

## The Necessary Englishman: the moral importance of E P Thompson

**Memorial Lecture: Bath, 7 October 2009**

In September 2006 Tony Judt, eminent director of the Erich Maria Remarque Institute at New York University and an international scholar of scathing, garrulous and confident talent, wrote a review article<sup>1</sup> in that splendid journal, *The New York Review of Books*. He was assessing, with unstinting approval, the life's work of Leszek Kolakowski, the Polish philosopher thrown out of his country in 1968 for heresies against Marxism, subsequently settled for life in the not entirely left-wing comforts of All Souls College, Oxford.

In his essay, Judt referred to a mighty essay by Edward Thompson published as 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' and reprinted in Thompson's collection, *The Poverty of Theory* in 1978.<sup>2</sup> Without commentary or detail, Judt dismissed Thompson as a "little Englander", condemned him as a roaring boy of intra-Leftish playground quarrelling in Britain, and remarked contemptuously that "no-one need ever take Thompson seriously again". Rebuked in the letters column a little later, Judt took some of his reckless animadversion back, but pronounced firmly on Thompson's "small-minded provincialism".<sup>3</sup>

It seems that what is needed now, in the dead centre of a four-year world recession, after three decades of the gluttonous pursuit of wealth and the repulsive rejection of such old and honoured names in the polity as equality, temperance, mutuality, the common good and the common wealth, is some kind of revaluation and conservation of that temporarily displaced tradition of which Edward Thompson was so recent, so powerfully charged and so irresistibly attractive a carrier.

The attractiveness provides me for this occasion with the essential form of this lecture. As Quentin Skinner, the greatest living historian still at work in Britain today, said of his recent British Academy lecture on Milton,<sup>4</sup> it will mostly be a matter of

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Judt, Good-bye to All That, *NYRB*, 21 September 2006.

<sup>2</sup> E P Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, London: Merlin Press, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> *NYRB*, Letters, 8 March 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Reprinted in the *London Review of Books*, 2008.

"reading out the good bits". Well, that is an intellectual method which has won its practitioners many a scholarship to Oxford and Cambridge. But an anthology of some of Thompson's best writing brings out a defining property of his large, protean, ardent and joyful character. His was a life lived in such a way as to unite those two magnetically repellent qualities, theory and practice; he refused by example W B Yeats's poetic dictum – and Yeats was a poet Thompson knew by heart –

The intellect of man is forced to choose  
Perfection of the life or of the work ...<sup>5</sup>

But what if the life *is* the work? More emphatically, how on earth (there being nowhere else to find an answer to the question) can the scholar, the teacher or the intellectual presume to keep life and work apart?

Thompson's life-and-work provides ample evidence that he lives in the work and the work is only alive as expressive of old life itself. But any number of scholars and teachers, whether in the schools or the academies, earnestly join in the conversation of an academic subject with its determinate principles of truth-seeking, scrupulous evidence-minding, scientific objectivity, historical awareness, personal allegiances, and all that – and then, when they stop and resume everyday life, allow their tradition to evaporate while they blithely step back into the bovine flank-rubbing which sustains the conventional and academic management of ignorance.

A comrade and colleague of Edward Thompson, whom he often cited sympathetically, the philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre, wrote once:

Being a great philosopher is not at all the same thing as leading an exemplary philosophical life, but perhaps the point of doing philosophy is to enable people to lead, so far as it is within their powers, philosophical lives. And of course how individual philosophers work out in the detail of their lives the relationship between the ends of their philosophical writing and the ends of their lives always depends on a myriad of contingencies, so that any life may open up hitherto unimagined possibilities. And in this respect for anyone things may go well or badly.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> W B Yeats, 'The Choice', *Collected Poems*, London: Macmillan, 1934, p278.

<sup>6</sup> Alisdair MacIntyre, *The Risks of Philosophy, Selected Essays*, vol 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p132.

I take for granted the contention of R G Collingwood<sup>7</sup> - also corroborated lately by Quentin Skinner<sup>8</sup> - that history and philosophy *are the same thing*, that inquiry into the facts of life in the past and the analysis of the concepts which shape human minds and purposes are alike moral and historical. The point of all such inquiries is to discover, and to teach others to discover, how the world we have lost forms the thoughts that we have, and how those thoughts may best be directed to the wellbeing of our common wealth and the world which is our only home.

