical Philosophy*. Rée also engaged with the idea of 'Englishness' in Thompson's writings and argued very firmly that this was not a chauvinistic or 'little-Englander' voice. Michael Rustin drew a comparison between some of William Cobbett's political writings and Thompson's political interventions of the 1970s, bemoaning the lack of a modern radical political rhetoric. Some people felt that Cobbett was not a good model for the twentieth century, recalling his exclusionary stance towards outsiders, including Scots and Jews. Various members of the audience discussed these ideas, some recalling the notorious events of the 1979 History Workshop conference in Oxford. Some still felt that Thompson had misdirected his energies and chosen some of the wrong targets. Most however concurred that passages of *The Poverty of Theory* transcend the old squabbles and retain great importance as reflections on the practice of historical research and writing.

The session on Transatlantic Radicalism demonstrated some of the ways in which students of Thompson or those who felt his influence at an early stage of their career were able to move into new fields and offer subtle revisions on his theses on subjects as varied as class formation to evangelical religion. Catherine Hall contrasted Thompson's black Yorkshire Methodist chapels as 'traps', with her evocation of the white hillside chapels of Jamaica which acted as sites of empowerment. Peter Linebaugh spoke about the earlier career of Marcus Despard (a prominent figure in chapter five of *The Making of the English Working Class*) especially his rapacious adventures as

a soldier in South America. All three speakers pointed out the vast scope for new research in this field. Harvey Kaye mentioned some of the conceptual problems in defining the Atlantic as a field 'from below', as against the old liberal thesis of an 'Atlantic democratic revolution' as espoused by R. R. Palmer. It was also noted that recent political events, especially the revolutions of 1989 had helped to historians to look West as well as East. As Hobsbawm noted in his *Echoes of the Marseillaise*, the Marxist historians had always associated any concept of 'Atlanticism' with NATO, or 'bourgeois Natopolis' as Thompson might have put it. The pioneering role of C. L. R. James in this historiographical warp was emphasised by Robin Blackburn and generally endorsed by the speakers.

Richard Sheldon



Dear Raphael,

Congratulations on last week end . . . But as you may have gathered, if you heard any of my several contributions, I was distinctly worried about the post-modernist mumbo-jumbo that seems to have taken possession of all too many. I have said my piece rather forcefully in the current six-weekly commentary I do for V&V (born April 1991 and doing well). Copy enclosed. Circulation: 20. I spend a lot of time and trouble on it as a means round which the group can be built. We have nine members and nine corresponding members and don't want any more. We just want other similar groups to start up. The only idea I still bless Lenin for is his 'a movement is built round a paper'. Right!

I came to the conclusion some seven years ago that the real reason we failed in '56 and '68 and subsequently *on the main issues* is that we had no structure of our own on which to build autonomously. The New Left did not deliver, the peace movement did not deliver. We always fell back, politically, on the Labour Party and the CP both endemically centralist. Fatal! The Anarchists are no better – ruined in their case by crude individualism. What survives from the 'sixties – *The History Workshop* and *Time Out!* Structurally, almost nothing else. This has to be remedied!

For about three years I cast about for half-a-dozen like-minded thinking activists hand-picked all. We are now well into our fourth year and exerting a

significant influence. I enclose a copy of our basic declaration: *V&V: Human Ecology and Community Politics*.

But what actually sparked this letter is a passing remark you made in the loo at Conway Hall – about my current enterprise in writing a new history of Kilburn. I enclose the first chapter – just published by *Soap Box* here. What I am out to do is to provide a new sense of place for the people of Kilburn especially the young, especially those still at school. I think it might work.

I hope that you and HW will think about the sense-of-place idea, especially for London and the south east. It is a powerful theme for academics who know how to write for non-academics. I learnt the trade the hard way in many years of teaching in Secondary Modern Schools, before turning to Adult Education with Birkbeck and the WEA. I retired last year.

Some years ago I was greatly impressed by the HW conference at Ruskin. It had a certain dynamic quality. Where has it gone and why? I didn't find it at Leeds last year. It was in Edward's last book – the very one that last week-end's speakers chose to by-pass! Ah well . . . It seems we are going through a hang-over period. I can't wait to see it end and some self-confidence return!

Peter Cadogan



Dear *HWJ*

As an undergraduate, when I received the information on the E. P. Thompson conference and discovered the cost of attendance I was thrilled to say the least that it was within my very tight budget. I assumed that as students were being encouraged to attend this conference, the content of the papers would be levelled accordingly. I sat through every session on my particular field of research only to discover that the speakers were using a language I was totally unfamiliar with. I spent most of the sessions trying to figure out what the speakers were talking about, and came out of each

session none the wiser on my period. I feel that it needs to be said that this conference was not suitable for undergraduates. You may recall that at the very last session I stood up and asked the bench 'Will the real Edward Thompson please stand up!' We were subjected to, what I would have expected to be the usual anecdotal references to 'my friend Edward and I' – 'when I last had breakfast with Edward' and other such trivia, after which, each speaker went off on their own trip in a language that may have impressed their peers but did not impress me. After my question to the bench, (and I believe that in all the sessions I attended I was the only undergraduate to ask a question) I did expect an answer. As you may recall my question was not addressed and a visit to the bar was the only reply I received. It was at the bar where several people came up to me and said that I was not the only person who felt 'short-changed' at the conference. Two people in particular were shocked that my question was treated with so much disrespect from the bench. I conclude by saying that if you intend putting on conferences such as this for undergraduates in the future, then the material should be levelled accordingly.

Yours most un-enlightened Tom Foad



Reply from History Workshop Journal

Dear Mr Foad,

Many thanks for your letter, received today. I have passed it on to the editors of issue 39 for the letters page.

