
Readers in the humanities and social sciences abound. There are those that introduce key texts in a given field. Others seek to encapsulate the contributions of a major intellectual figure. In this latter category, there are volumes that focus on cultural critics, social theorists, literary scholars, and political writers. But there are few—if any—that highlight the writings of historians. It is thus says a great deal regarding E.P. Thompson’s stature that the New Press has published *The Essential E.P. Thompson*. He is, as the book’s editor Dorothy Thompson states, “one of the most influential historians of his generation” (vii). But he is more than this, as readers of this journal undoubtedly know. He is among the major public intellectuals of the last half of the twentieth century, certainly in the English-speaking world.

In his introduction to *The Castoriadis Reader*, David Ames Curtis reflects on what a Reader should contain. In his view it should provide a general survey of the author’s work, convey a clear sense of the basic elements of his/her thought and how it evolved over time, incorporate selections for which the author is best known, and include texts that are normally hard to find but are deserving of wider recognition. Curtis is certainly not the last word on Readers, but he captures the multidimensional nature of the enterprise. Does *The Essential E.P. Thompson* fulfill these purposes? In many respects it does. It provides a clear picture of Thompson’s principal achievement as an historian and a clear sense of his intellectual development: from the early biography of William Morris to later work on the early English working class and then still later writings on historical theory and eighteenth-century popular culture. I myself would have begun the volume with the selections from the Morris biography rather than *The Making of the English Working Class*. Despite being revised in the 1970s, it remains a work conceived in the 1950s. In addition, I would have included neither the book review of Claire Tomalin’s biography of Mary Wollstonecraft nor the chapter from *Alien Homage*, a family memoir/history of his father’s relationship to the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. They were perhaps chosen to establish Thompson’s relevance for feminist and colonial/postcolonial scholarship but seem incidental to elucidating the development of his main ideas, although *Alien Homage* provides a fascinating glimpse into his family background. Replacing them with the extraordinary “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” would have been preferable.

I also have reservations regarding the selections made from larger works. I am not objecting to extracts on principle nor am I disputing the importance of the ones chosen. Yet both *William Morris* and *The Making of the English Working Class* are conceived on the scale of nineteenth-century novels. The inclusion...
of a few chapters wrested from their larger narrative poses serious challenges for readers. The selections from the Morris biography begin at a crucial juncture in the middle of his life. It is much like entering a conversation in midstream. These chapters might have been usefully supplemented by Thompson’s 1959 address to the William Morris Society, an excellent introduction to his understanding of Morris, including a memorable analysis of his views on Morris’s relationship to Marx, in his *Making History: Writings on History and Culture* (66–76).

Consider also in this context *The Making of the English Working Class*. Written, as everyone knows, in part as a polemical engagement with Marxist economism, its narrative is structured accordingly. Following the unforgettable Preface, with its classic definition of history from below, Thompson does not begin with working people’s experience of the Industrial Revolution, which would have given a kind of credence to the economistic ideas that he was combating. Rather he sets the table by first discussing eighteenth-century political traditions of dissent: English working people did not face the Industrial Revolution as blank slates but as freeborn Englishmen. The book’s organization is briefly mentioned in the Preface. However, the exclusion of these vital chapters produces the unintended effect of blunting the originality of Thompson’s project. Short of including some of them, readers might have benefited by an introduction explaining the relationship between the parts and the whole.

In the Introduction Dorothy Thompson suggests that her husband “wrote little about historiography or historical theory, preferring to let the theory emerge from the historical and literary writing itself” (ix). This may be true in terms of the proportion of his overall work, but, as historians go, Thompson was unusually reflective regarding the relationship between historical theory and practice. The extracts from “The Poverty of Theory” include Thompson’s most serious attempt to define his historical practice and his analysis of Marx’s *Capital* and its problematic relationship to historical materialism. I am not a fan of this text as I have already stated in great detail elsewhere. Thompson was so preoccupied with demolishing Althusserian theoretical practice that he ended up damaging the alternative case that he was attempting to mount. His reflections here shed light on his practice as an historian but only hint at the essay’s wider purpose as polemical intervention into British left-wing intellectual debates.

For years now Thompson’s most important writings have been readily available. The Reader thus, not surprisingly, turns up little in the way of newly discovered or hard-to-find essays. The one exception is the 1966 essay, originally published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, “History from Below.” It is to be read in conjunction with a text from twenty years later, “Agenda for Radical History,” a talk given at the New School for Social Research, originally published in *Radical History Review*. Appearing at the end of the volume, they comprise reflections on the state of radical and labor history at two very different moments in time, both in relationship to the development of radical history and to Thompson’s own life. The early essay turns out to be a rather workmanlike survey, but it does convey the enormous optimism that radical historians felt at the time. Deploying an image of the ruling class that Christopher Hill had explored in a
famous essay, Thompson argues that radical historical writing in England had defined itself against an official history that had “languished under the Norman yoke, and the seed of William the Bastard occupies the Chair” (481). Only in recent years had radical historians developed an autonomous voice. “What is happening now, in what used to be Labour history, is not a disintegration so much as a liberation” (489). The later text, reflecting a time when Marxist and labor history were beginning to enter into more troubled times, does not have the same kind of optimism. Acknowledging the transformed political climate ushered in by Thatcherism in Britain, Thompson tells his audience “that our radical impulses are really hemmed in in many ways” (492). At an event that also included Perry Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm, Thompson distances himself from Marxism. He is bored by it as a system and sees its provisional categories as “difficult but still creative concepts,” although he still embraces the term historical materialism.