## II

All of which returns me to Thompson's *Letter to Kolakowski*, and Tony Judt's view of it. But first let us do a little biographising, remembering first how Edward Thompson was invited, in 1965, to found and build the unique Centre for Social History at the new University of Warwick which took its name from the Elizabethan-to-Georgian county town, but was set in fields close enough to the then headquarters of a still-thriving British car industry, naturally recruiting its management from the local and senior businessmen, arrayed in their peerages and knighthoods, whose social duty was to decide on rewards and punishments for car assembly workers and degree assembly undergraduates.

They had, however, appointed a former communist, Methodist, anti-capitalist and ex-tank troop commander as well as the world-famous author of *The Making of the English Working Class* (published as Pelican Books 1000th imprint in 1967) to do historical research at the very heart of the class enemy. As all the world may still recollect and much-travelled international scholars like Dr Judt remain baffled at, the best-known publication from the Centre was *Warwick University Limited*,<sup>9</sup> a detailed local history of the way the automobile magnates disapproved the wrong political appointments and student admissions, as well as their preferring the kind of new university which would help make the world safe for old capitalism. The principled objection to this calm view all boiled over into the old hoo-ha of student occupation, sit-ins and the like, expressions of critical dissent successfully eradicated by now.

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<sup>7</sup> R G Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944, p

<sup>8</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p

<sup>9</sup> Penguin Education Special, edited by Thompson and published in 1971.

Thompson took so seriously the identity of his life and work that he resigned a posh job and a good salary, and took up the lonely, exiguous life of writer which, punctuated by occasional one-year visiting professorships, he followed until his premature death after a good deal of illness, in August 1993.

His is a singular and striking instance of the determination to make moral principle, vehement judgement and intellectual life, especially as manifested in a steady respect for the facts to coincide, and to do so at personal inconvenience, not to say painfulness. With characteristic candour as well as his delightful gift for mockery, he once told this little anecdote about the price of his experience.

I was browsing in a bookshop the other day and came across a book by one Roger Scruton about Thinkers of the New Left. It included biographical notes on these Thinkers, of whom I turned out to be one. To my excitement, I found myself described as a man of 'considerable wealth'.

This was welcome news, and I must write to this Scruton to find out where this wealth is and how I can get hold of it. Perhaps he knows of some fortune about to come to me? Because all that I know is that my net income from all sources – that is, literary and some lecture fees (and I have no other sources) – in 1985-6 was £8,653.62 before tax. That is not poverty, but it is not, I think, what is normally regarded as 'considerable wealth' by characteristic figures in Mrs Thatcher's Britain, such as directors of Guinness and the like. Perhaps even Mr Scruton does a little better? But I find on scanning the dust-jacket that this Scruton is a philosopher, who need not pay regard to inconvenient things like facts. He is engaged in loftier heuristic exercises.

This is the voice of a man not only of moral authority but also of both geniality and solidarity. So if we turn back to the *Open Letter*, we find Thompson, talkative in the manner sometimes brought on by solitary composition, giving all credit to Kolakowski's heroic dissent in Poland, but finding – after detailed exposition of the other's philosophy of history – something disagreeably complicit and accommodating in Kolakowski's wise pursing of the lips at student demonstrations in Berkeley or in his now comfortable judiciousness in All Souls College. Thompson dramatises his criticism as being symbolic of the unstoppable post-Enlightenment and Romantic dispute between 'utopians' and 'realists'. He, of course, is a utopian; but the

membership fees are high. They cost him his job, and as he admonishes Kolakowski:

You will have noticed, if you have followed my footnotes, that my criticisms of socialist reality have always been made in socialist journals. And at the time when I can no longer criticise socialism from such an unmistakeable anti-capitalist standpoint, I will fall silent. For no matter how hideous the alternative may seem, no word of mine will wittingly be added to the comforts of that old bitch gone in the teeth, consumer capitalism. I know that bitch well in her very original nature; she has engendered world-wide wars, aggressive and racial imperialisms, and she is co-partner in the unhappy history of socialist degeneration.