I am sorry you were disappointed by the EP Thompson conference last weekend. I think you may be right that there is a problem with audience at these sorts of events. In the past, our audiences have included a large number of non-academics, from the labour movement, peace movement, local history, as well as undergraduates, post graduates and lecturers in history.

Nowadays though, it seems that our audience is more specialised and that a lot of them are very conversant with the arguments going on in branches of history which may be unfamiliar to the general student of history. So it is quite difficult to know how to pitch each session.

I also heard some remarks along the lines of 'Now we know how many lumps of sugar EPT had in his tea!' but chose to see them in a positive light, with the conference as a kind of living contribution to his biography. I also personally think the conference had a rather emotional tone because for the generation of historians in their late '30s and above, EPT represents a form of ethical socialism which has all but disappeared. I thought there was quite a lot of grieving for the end of an era going on. As a history student, perhaps you found that interesting?

Anyway, thanks for your comments. I hope if you read the *History Workshop Journal*, you will continue to do so.

Best wishes,

Barbara Bloomfield



To History Workshop,

I would like to put some comments on paper re. the conference on 'E. P. Thompson and the Uses of History'. Thank you for organising it, and for bringing together so many people who are struggling to retain a particular kind of work. I emerged from the conference with my sense of self restored, and that has been important.

Now to substantive points. As always, as others must have said, there was too much of a feast. I was particularly disappointed that 'South Africa and History from Below', 'Subaltern Studies' and 'Transatlantic Radicalism' were all together in the same strand – making it difficult to interact with others. As far as the contributions on India are concerned (and since this is the area of my own work, I can engage with it best) – History Workshop

through its journal, has had some coverage of Indian history and historiography, but given the richness, diversity and complexity of history-writing in India, this could be greatly expanded and broadened out. O'Hanlon and Washbrook's article ('Histories in Transition: Approaches to the Study of Colonialism and Culture in India,' HW, issue 32, Autumn 1991) make important points on the 'state of the art' in history-writing. However, O'Hanlon's critique of the subaltern studies project at the conference on 9.7.94. I thought was very unfair, in fact unproductive in its tone. I do feel strongly that since the 'Subaltern Studies' project is closest to the History Workshop, and shares a lot of its intellectual and political premises, it is important that those who are actively involved in it, and those debating with them seriously on their own terms should have been asked to speak on it (and there are people based in Britain, the U.S. as well as India who would have been much more suitable than O'Hanlon and Washbrook). The 'Cambridge School' of history (on India) has to a large extent tended to be antithetical to people's history and history from below. It was therefore ironic to have them lead a History Workshop contribution. I was also told that Raj Chandravakar, who spoke on the history of the working-class in India (he too is from Cambridge) was similarly cavalier in his dismissal of attempts at engaged writings. I think it is this lack of serious criticisms which is so debilitating. Sumit Sarkar's criticisms, on the other hand, were serious and cogent, so that those of us who have engaged with the subaltern studies project over the years could take up the debates with him, and between ourselves.

Those who attended the workshop on subaltern studies will know that it raised, amongst other issues, the important question of the tension between providing a critique of imperial, neo-colonial ideologies and practices – and that of critiquing internal structures of patriarchy, caste, indeed the Indian state (in the West). While this is not a tension that is easily resolvable (one contributor to the workshop – non-Indian – called for more of an 'indigenous form of understanding') it is good that it was raised for it is clear that intellectual work which sets out to valorise 'Third World' perspective can be fatally flawed.

Tanika Sarkar's article in HW 36, Autumn 1993, is a beautiful one – a real treasure. I am sure more of such carefully-crafted historical-cultural practices could be included in *History Workshop Journal*: perhaps an issue on women's histories and cultures in India? There is a lot there, and I would like to help out with such an issue.

Returning to the conference: Marilyn Butler's contribution I found very stimulating, and I know that more than one of us found the workshop on 'E. P. Thompson and the Teaching of History' both moving and sustaining in our own work.

I hope these comments will be of some use.

Parita Mukta

An Afterword by the co-organizer of the conference

With the conference now successfully past I find myself increasingly reflecting upon it. This is due in the main to the fact that I can now see it as a total event: rather than the array of organizational problems it appeared to be during its long gestation period. Another contributory factor to this reflection is that during the even I was too busy making sure that all ran smoothly to really participate. It was however evident that a tremendous atmosphere was generated from the very beginning, with I think the wonderful weather, excellent catering and sympathetic venue being major supporting actors to the main cast of speakers.

During the many rambling but always enjoyable meetings with my co-organizers I often found myself musing about their personal reminiscences of Thompson and setting these against my own impressions of him gained from his writings and actions. Out of this synthesis the picture of a very complex man appeared; privileged yet accessible, artistically minded but of energetic endeavour. One thing was certain to me, Thompson was the latest in the long line on English radicals that stretches back to Tom Paine and even further back to an older brand of dissent personified by Watt Tyler.

Would Thompson have enjoyed the conference? I don't know. I do know that whilst he may have gained some satisfaction from the affair he would have been overjoyed to see so many young people there. Time may follow for most of us a form of linear progression but history goes in epochs. Thompson's epoch may seem to be rapidly moving backwards, in the same way that the feel of the 19th century has evaporated since my childhood in the 1950s. Yet today's students turned up in large numbers and young academics were honoured to give papers. Is there any better testimonial to Thompson than that of this generation seeing his life as a major contributing factor to their desire to resurrect the spirit of positive dissent that the Thatcher era tried so hard to destroy.

Roger Mumby-Croft