“Agenda for Radical History” reminds us that Thompson was much more than a historian. He makes clear that CND activism had placed historical work on the back burner, that his work in the peace movement had taken precedence over several partially written manuscripts. The Introduction to the Reader acknowledges Thompson’s multifaceted intellectual and political interests, while specifying that the book will exclusively focus on his work as an historian. The question is this: does this warrant the title The Essential E.P. Thompson? It is certainly catchier than The E.P. Thompson Reader, and catchiness counts. But it would not have been by my choice. My first exposure to Thompson was his 1965 critique of the Anderson-Nairn thesis in “The Peculiarities of the English” in The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays (245–302). I had never read anything like it. I was drawn to Thompson’s socialist humanism; cultural Marxism; political activism; hardheaded, concrete, yet romantic thinking; and his sustained effort at fusing theory and practice. He was the first contemporary Marxist that truly made sense to me, but his being an historian, although important to me, was only partially the reason. There is of course a voluminous literature on the problems with essentialism. Leaving that aside, I cannot conceive of an “essential” E.P. Thompson that does not include his pioneering efforts at founding the New Left.

Thompson’s intellectual life was overdetermined by the Cold War and much of his political writings bear its imprint. In our post-Cold War world there might well be a dwindling audience for them. Yet as we descend into a political epoch whose discourse rivals the Cold War in its irrationality and dogmatism, Thompson’s efforts at finding a third way still seem relevant. I am therefore glad that we now have a single volume of some of Thompson’s best historical writing. I just would have been happier with one that contained a broader view of his life and work.

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For Aristotle identifying the essence of something was a step to its classification, and thus the genre to which it belonged. For Leibniz every individual thing had an essence, and thus it established specific difference. Who was the essential E.P. Thompson, one of a kind or a type? The vogue in America was to speak of the British Marxist historians, or English social history as a genre.

“To this day many academic history schools languish under the Norman yoke, and the seed of William the Bastard occupies the Chairs,” wrote Thompson in 1966. From America it seems that the genre called English social history helped to throw off the Norman yoke, but actually several schools (the seed of Alfred?) did that. First, the Warwick School. Thompson was the director of its Centre for the Study of Social History, which produced remarkable social historians, such as John Rule, Eric J. Evans, and Robert Malcolmson. It reached out to North America for graduate students such as Cal Winslow and Douglas Hay, and for senior labor historians such as Melvin Dubofsky and David Montgomery. Thus the Warwick School was trans-Atlantic. Ralph Samuel led the Ruskin School which practiced true history from below, whose practitioners came from the working class and were often non-matriculated. It spawned the glorious history workshop movement that grew around the world, Germany, South Africa. Stuart Hall led the Birmingham School, the third. It produced cultural studies and helped open academia to people of color and the formerly colonized.

The schools of “Alfred”, Warwick, Ruskin, Birmingham, lost their distinctiveness in the crossing to US academia, which at the border stamped them essentially as English social history. Essence as singularity became essence as genre in the crossing. Also crossing to the land of plenty was The New Left Review, which in its own way combated the Norman Yoke and was the seed of the new schools. The bright lights of Cambridge University (where Thompson went after the Second World War) whisked right through Customs without a problem.

The editor, Dorothy Thompson, is an English social historian of Chartism, respected from Ireland to Japan. She was also E.P. Thompson’s wife. This gives to her selection of the essence an authority based on deep knowledge and long professional cooperation. Hers is the second meaning of essence, unique. In the preface to The Making of the English Working Class he describes her as his collaborator, and in The Poverty of Theory as a comrade who argued both with, and against, his views. She excludes his literary criticism, his novel, and his poetry. She also excludes his political work, both the occasional essays in the newspapers (some later collected in The Heavy Dancers (1985) or Persons and Polemics (1994) or Reading by Candlelight (1980) and the great campaigning documents, like Protest and Survive (1985). His sustained polemics, or interventions in the debates of international Marxism, are absent too, “Outside the Whale” (1960), “The Peculiarities of the English” (1965), “An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowsky” (1973), and “The Poverty of Theory” (1978). She writes, “he increasingly hesitated to call himself a Marxist.” In this selection we do not see him as a socialist, or a revolutionary. Dorothy Thompson presents Edward Thompson as an historian.
Her selection is not based on chronology but on topics called Politics and Culture, Law and Custom, History and Theory, and Reading and Writing History. It proceeds from *The Making of the English Working Class* of 1963, back to *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* in 1955 forward a little bit to 1976 and the coda to the second edition of *Morris*, then back to an essay on Mary Wollstonecraft in 1974. A second section contains four pieces on the Eighteenth century. Despite the disclaimer that Edward was not a theorist two selections appear here from *The Poverty of Theory* of 1978. The book closes with two short, deft pieces on writing history, one from 1966 and the other from 1986. In the middle of the volume is a Brechtian interlude of Bengali-Oxford gossip from Thompson’s book about his father in which having survived a night with a tiger growling at the bungalow, the next morning with Indian friends Thompson sahib sat beneath the ancient bo-tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment.