It is a manner among Thompson's unfailing good manners which recurs rousingly on many occasions. Some call it self-referential, but if it is, its justification is found in his knowledge of his own genius. He would address anybody as an equal and, compatible with a proper politeness, speak in accents and an idiom "alternately passionate and playful, caustic and delicate, colloquial and decorous" (in Perry Anderson's eulogy<sup>10</sup>); his voice as unmistakeable as a great writer's always must be.

I come to praise Thompson, as is obvious, and praise him as his junior and as a far less talented writer, historian and political comrade. This is not to say he was without fault, although it is always worth remembering that a person's defects in one set of circumstances may be his or her best strength in another. Timidity over here may be gentleness over there, courage may turn into cruelty, touchiness one day is a due sensitivity the next. Thompson could be touchy for sure – I wince to recollect having been on the wrong end of his eloquent rebukes and his misunderstanding – just as he could be, in the certainty of his gifts, generous to others in a way utterly exceptional in the baying doghouse of academic rivalry. As Yeats also required of himself, Thompson was a "foolish passionate man", a self-image of which it must immediately be said that foolishness is intrinsic to being human and a self-knowing historian had better know that, know also that life whether as lived in a love affair or in the writing of a book seeking in Thompson's own immortal phrase, to roll back "the enormous condescension of posterity", is lived according to the passions.

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<sup>10</sup> Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, London: Verso, 1980, p1.

This commonplace is not, however, a surrender of the life of the mind to the gales of hysteria. It is merely a recognition of the fact that thought and feeling, the allegiances of the soul and the discipline of the disciplines are inseparable. No-one performs their scholarship in "calm of mind, all passion spent". Each must pursue the subject in hand with the best feelings due to it, whether bio-engineering a fruit fly, analysing the pigment of a Renaissance fresco, tussling with Russell's Theory of Paradoxes, or describing the slow disintegration of the Trade Union movement under the hammer blows of Mrs Thatcher. That is to say, the scholar seeks to order his or her relation to the subject according to the feelings which should best accompany the thought demanded. In Thompson's case, his strong solidarity with, his square loyalty towards, his loving kindness for (in his famous examples) "the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott" in 1801<sup>11</sup> are the necessary ingredients of his historical achievement and its astonishing creativity.

It is his full awareness of the presence in his prose of these vehement and judicious passions which makes it so easy and so convincing for him to turn, at the end of his marvellous essay, "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism",<sup>12</sup> and point the moral at those dire custodians of the present, the scientific managers:

If the theorists of growth wish us to say so, then we may agree that the older popular culture was in many ways otiose, intellectually vacant, devoid of quickening, and plain bloody poor. Without time-discipline we could not have the insistent energies of industrial man; and whether this discipline comes in the forms of Methodism, or of Stalinism, or of nationalism, it will come to the developing world.

What needs to be said is not that one way of life is better than the other, but that this is a place of the most far-reaching conflict; that the historical record is not a simple one of neutral and inevitable technological change, but is also one of exploitation and of resistance to exploitation; and that values stand to be lost as well as gained. The rapidly-growing literature of the sociology of industrialisation is like a landscape which has been blasted by ten years of moral drought: one must travel through many tens of thousands of words of parched a-historical abstraction between each oasis of human actuality. Too many of the Western engineers of growth appear altogether too smug as to the gifts of character-formation which they bring in their hands to their backward brethren.

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<sup>11</sup> Thompson (1968) p13.

<sup>12</sup> *Past and Present*, no38, December 1967, pp93-4.

One detail worth pointing out to those who call Thompson "an old agrarian" and a "little Englander" is the amazing range of references in this classic restatement of Max Weber's and R H Tawney's famous thesis that capitalism had first to borrow the stern self-disciplining of Puritanism<sup>13</sup> in order to make the world safe for the happily self-indulgent consumer four centuries later. Thompson takes in a farmer's notes made near Bath in 1795, a Methodist School of Industry in York in 1819, and a washerwoman's rough verse in Petersfield in 1739, before finding the same grim authority of industrial capitalism at work in Philadelphia, Mexico, the Cameroons, and the central India which was his father's and, at times, his own life-preoccupation.

