

E.P. Thompson: 1925–1993

E.P. Thompson died on 28 August 1993, generally regarded as one of the leading English historians of his generation and its most thrillingly eloquent polemicist. Most, though not all, of the obituaries of Thompson made the point that his first substantial work was *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955), written when he was only thirty. Typically what began as a review of an American book he disapproved of burgeoned into the 800 page political study that was to alter perceptions of Morris fundamentally and for all time.

Thompson specialised in the rescue operation. In his later and most famous book *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) he announced as his intention “to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan, and even the deluded followers of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity”. His study of Morris had already challenged the different but related condescension of those who dismissed Morris as a political bumbler, a well-meaning but ineffective amateur on the fringes of the Socialist scene. It was Thompson who first revealed the steel in him, the *strangeness*, and reclaimed him as “a major intellectual figure”, central to that tradition of English dissidence that stretches from John Bunyan and the Levellers to William Cobbett and Tom Paine. Thompson saw William Morris as perhaps “our greatest diagnostician of alienation” and described him as “one of those men whom history will never overtake.”

I first read E.P. Thompson when I was at Oxford. I already admired Morris but I was finding his diversity a puzzle. The wallpapers and politics did not tie up. The book hit me, as books only occasionally do, with the force of revelation because Thompson grasps so precisely, and teases out so patiently, the central relation of Morris’s politics and art. Thompson is nothing if not a great teacher and part of his magnificence lies in the urgency and passion of his writing. This is not dry history but gripping argument, causing endless small eruptions in the mind.

Both Thompson’s parents were missionaries and it is surely this proselytizing background that gives such conviction to his account of English Socialism’s formative years. The rallying of the followers; ‘street-preaching’; the undercurrents of *outréness* and martyrdom: in Thompson’s marvellous first telling of the history of the Socialist League an obvious parallel is with the early Christian sects. Perhaps Thompson does not give proper weight to Morris’s relations with the emigré Anarchists in London. I believe he underestimates the influence of Morris on R.H. Tawney, G.D.H. Cole, Clement Attlee and other builders of the post-war Welfare State. But these are quibbles. Anyone who writes about Morris after Thompson is immeasurably in his debt.

It is sometimes forgotten how far E.P. Thompson was steeped in literature. He used literary sources inspiringly, and carefully, to illuminate the writing of his history. This is as obvious in his *William Morris* – reread his interpretation of *The Earthly Paradise* – as in his last book, the posthumously published *Witness Against The Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (1993). As writer and reformer he identified with Morris, who held an unassailable place in Thompson’s pantheon. As he explained it to Leszek Kolakowski, the former middle-European dissident:

“Talk of free-will and determinism, and I think first of Milton. Talk of man’s inhumanity, I think of Swift. Talk of morality and revolution, and my mind is off with Wordsworth’s Solitary. Talk of the problems of self-activity and creative labour in socialist society, and I am in an instant back with William Morris – a great bastard like myself”.

Like Morris, Thompson was in a sense a late developer. He did not become a truly public figure until the 1980s, when he was nearing sixty, in the resurgence of the peace movement, writing and speaking vehemently against nuclear weapons and Cruise missiles and the potentially disastrous effect on society of an extension of Cold War politics. E.P. Thompson on the platform in Trafalgar Square, white hair flying, charismatic and prophetic, was as vigorous a stirrer of the conscience of the nation as Morris had been a century before.

Fiona MacCarthy