The essence being developed is a professional one. Yet, his history is poetic, not because it rejects the discipline of craft or the protocols of investigation. He was an original contributor to methodology and a discoverer of primary documentation. His history was epic, or poetic, because it expressed a yearning: he understood human nature as *potentia*: he expressed the revolutionary affirmative as a deep non-rhetorical litotes (the negative of the contrary). His rhetorical brilliance, his sustained metaphors, his ironic tone, his passionate cries, his awkwardness, his multiple voices were allied closely to archival rummaging and to his intellectual striving. His rhythms are consciously wrought. This is why was beloved, and why some still say he spoke of “the nation.” It is what Milton and Blake did, and at night in the loneliness of his study he communed with them. At one notable point, he spoke of history as the queen of disciplines.

Essentializing makes contextualizing more difficult. Edward was not only a great speaker, he was an attentive listener. The publisher has chosen to cite its own re-prints rather than the initial publisher, so the dates on the selections are later than the dates of first publication. The question of dates is important to that of context. The scholarly community was one context. Thus, “The Moral Economy” appeared not in *Customs in Common* (1991) but almost twenty years earlier (1972) in *Past & Present*, the journal of English social history. A second context was provided by his political comrades. The debate of 1956 is not here. He exchanged words with Raymond Williams, crossed swords with Perry Anderson, bruised Philip Corrigan. His students provided a third context. “The Crime of Anonymity” appeared in a volume which was largely a collective effort. You cannot understand “The rule of Law” unless you have understood their pre-occupation with crime.

Neither essence as generic English social history nor essence as the genius of the specific individual best grasps Thompson’s achievement. An evolutionary and organic metaphor, his growth from a seed, at least calls attention to its origins. What was it?

In 1985 Edward identified the origins of that essence. Exhausted from the previous six years in the peace movement and speaking as if he too had stayed
the tiger and sat under the Tree of Enlightenment, he spoke at a conference at the New School of Social Research with, and about, his generation of radical historians. “A certain breakthrough in British radical history, associated particularly at that point with the Marxist tradition, took place some forty-five years ago,” and he apologized for the military metaphor. He continued, “We’re still exploiting the terrain that was opened up with that breakthrough.” What did he mean? He did not mean the breakthrough of the Blitzkrieg in Poland, Holland, Belgium, and France to the beaches of Dunkirk. However, the Nazi threats to social being undoubtedly in this last instance broke through social consciousness.

“Blood, sweat, tears, and toil”—“their finest hour”—the Four Freedoms: we recognize the moment. Breakthroughs in social consciousness were happening all over. Virginia Woolf, two houses in Bloomsbury wrecked by bombs and the Luftwaffe buzzing above her in the Suffolk Downs, extolled the tea-table (her sex was excluded from the high table and the conference table) and the human “mind.” In May 1940 she wrote, “thinking is my fighting.” Day Lewis apparently disappeared into the translation of Virgil’s Georgics which was published in June 1940. Against the hypocrisy following the debacle of Munich and the defeat of Spain, he wrote “for a vision that saw beyond an imperial day the hand of man no longer armed against his fellow.” And his praise for subsistence or kitchen gardening on waste land which took as a metaphor that “our creative winged seed can strike a root in anything.”

Indeed, the breakthroughs in human thought in that 1940 spot of time included Mary Inman (wages for housework) and C.L.R. James (black power). In the weeks before his death trying to cross the Pyrennes, Walter Benjamin handed over in the Marseilles underground to Hannah Arendt his “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” History is a flower, it must be brushed against the grain, not even the dead are safe from the enemy, the now is shot through with the chips of messianic time.

Such a chip fell on Edward. “For me in 1940 as a school student it came through the work of Christopher Hill: his first brief study of 1640. I sat down at the age of 16 to write for the sixth form history society a paper on the Marxist interpretation of history and the English civil war, leafing through Christopher’s work, and Bernstein, and Petagorsky, and Winstanley’s pamphlets and such Leveller tracts as I could get, and some Marx, Engels, and Plekhanov.”

In his brief study” Christopher Hill criticized the Tory interpretation which suggested “that all politics is a dirty game, all principles are eye-wash, all revolutions useless.” He summarized Winstanley’s view that “all men are equally and alike born to toke property, liberty, and freedom.” What was the lesson of 1940? If the legal system is not suitable to freedom, then it can be changed by united action. Commenting on Winstanley’s freedom, it “was not a cheap politicians slogan: it mean the living struggle of comrades to build a society based on communal ownership.”

At first the Communist Party rejected the book on the grounds that he was wrong to see the civil war as a bourgeois revolution. Hill’s book was called The
English Revolution. In 1985 Thompson censored himself and spoke, not of revolution, but of the English “civil war.” It was a simple elision to make. The Cold War had done its work, revolution had grown tired. Done Torr, whose graceful independence of mind influenced the post war CPGB History Group, wrote that Hill was a pioneer and that “we all owe it to him in the first place and it was a victory for politics as well as theory.” In 1940 she produced a textbook on nationality and war, quotations from Marx and Engels whose purpose was to provide the reader with writings enabling the reader to “begin to see his own place as a maker of history.” Looking across the world from the flames of London, she noticed, “Millions who stood outside history have become makers of history.”