### III

This latter point reminds me that I promised a little biographising by way of explaining E P Thompson's formation and his part in an English tradition of enormous, half-forgotten significance in the present which is also in immediate danger of dissolving into the mists of time, along with much else of the nation's history.

Thompson's father, after whom he was named, was a successful novelist and a poet of no mean achievement, a Methodist preacher who taught Indian history at Oxford and lived Indian history in India. He was an associate of Gandhi and a close friend of the great Jawaharlal Nehru, old Harrovian, prisoner in a British jail, Prime Minister of his country during the critical years of its establishment after Gandhi's assassination in 1948, and who once taught the young Edward how to improve his stance as a batsman.

Father Edward was, long before it arrived, a tireless and public advocate of Indian independence, rewarded as such, like his young son, by British secret service surveillance. His wife was an American missionary who met her husband on duty in India, the pair of them cutting a heroic figure in the unpainted frescos of heroism in opposition to Empire, brave and cultivated dissenters from old power without whose

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<sup>13</sup> John Wesley required the boys at Kingswood to get up at 4am.

principled opposition and active example the end of that Empire might have been far bloodier and less creditable than it was.

Then there was EP's brother Frank. Born in India in 1920, a wonderful, fearsome, amazingly gifted, tall and handsome *beau idéal*, always moving four years ahead of his young brother into rare accomplishment and, at 24, the kind of death which it is still possible to call, in spite of its squalid injustice, glorious.

Frank was a genius at languages. By the time he died he read and spoke, in most cases fluently, French and German and the two classic tongues, Italian, Turkish, Arabic, Polish, Russian, Serbian and Bulgarian. He was, like his younger brother, a communist, since those were the only political beliefs in Britain in 1939 to make it possible to see plainly the hideous lineaments of world-threatening Fascism and to call out the highminded idealism of boys like the Thompson brothers on behalf of the wretched of the earth. Girls also: at Oxford, Frank's sweetheart was the famous novelist, Iris Murdoch, and she too a Party member.

It followed as a matter of necessity that both brothers volunteered for active service, Edward as a twenty-year-old tank troop commander in the Eighth Army's grim and extended struggle to win back Italy in 1944, Frank as a liaison officer for the cloak-and-dagger gallants of Special Operations Executive ( only this week memorialized in London for the first time ), parachuted into Bulgaria miles away from any front line, with orders to link up with and give direction to first Yugoslav, then Bulgarian partisans.

After desperate endeavours on the run from the Fascists, drenched and frozen to the bone by mountain snow and sleet, starving so badly that at one point there was only raw snails to chew gluilly and to swallow, two of his three British comrades dead, the Bulgarians hopelessly ill-equipped, Frank was captured and shot by the Bulgarian Fascists along with his comrade partisans. At the rigged trial (he was captured in



uniform and of course fully entitled to POW status) he bore witness to his solidarity and his allegiance, declaring in Bulgarian (an eye-witness report tells us<sup>14</sup>):

I came to this country because this war is something very much deeper than a struggle of nation against nation. The greatest thing in the world now is the struggle of anti-Fascism against Fascism ... I am ready to die for freedom. And I am proud to die with Bulgarian patriots as companions.

Such people, father, mother, brother, constituted EP's immediate tradition. Beside and behind them stand the great writers, historians and political figures from the past – John Lilburne, John Milton, James Harrington from the 17th century, William Blake, William Wordsworth, William Morris in the 19th, the mostly nameless colliers or shepherds, the tanners in Cornwall, potters in Staffordshire, and farm labourers in Carlisle, who turned out together to fight for corn for their famished families – these are the figures who shaped the prose, confirmed the character and fired the spirit of Edward Palmer Thompson, leader of old English dissent between, let us say, 1957 and 1993.

Indeed, it was in 1957 that Thompson grasped hold of one life-defining theme when, writing for the "journal of socialist humanism", *The New Reasoner*, which he helped found with his wife and his comrade in university extra-mural studies, John Saville. In the summer number, he wrote,<sup>15</sup> during a sustained attack upon the lies, cruelty and vilifications of Marxist-Leninism in the USSR and in support of all that had been done for the common good by honourable socialists, he wrote this:

Socialist humanism declares: liberate men from slavery to things, to the pursuit of profit or servitude to 'economic necessity'. Liberate man, as a creative being – and he will create, not only new values, but things in super-abundance.

This case now has a greater significance, both terrible and hopeful. Philistinism and blind class interests have evolved the biggest Thing of all, a Thing to end all things. Today man and this thing face each other. This thing is there because both capitalism and Stalinism have reduced human being to things, commodities or appendages to machines... The bomb must be dismantled; but in dismantling it, men will summon up energies which will open the way to their inheritance. The bomb is like an image of man's whole predicament: within it beats death and life, total destruction or human

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<sup>14</sup> Raivh Sharova, quoted from *News Chronicle*, 8 March 1945 by T J and E P Thompson, *There is a Spirit in Europe*, London: Gollancz, p10.

<sup>15</sup> *New Reasoner*, Summer 1957, p143.

mastery over human history. Only if men by their own human agency can master this thing will Marx's optimism be confirmed, and 'human progress cease to resemble that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain'.

#### IV

It had been in 1972 that Thompson renounced his post at the University of Warwick and, with the aid of a timely legacy, bought a sometime diocesan mansion on the outskirts of Worcester. There, with his wife's always unwavering support and her academic salary together with (as we heard) his own modest royalties, he became the kind of old-fashioned, English radical-of-letters such as William Cobbett, John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin, whose demise has been so very exaggerated for so long.<sup>16</sup>

Thompson's name still merits lights every bit as big and bright as those awarded to the earlier names. Freed from the attentions of the graduate students thronging to his Centre, freed also from the crashing tedium of modern British university administration which can so sap a scholar's energy and creativity, Thompson became a giant in the history of his present. He became the greatest polemical journalist of his era – the era of a still arctic Cold War and the era of the most virulently rightist and vengeful Government this placidly conservative country had seen since the days of the Lords Liverpool and Eldon.

He had begun such journalism the moment he unpacked his ancient typewriter at the new house. He had taken on what we now can see to have been the decent and herbivorous government of Ted Heath when it made such an incompetent mess of its row with the miners in 1972. Heath had inaugurated that much mythologised moment of trade union tyranny, the Three Day Week, ministers had advised the citizenry to clean its teeth in the dark, and (as Thompson spotted with such delight) a reader wrote to *The Times* in the days before it had been disgraced by Rupert Murdoch and was straightforwardly the ruling class's newspaper ...

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<sup>16</sup> As Stefan Collins points out in his study of intellectuals in Britain, *Absent Minds* (Oxford University Press, 2006), before citing as examples still in action John Berger, Germaine Greer, John Gray, Clive James.

May I, Sir, writing by candlelight, express my total support for the government in their attempt to halt the unbelievably inflated wage claims now being made ...

And after duly mocking with his habitual dash and high spirits, all such revolting and self-pitying spasms as attend such letter-writers the moment they are inconvenienced, Thompson stepped up the diapason on his music, and in a ringing reminder of our common wealth, dramatised the moment by way of a metaphor which expresses perfectly his fraternal vision of history.

Miners' strikes have had before this way of posing larger questions: who is 'the nation' anyway? How long can we tolerate, in an economy with such intricate reciprocities, not the right to strike but the vast inequalities in lifestyle and in material opportunity which are thrust before rich and poor alike on a common TV screen, and which plop in the blatant business supplements, each Sunday through the door of stockbroker and of miner alike? Should we not think again, as William Morris demanded in another miners' strike (1893), of an approach to 'a condition of practical equality of economical condition amongst the whole population'?

The 'special case' turns out, after all, to be the general case of the working nation. It is never safe to assume that any of our history is altogether dead. It is more often lying there, as a form of stored cultural energy. The instant daily energy of the contingent dazzles us with its brightness. What passes on the daily screen is so distracting, the presence of the status quo is so palpable, that it is difficult to believe that any other form of energy exists. But this instant energy must be reproduced every moment as it is consumed; it can never be held in store. Let the power be cut off for a while, then we become aware of other and older reserves of energy glowing all around us, just as, when the street-lights are dowsed, we become aware of the stars.<sup>17</sup>

It is a wonderful image; it is the key to Thompson's historical poetics that the lives of the past are packed into veins of cultural energy (like coal itself) in the morphological stratifications of history, there to lie until mined and ignited, for better or worse, by the need for political heat or moral light in a later generation.