“We shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall never surrender . . .” vowed the prime minister. Who was that “we”? Whose hills? Whose fields? Whose streets? Indeed, these questions extend the pact of Spain, as Auden wrote. George Orwell wrote that “the English Revolution started several years ago, and it began to gather momentum when the troops came back from Dunkirk.” Orwell translated Hill’s “communal ownership” to include nationalization, educational reform, independence for India, and limitation of individual riches. Yet the Communist Party was not calling for revolution. The USSR had signed the Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler. “1940 was a nadir of hope,” wrote Thompson.

There is a second point to be made about The English Revolution, and “the breakthrough in British radical history:” Hill’s was not the only essay in it. Edgel Rickword wrote an essay about Milton. Later in life Thompson affirmed Milton’s importance to him (“take free-will and determinism, and I first think of Milton”). Fred Inglis, the editor of Thompson’s poems, expressed his conception of poetry “as the best, because the sanest, plainest and most affirmative speech of a free citizen, speaking on behalf of his or her comrades.” “His poetics therefore suffuses all his work.” “The poet’s words and the historian’s hunt together on behalf of the human.”

His brother, Frank, had joined the army despite his youth and the opposition of his parents. The young brothers had lost a young friend in Spain. Perhaps they made a brotherly pact, like tens of thousands of others. In August 1940 Frank Thompson shortly after the fall of France and the rescue of the British Army from the beaches of Dunkirk wrote a poem comparing the village casualties, Tom, Bill, and Dave, to the heroes of Troy. Taking his title from the Agamemnon, “they died in a war of others’ making”—the young poet is not quite at home in the village pub, but gracefully familiar with Aeschylus. Yet, his theme takes you directly to twenty years hence and The Making: self-activity of the working class, the casting off of deference, the fury at riches, the demand for pay.

Yes. They died well, but not to suit your purpose;
Not so that you could go hunting with two horses,
While their sons touched their caps, opening the gates for pennies.
Perhaps we shall take a hand, write our own ending.
What is that writing to be? For both brothers history was writing. The life of action was a tale, an epic. A year just before embarking for the front, Frank Thompson wrote a poem called “Brother,” about two poets, two Communists, two brothers, about to become soldiers. Frank wrote in March 1941, giving meaning to brotherhood without using the word,

Why is there limit set on our good will?
Make this our task, out of a time-stained word
Often invoked but rarely true, to weld
A slogan that will galvanized the world.

Frank was shot in 1944, becoming a casualty of both that war and the Cold War. Edward returned to this spot of time and its personal and political commitment, more so than 1945, or 1956, certainly than 1968. Despite the Soviet purges, the debacle at Munich, the struggle for power among the Spanish republicans, the orthodoxy of the Popular Front, the Russo-German Pact of 1939, this is when he made “a purposive historical commitment” of his life. Like Milton, he prepared himself early for a noble role, “surrounded by congregated multitudes, I now imagine that, from the columns of Hercules to the Indian Ocean, I behold the nations of the earth recovering that liberty which they so long had lost.” His authority and his assurance stemmed from this grief, that victory.

I emphasize the origins in 1940 of Thompson’s political beliefs and literary commitments as the background to his professional accomplishments. Dorothy Thompson’s theme of selection is Thompson’s “exploration of English romanticism in art and politics,” even though his books about romanticism per se, Witness Against the Beast and The Romantics, are not represented in this selection. The 1955 work on Morris was the beginning of his “engagement with certain mechanistic and teleological forms of historical presentation which he found not only in mainstream economic and political history but in aspects of the Marxist tradition within which he was writing.” The “real silence in Marx lies in the area that anthropologists call value systems.”

Values might be virtues—wisdom, prudence, kindness, justice, faith, hope, charity. They might be Puritanical, sobriety, punctuality, thrift, cleanliness. They might be antinomian, excess, harmony, spontaneity. They might be English and political, indignation at child labor, at slavery, at bullies; they might include trial by peers, freedom of assembly, petition, thought, speech and publication. Thompson described craft-specific values. He referred to Brechtian values. Oddly, in light of his much noticed anglotude, he referred to a Gallic virtue, égalité.

Thompson argued within the philosophical tradition of English empiricism, and its positivist contrast of facts and values whereas the Marxist tradition describes value in relation to the commodity and its two kind of values, use-value and exchange-value. Even here ambiguity sets in because the ‘uses’ are not questioned much. From these beginnings grew constructions such as money, constant and variable capital, organic composition, whose sociology and politics is scarce-
ly explored. Instead, Thompson winked with the Linnaean phrase homo economicus.

“Political Economy has terms for use-value, for exchange value, for monetary value, and for surplus value, but not for normative value.” These are references to the first chapter of Das Kapital, but later Marx, unlike the political economists who preceded his critique, took us to the labor process, to concrete labor, to abstract labor, and to production in plantation, factory, field, garden, mine, mill, and home. Here values were made, and norms were forged.