His quarrels with the Heath government were as nothing, however, to his quarrels with Mrs Thatcher and President Reagan when they jointly arranged, without benefit of Parliament, to site a large number of specially designed, satisfyingly destructive, and bran- new nuclear missiles in assorted coppices of rural Berkshire and East

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in E P Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight*, London: Merlin, 1980.

Anglia. Turning to the energy laid down by the 'free-born Englishmen and women' of the past whose records lined his beautiful library – John Hampden and John Wilkes, Annie Besant and Ellen Wilkinson – Thompson made himself master of the vast and technical literature of nuclear weapons, the complex, obfuscatory negotiations between the USA and the USSR, and the sometimes delirious, sometimes chatty way in which press and television discussed the nearness of world incineration. (It is worth remembering that it was Leonid Brezhnev, first secretary of the Soviet Republics, who said in 1893,<sup>18</sup> "... it is really high time to throw the threadbare scarecrow of a 'Soviet threat' out of the door of serious politics".)

In his journalism – weekly in *New Society* and in *The Nation* (in the USA), regularly in *The Guardian*, in *Peace News*, the *New Statesman*, *New Left Review* and a dozen of those minor periodicals of the Left who never paid anything but who never supplicated his contributions in vain – as well as in his professional scholarship (let alone his big, Swiftian science fiction of 1988, *The Sykaos Papers*), this heroic and tremendous figure met the history being made without flinching and with some of the noblest prose ever to confuse and confute mere power. In a bad time, now almost forgotten, when the English language as spoken in politics turned rancid with cant or hard with crisis management, Thompson did much by himself to keep its critical idiom clean and sharp and magnanimous.

He paid the price of exposure. I was a regional chair of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament for some years from 1980, and I don't think I ever heard of his refusing an invitation to speak on the subject. A man as generous, quick and open in his feelings as Thompson was, will be at times woundingly rebuffed. An open and impulsive man will be made touchy by misunderstanding and at times annoyed even by admiring responses. He was miscalled by cold warriors on every side as knave and fool, blamed by Russians and Americans alike for threatening the cause of peace-through-lots-of-nuclear-weapons with his naïve demands for disarmament. He thereby greatly heartened hundreds of thousands of protestors trudging through the dust or mud of Sicily, the Netherlands and over Greenham Common.

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Fred Inglis, *The Cruel Peace: everyday life and the Cold War*, New York: Basic Books, 1991, p323.

But he was up to and for it all. His tall, craggy, white-maned good looks went well with Joan Ruddock, National Chair of CND and her lively beauty. Together, in front of 60,000 people in Trafalgar Square, they seemed the reincarnation of their country's powers of dissent, of its ancient cause of liberty, of what it could teach its people and all peoples of peacefulness, of sanity, of, indeed, self-government.

No doubt his most widely known single publication was his unforgettable malediction *Protest and Survive* spoken over the NATO decision to install the US missiles. The pamphlet sold well over 100,000 copies before becoming a compact little Penguin and all royalties were donated to the movement. It was *the* rallying call which shaped and focused that vague, pervasive resentment and that wholly justified fearfulness in Britain, North America, Holland, Italy, *Germany* (NATO's front line) at the brutal and extravagant dangerousness of playing for political advantage with world incineration. In this country, I suppose, the crowds in Trafalgar Square and the civic, civil tens of thousands in their respectable kagoules and walking boots bussing their way to Greenham Common on half-a-dozen Good Fridays and the vaguely supporting million or two behind them, never numbered much more than six or seven per cent of the nation. Nonetheless, *Protest and Survive* constituted, for them and the many more others who looked on CND with no more than kindly indifference, the first loud and coherent declaration that the passions, the institutions and the allegiances which defined and expressed the horrible and bloodstained Cold War, had split wide open and were pouring away on a new tide. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher couldn't see it, Mikhail Gorbachev could. Nine years after *Protest and Survive* came out, the vast crowds in the market places and grand plazas of Gdansk, Leipzig, Berlin, Budapest, Prague and Timisoara finished things off. Thompson was not only proved right, his words in his style had been a prime saboteur of iron curtain and Berlin Wall.

I cannot forbear to elaborate a little on that bomb of a pamphlet. It was addressed, in one of Thompson's largest, most stirring gestures, to "the People of England", and it combined its plain exposition of his hard-won mastery over the densities of strategic weaponry and its mad balancing of terror with his sardonic, desperately funny quotations from official government advice on what to do if the bombs go off.

This is how the people of England were adjured to face the nuclear music by an official pamphlet only twenty-nine years ago.

As you plan the fall-out room and the inner refuge you need also to limit as far as you can the dangers from heat and blast to the rest of the house... Remove anything which may ignite and burn easily (paper and cardboard for example) ... clear out old newspapers and magazines ... coat windows inside with diluted emulsion so that they will reflect away much of the heat flash, even if the blast which is to follow is to shatter them.

If you have a home fire extinguisher, keep it handy.  
Keep buckets of water ready on each floor.<sup>19</sup>

There is much to give pleasure here, and all Thompson had to do at this juncture was quote these fatuities and wait for laughs.

It is a delicious as well as a ghastly moment. But I cannot doubt that the colossal self-sacrifice and overwork, unpaid, self-giving, always at the call of duty, of editors – five volumes of journalism and political argument published between 1978 and 1985,<sup>20</sup> endless travelling with his wife across the Atlantic, to the Mediterranean, and in his ancient Land Rover to evening meetings of CND in countless church halls, student unions, school assembly rooms - that this terrific schedule wounded him in body and spirit. He became a celebrity of the quite new kind which late capitalist communications have devised on behalf of the competition of ideas.

The adulation and vilification which follow such promotion exact a fearful toll. By nature passionate, impulsive, touchy, Edward Thompson responded warmly but warily to the fame and renown which his sense of public duty brought him. Being human, he loved it; being a fine and a fond as well as a visionary man, he also deplored it. Either way, the spurs of fame never scratched his style or signature. He remained a *public* writer in private old England, and as such is of the stature and the prodigality of, let us say, William Godwin, William Blake, William Morris, the three writers he did so much himself to chronicle, and after them John Ruskin or, in our time, Richard Hoggart.

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<sup>19</sup> *Protect and Survive*, London: HMSO, 1980, pp18-19.

<sup>20</sup> *The Poverty of Theory, Writing by Candlelight, Zero Option, The Heavy Dancers, Double Exposure*, all from his old friend Martin Eve's publishing house, Merlin Press.

## V

The present day may well be seen as an amnesiac moment. The old narratives which held past, present and future in an intelligible order have gone down. Thompson himself, as we saw, helped signally to break up the old lies of Cold War in 1980. Since then, socialism has lost both definition and energy as a utopian prospect. With the widespread disgracing of the foam-flecked pursuit of mere money since 2007, the common expectation of rational progress and prosperity has faltered badly. Britain, Europe, North America – to go no further afield – have alike fallen into a quietist puzzlement about what on earth is going on.

In such circumstances, so history teaches us, all kinds of strange oaths and mad-eyed commitments start up and march the earth and vie with one another for death or glory. Hence, surely, the return of fundamentalism, the erratic surges of new ardour in old Islam, the invention of identity politics, the rediscovery of some disagreeable nationalisms. It is perhaps a moment something like that of the late Reformation, when old narratives and their official authorities were broken up and new prophets stalked the earth.

The Communist Historians Group of which Thompson was such an early member in the 1950s recognised such a moment in 17th century England, and the French *Annalistes* followed their lead. In the pages of that wonderful journal, *Past and Present*, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, Victor Kiernan, Eric Hobsbawm, Georges Rudé, Joan Thirsk and E P Thompson rewrote English history as persistently inflected and radically changed by those small sections of the poor with radical preferences on their own account. The tradition of scholarship of which he was so thorough and gallant a leader is to be honoured as finding in the past those veins of energy hidden in its stratifications and igniting them once more for the illumination and warmth of those who need such succour today.

This momentous effort of intellectual reorientation has become overlooked of late. A recent work of shortwinded revisionism called *The English Civil Wars 1640-1660* by one Blair Worden, a professor at Sussex, assures us that nothing much happened at all in 17th century England, and that the nothingness had no consequences for

democracy or equality or any of the rest of what Sir Lewis Namier used to call the "flapdoodle" of ideals and *ideas*.