Das Kapital “remains a study of the logic of capital, not of capitalism, and the social and political dimensions of the history, the wrath, and the understanding of class struggle arise from a region independent of the closed system of economic logic.” Contrast this with “we had, after all, the living line of Marx’s analysis of British history, in Capital, in Marx and Engels’ correspondence—continually present to us.” Over time the living line became the closed system.

The fact-value antimony might be replaced by a metaphor of animality. Capitalism is a female dog, squirming, hideous, nasty with undertones of pollution. In “An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowksy” (1973) he referred to “that old bitch gone in the teeth, consumer capitalism.” “I know that old 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.”

In “Class Consciousness,” the final chapter of The Making of the English Working Class the radical tradition is distinctly separate from the romantic critique of utilitarianism. The Making described the making of the class which was to overthrow the bourgeoisie and replace capitalism with socialism. This is also the burden of “the river of fire” in the Morris biography, his transformation from a bourgeois aesthete to a communist agitator, educator, and organizer. That’s why it attracted readers who were not otherwise inclined to English history. Can we therefore have the book as an empirical study of modernization but not a story of the class of people who can fulfill the revolutionary destiny of the destruction of capitalism?

William Morris: From Romantic to Revolutionary was “an argument about the Romantic tradition.” Morris was stimulated by Kropotkin as well as Marx. Ideas have contexts: “the ideas had work to do in the present before they were passed on down the line.” What he means by “work to do” is the causing human action. It is a Brechtian meaning. Thompson would say “socialist is not only one way of organizing production; it is also a way of producing human nature.” Precisely, what he wants his writing to do. “Perhaps we shall take a hand, write our own ending.”

There was a theoretical closure at the end of the nineteenth century such that the romantic critique became moralism or utopianism. The socialist movement retreated from “the acceptance of Utopianism as a valid imaginative form, because of a fright given to us by Engels in 1880.” To Morris romanticism included historical consciousness. “I have heard people miscalled for being romantic, but what romance means is the capacity for a true conception of histo-
ry, a power of making the past part of the present.” “Beauty, medievalism, Germanic, Icelandic sagas” were Morris’ means of detachment from utilitarian notions of progress, capitalist private property, and technological determinism. “No swearword is more devastating than romantic,” Thompson complained.

Maximization of economic growth is the utilitarian earthly paradise, in contrast to the vocabularies of desire, faculties of speculation, moral self-consciousness. He argues Morris derived communism out of the logic of the Romantic tradition. It is surprising that he didn’t correct this following the findings of *The Making of the English Working Class*. Is it entirely true that Morris did not explore a derivation of communism from the Radical tradition, in contrast to the Romantic? Moreover, the romantics, too, came from somewhere!

His historical subjects went deeper into time, from Marx and the socialists of the nineteenth century, to the radicals and artisans of the eighteenth, to the plebeians of the bread riots and the commoners at enclosure. He recovered each of these dialogues from “the Norman yoke and the seed of William,” or the pall of Stalinism and the complacency of the bourgeoisie. If his life-time concern was the dialogue between social being and social consciousness, then we could make a little non-poetic diagram expressing the revolutionary ideal of equality. Between the books he was active politically. In the first interval he was active in CND and the New Left; in the second, he formed END and helped end the Cold War.

Morris drew on Ruskin and Carlyle, and “upon the very deep commitment he had learned for certain precapitalist values and modes.” Their remit may be larger: if not universal history, then our experience must include the huge reservoir of the commons or the environments protected by the indigenous peoples. Here too is a source of dignity. With the defeat of the Maori in New Zealand, with the Cherokee’s Trail of Tears, with the starvation in Ireland, with “the Song of Hiawatha,” with the defeat of the Bedouins in Algeria, with the missionaries prohibition of the surfboard in Hawaii, it is clear that the values and modes did not disappear. Benjamin again: “not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself, is the depository of historical knowledge.” He advised “a tiger’s leap into the past.”

“What’s radical in [radical history] demands some relations between the academy and active experience . . . and some distrust of easy assimilation by the lost society, an awareness of the institutional and ideological determinations of the society in which we work, which are founded upon unreason, or on the reasons of power and the reasons of money.” The essential Thompson includes this radicalism.

Thompson’s work seen as a whole, as an oeuvre, enables us to see both the experience and the history together. Edward believed in human action which is why he blamed Orwell for predicting in 1940 “the passive attitude will come back . . . Seemingly there is nothing left but quietism, robbing reality of its terrors by simply submitting to it.” His history writings are thus like Bertolt Brecht’s notion of epic theatre whose principle was commitment to social change, whose method was *Historisierung*, whose soul lay in the story rather than the psyche,
whose constant interruptions created a genre without the closures of logical causality, and which was antiillusory. History was essential to his poetry and politics and vice versa.

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E.P. Thompson was nursed on a mother’s milk of transatlantic missionary work and writings on the Middle East that reached back to the last half of the nineteenth century. Fathered on Bengali literature, the poetry of the Great War, cricket with the likes of Nehru, and the struggle for Indian independence, Thompson was born into a highly literate and deeply politicized global village. Small wonder that at seventeen he was an anti-fascist and a soldier. But he took a wide Left turn, following in a brother’s footsteps, to become a Marxist and a Communist in his twenties, only to find himself, by 1956, donning dissident dress, leading an exodus from the Communist Party of Great Britain, building a revolutionary New Left in the seemingly unpropitious climate of the late 1950s.

By this time, Thompson had spent almost a decade in the adult education movement, where he learned a profound respect for the experience of working people. A writer whose passion for the poetic and willingness to immerse himself in sources that cut against the grain of various scholasticisms, Thompson’s first books (a 1955 political resurrection of the revolutionary romanticism of William Morris, followed by a volcano of a book, The Making of the English Working Class, in 1963) established him as perhaps the most influential advocate of a new working-class history. It accented the agency of laboring people, and refused to shy away from the class struggles that promised a better world, whatever their failings.

For a time an influential teacher and founder of the Centre for the Study of Social History at Warwick University, Thompson rested uneasily in traditional academic life. He made his exit from it in the 1970s to devote full time to his writing, both popular and scholarly. But he was never a man of fashion, and he railed against the Parisian theory so prominent in Left academic circles, attacking relentlessly the oeuvre of Louis Althusser and relating its mechanical structuralism to the Stalinism Thompson had pilloried in 1956. All of this was obviously linked to what Thompson considered of value in Marx, not only the questions that the founder of historical materialism had posed, but the purpose in asking them: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.” It was his refusal to suffer much foolishness that flew in the face of this commitment gladly that often isolated Thompson. But it elevated him as well.

At a time when most historians are producing their best work, in their fifties, Thompson shelved his notebooks and his beloved trips to archives and provincial libraries, and took to the global hustings, beating back the threat of nuclear war and the possible annihilation of the species. Never one to do any-
thing by halves; he sacrificed not only a decade of his now precious time, but his health as well. A powerfully theatrical orator, he galvanized audiences East and West, reviving the old Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in which he had marched in the late 1950s, into a European Nuclear Disarmament movement that actually reached from London, Paris, Oslo, Prague, and Berlin to Calcutta, Sydney, New York, and Toronto. Edward Thompson made history in this period rather than researching it.

The price, however, was to be a high one. This last mobilization exhausted Thompson, and a bug that he picked up in his world travels left him debilitated and undermined his immune system. He was left vulnerable to a range of afflictions, among them a death-threatening encounter with what he thought was Legionnaire’s Disease and a nasty bout of shingles (passed on to him unknowingly by my five-year old daughter, who a day or two after playing with Edward broke out in a case of chicken pox). By the 1990s, the political landscape of world politics, forever altered by the implosion of the Soviet Union and the reconfiguration of Eastern Europe, Thompson was racing against the obviously ticking clock of death to finish many writing projects, none of which, whatever their brilliance, came up to the truly exceptional standards of scholarship and analytic acuteness that would have been reached had Thompson been at the height of his powers.

Almost all of what E.P. Thompson produced in the 1990s owed an immense debt to Dorothy Thompson, his life partner since the 1940s, and an historian and political activist of considerable stature in her own right. The list of works, amazingly enough, included three major studies: a long-awaited account of eighteenth-century plebeian culture, *Customs in Common* (1991); an evocative reconsideration of William Blake, *Witness Against the Beast* (1993); and *Alien Homage* (1993), an elaboration of Thompson’s father’s relations and encounter with the Bengali poet/philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore. But beyond this were also four posthumously-published volumes, collections of essays and poems, as well as an excavation of the politics behind the death of Thompson’s brother, Frank, a communist partisan killed by fascists in the Second World War, but possibly also abandoned by his own military command while leading a failed Bulgarian mission.

Much of Dorothy Thompson’s 1990s was spent helping Edward and, following his death, preparing his unfinished work for various presses. *The Essential E.P. Thompson* is probably the last of these efforts. And it is a masterful job, one designed to introduce future generations to the pivotal pieces of Thompson’s perspective. Hard choices no doubt kept Dorothy thinking for many months which works must be included, and how they were to be excerpted. Given Thompson’s range and shifting concerns, capturing “the essential Thompson” must have taken considerable thought, proving no mean feat.

Dorothy’s first task was to appreciate that while Thompson never considered himself primarily a historian, it was as a writing researcher of the plebeian and radical past that he perhaps left his most lasting mark. Thompson changed the way we look at this obscured experience, and while it should never be for-
gotten that he did this by always being cognizant of the need to transform our presents and build better futures, his approach to the past was of course crucial. He was never one to sacrifice the integrity of historical research, moreover, on any easy altar of political expediency.

The selections from Thompson’s writings chosen by Dorothy Thompson are appropriately gathered together in four sections.

Leading the way is a major compilation of extracts from, among other works, Thompson’s pathbreaking early books, *The Making of the English Working Class* and *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955 and Postscript, 1976). Under the heading, “Politics and Culture,” these sections highlight the vision of Thompson, perhaps articulated most succinctly in the famous Preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*, arguably the most widely quoted brief statement on class formation in the last forty years. They are also indicative of Thompson’s tone. For what marked Thompson as one of the greatest historians of the Left was his uniquely combative, polemical engagement with all writing that rubbed against his democratic and radical sensibilities. This is evident in the inclusion of chapters from *The Making of the English Working Class* on exploitation and the weavers, in which Thompson faced into the strong wind of 1950s conservative historiography by insisting that whatever the advances registered in the Industrial Revolution, it was also emphatically a history of loss. “For those who suffered,” Thompson wrote tellingly, “retrospective comfort is cold.” (68) Finally, in charting the character of radical culture and resistance in pre-Chartist class consciousness, and the role of gentleman leaders such as Carlisle, Cobbett, and Owen, Thompson’s emphasis on agitation and commitment in history is brought to the fore. This, too, is central in the material extracted from his Morris studies.