Professor Worden is of a piece with contemporary amnesia. Only 30% of all schoolchildren are presently signed up for GCSE history. The *Daily Mail* gloats regularly over pupils' ignorance and errors concerning Mr Churchill's fighting the Vietnamese War, or the Battle of the Somme's being contested by medieval cavalymen in armour. No rational person can turn to the yellow press for signs of the times, but commonplace and confidently mistaken judgements heard any day on the Middle East or on the importance of trade unions in defending trans-European freedoms or on the origins and history of the National Health Service serve to confirm the view that popular historical knowledge is, for a season, in decline, and the body politic mutilated in consequence.

In a review published the month before he died, Edward Thompson wrote of a "most un-English moment ... when a section of the English intelligentsia called all things in question, and the vibrations were felt for decades".<sup>21</sup> It was his exceptional contribution to intellectual and public life in this country to give the lie to that ironic phrase of his, "an un-English moment". I have called him 'the necessary Englishman' precisely because his history, whether of the 18th and 19th centuries or of the present, calls things in question, for sure, but refers that question to his solidly grounded, commonly held certitudes of an English, a European, and an internationalist provenance.

A little anecdote by way of a coda, about his genial and caustic sense of humour provides me, I trust, with the trifling sort of shock to our sense of propriety he liked to give and an example of his fine and insouciant egalitarianism. He was, as I said, an old friend of the novelist-philosopher, Iris Murdoch, and joined her at a grand conference in Delhi hosted by the Indian government during 1987. His old friend was newly-minted Dame of the British Empire, and the two travelled together first class at the Indian government's expense.

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<sup>21</sup> *London Review of Books*, 8 July 1993.



I've never travelled first before, and well! Cocktails, champagne, caviar, lobster ...<sup>22</sup>

and after some reminiscences about a stay in hospital on his return and the keen reminder it gave him of the necessary solidarity and mutuality of wartime and post-1945 peacetime, he concludes:

Not many have stayed loyal, though, to the oaths of 1942 or 1945. Most proved adaptable. We've all adapted a bit. Which reminds me that I neglected to congratulate the young Dame on the new handle added to her name. The neglect was studied. One had supposed, in those old Covenanting days, that serious writers did not accept that kind of handle from the state – and least of all from a mean and malevolently philistine government like this. How could Iris Murdoch have forgotten the oaths of yesteryear? I would be glad to see her honoured by the public or by her peers. But is it an honour to carry a warrant of approval from Mrs Thatcher?

Oh well, never mind, Dame Iris. I've blurted it out because no one else would dare. Or perhaps no one else notices these metamorphoses of cultures and moralities any more? The times I was remembering have long been wrapped up. Today they snigger at *égalité* and the whole business of state is to conspire against the common good.

The readiness with which all teacher-scholar-intellectuals bar a handful accept knighthoods is an old source of public shame (the shortlist of those who refuse bears rehearsal: R H Tawney, A H Halsey, Richard Hoggart, Alan Bennett, Quentin Skinner). It is one measure of Thompson's un-English Englishness that he would never have countenanced such a disfigurement. The fierceness of his dissent gives rise to scorn or anger as being the other side of a generous heart which longs for things to come out right.

In his last great work, on William Blake, published in the year of his death, he wrote:

... in shedding the prohibitives of the Moral Law, Blake held fast to the affirmative: Thou Shalt Love. It is because this affirmative remains an essential need and quest of our own time that William Blake still speaks with such power to us.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> 'Diary', *London Review of Books*, 7 May 1987.

<sup>23</sup> E P Thompson, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p128.

The aim in historical inquiry and the hope of communal self-knowledge it will provide is so to mingle loving kindness with judicious objectivity that these become synonymous, and keen moral sympathy dissolves into historical understanding. This is what I meant by attempting the discipline of one's emotions according to the exigency of one's intellectual subject-matter. Edward Thompson is one faithful and extraordinary guide to that pilgrims' progress of which we are all part., and his is a name which in our time - lacking as we do a political prose-writer of his distinction and an English citizen-historian of his powers of inspiration and of insight - we should peculiarly honour.

**Fred Inglis**