A second section brings together crucial fragments of Thompson’s exploration of the meanings of law and custom in plebeian life. Most of the segments chosen focus on the eighteenth-century experience, and include the justly famous ruminations on the rule of law that closed *Whigs and Hunters* (1975), as well as perhaps Thompson’s most influential article, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century” (1971), later to be a cornerstone of *Customs in Common*. Less well known is “The Grid of Inheritance,” a paper that came into being as a comment on a 1970s *Past & Present* conference addressing issues of common right and enclosure. It revealed what students and colleagues of Thompson’s always valued highly, his capacity to offer critical readings of other’s work that synthesized deeply and ranged broadly and suggestively over historical terrain, a characteristic evident as well in the famous essay, “Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism” (1967).

Thompson never made much self-conscious attempt to write as a theoretician. He preferred his historical works to carry their theory implicitly. Ironically, in the end he was perhaps the most theoretical (and theoretically innovative) of all of the so-called British Marxist historians. In the brief extracts from *The Poverty of Theory* (1978) included in this book, Thompson elaborates on his understanding of historical logic and the relationship of Marxism and history. Oth-
er essays, most emphatically the underappreciated “Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context” (1972), writings on socialist humanism, the base-superstructure metaphor, or revolutionary practice that first appeared in the New Reasoner in the late 1950s and the earliest numbers of the New Left Review, as well as Thompson’s engagement with Kolakowski, might usefully supplement these choices.

Closing The Essential E.P. Thompson are two remarkably prescient statements on writing radical history. The first, a little-known essay from The Times Literary Supplement (1966) titled by the editor, “History from Below” (it would not have been Thompson’s choice of a heading, for he insisted that all history was made at the interface of top/bottom, with the middle not of inconsiderable importance), outlines a mid-1960s transformation in labor history, as it moved into areas associated with the influence of the French journal, Annales E.S.C., and the cultural turn associated with Thompson himself. But this essay also marks Thompson’s genuine capacity to embrace the widening of historical inquiry, and endorses with enthusiasm venturing into new areas not in any way associated with Labor’s official/approved evolution, including working-class apathy. But more pointedly, Thompson insisted that unless the new strains of radical and labor history steeled themselves in dissidence, continuing the project as “somewhat disestablished” and with “an extra-mural audience still partly in mind,” they could well “grow fat and adopt Norman habits.” (489)

This thought was in some ways reiterated gently in a 1985 discussion involving Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Perry Anderson, and Christopher Hill, published in the Radical History Review (1986) and reprinted here. Thompson acknowledged how radical history faces many challenges as it confronts mainstream accommodations. “[O]ur radical impulses are really hemmed in in many ways. . . . we all know it. . . . in the last ten years in Britain I feel very much a closing down of the situation. A lack of originality. A playing safe.” (494) And this trend has of course continued, albeit in ways not always foreseen by Thompson.

Thompson ended this statement on radical history with a homage to Mary Wollstonecraft, whom he recalled insisting that “mind has no sex.” This went against the grain of mid-1980s radical thought, which demanded that everything be recognized as gendered. It would be even more out of favor now. But Thompson, ever the dissident, suggested that Wollstonecraft looked to a wider radicalism, demanding entry into “the whole world of the mind” for herself and other women, at the same time as she refused to rest her case on her own, particular oppressed identity. Radical history, thought Thompson, must demand, and live up to, no less. It must excel as history, refusing to rely merely on the advocacy of the downtrodden and the righteousness of rhetorical platitudes addressed to “Comrades, brothers, sisters.”

I want to key on Mary Wollstonecraft to end this comment. One of Dorothy Thompson’s selections for inclusion in the “Politics and Culture” section of The Essential E.P. Thompson is a seven-page review of Claire Tomlin’s The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft (1974) that appeared in New Society. This will
seem to many a strange piece to privilege in this collection, and of all the writings of Thompson between these covers, it is probably the least remembered and read, with the possible exception of “History from Below.” Yet Thompson always wanted to write on Wollstonecraft, and when teaching graduate students at Queen’s University in the late 1980s he focused entirely on the 1790s, devoting considerable attention to this first Jacobin feminist.

His review of Tomlin is vintage Thompson. It refuses readings of Wollstonecraft, Right and Left, that incarcerate her in the category, “Extraordinary Woman.” It refuses to submerge Wollstonecraft in the condensation of either philistine sexism (which abounded in the anonymous anti-radical pamphleteering of the 1790s, bordering on hate literature, and has survived in our time, as an outrageous review of Tomlin’s book by Richard Cobb confirms) or the accommodations of contemporary politics (whereby commitment to revolution and the demand that utopian possibility be imagined and grasped are treated as beyond the progressive pale). It refuses to hive off Wollstonecraft’s life into an understatement of the immense accomplishment of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), or an overstatement, dripping with censoriousness, of Wollstonecraft’s personal blunders, as if most of us, in our adherence to pristine human relationships, do not fall into our share of subjective holes. In short, Thompson refuses much of the mainstream cant of “Poor Mary”!?! He demands no special pleadings, just as he insists on historicized recognition of accomplishment. The closing paragraph of this review of Tomlin is the essential Thompson: politically demanding, historically situated, a side taken with passion, an insistence on what it is right to refuse and resist.

We have rarely seen her equal in our history. To Tomlin’s mature assessment, I prefer infinitely the words of Virginia Woolf, where she speaks of ‘the high-handed and hot-blooded manner in which she cut her way to the quick of life’. And as Woolf well knew, high-handedness brings down its revenges. Wollstonecraft was prepared for these; but what she does not deserve is the revenge of “Poor Mary”! emblazoned across a complacent press. She needs no one’s condescension. She was poor in nothing. She was never beaten. And the final evidence lies in that part of her which remained a child to the end of the chapter. For that part of her—the refusal to become careful and ‘knowing’, the resilient assent to new experience is exactly that part which most of us are careful to cauterise, and then to protect with the callouses of our world-wise complicities. (191) And, of course, what Thompson said of Wollstonecraft could well, with a few adjustments here and there, be said of him.

He had the high-handed and hot-blooded manner in him, to be sure. It certainly brought down its revenges. Thompson was the object of much attack, and he accepted this, up to a point, with good grace. But when lines were crossed, when conservatives castigated his radicalism with oddly out of place reference to his “considerable wealth” or radical feminists charged him with exploiting his wife in his publication activities, he was rightly resentful, as was Dorothy. I have never understood the caricatures of Thompson on the Left, where one of
Britain’s great internationalists has often been dubbed a “Little Englander”. Jealousy explains much of this. But particularly irksome have been the carping of so many who, in abandoning radicalism to settle into some comfortable middle ground, find Thompson’s conscience a burr under their forward-riding saddles, best removed with the tweezers of a superior, often postmodern, conceptual apparatus. But Thompson, like Wollstonecraft, has never been beaten, can never be understood as poor, and refused, to his end, to succumb to the temptations of the worldly-wise, to be complacent in the face of that which he knew to be repugnant, fake, or inflated with academic pomposity. Compared to his critics, and against any standard we would choose to employ, this was precisely why he was great, and remains so a decade past his death. It is why the essentials in this book still matter, some of them written fifty years ago.

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Putting together a reader from the polymorphously diverse writings of a formidably creative, dissident writer who reflects in his or her sensibility and voice the defining compass of the times that he or she has lived through and, moreover, helped remake is an unenviable task of tribute fraught with inevitable omissions and haunting incompletion. In his obituary on C. Wright Mills, his trans-Atlantic friend and comrade of the international New Left, Edward Thompson recognized that it was Mill’s “style, rather than a comprehensive theory of social process . . . the style of a responsible and catholic eclectic” that he successfully attained in his late years and remains his enduring legacy. Thompson was able to make greater strides in achieving, if not a “comprehensive theory of social process,” a poetically incandescent, empirically textured way of reading this social process from the perspective of the English plebeians, artisans, and commoners, most famously with *The Making of the English Working Class*. Noting that in America *The Making of the English Working Class* “had both a Movement reading and an Academic reading,” Peter Linebaugh, a former student of Thompson’s, has stressed its function as “an iconic text in some ways in the Movement . . . a text of particular class composition and a particular political moment” that also became among the students “a shield for the troops in this strategy, protecting us from the shafts and cuts of the Old Boy Network” of US higher education in the 1960s. Thirty-five years later, under the specter of another “particular class composition,” we may ask ourselves if *The Essential E.P. Thompson* can bid us to undertake new readings of the last “great bustard” and to pitch them against the neoliberal imperial Behemoth that encircles us today wherever we turn our eyes.

In the closing of the classic 1963 “Preface” to *The Making*, Thompson wrote, “Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won.” Thirty years later, in his introductory chapter to *Customs in Common* (unfortu-
nately not included in *The EEPT*), Thompson invoked Asia and Africa again, albeit on a less optimistic note:

The industrial revolution and accompanying demographic revolution were the backgrounds to the greatest transformation in history, in revolutionizing “needs” and in destroying the authority of customary expectations . . . If we need a utilitarian apologia for our historical enquiry into custom—but I think we do not—it might be found in the fact that this transformation, this remodeling of “need” and this raising of the threshold of material expectations (along with the devaluation of traditional cultural satisfactions) continues with irreversible pressure today, accelerated everywhere by universally available means of communication. These pressures are now felt among one billion Chinese, as well as countless millions in Asian and African villages.

I say “less optimistic” because, further on, Thompson considers the likelihood of defying these pressures to remake human nature according to “a new kind of customary consciousness” that might break asunder the Promethean shackles of capitalist and state communist “economic man” as “not . . . likely to happen,” perhaps equivalent to the act of “whistl[ing] into a typhoon.” In 1992, we heard just such a whistling against what Subcommandante Marcos called “the first wind” from above—Thompson’s “typhoon”—reverberate from Chiapas into “the second wind” from below as the Zapatistas declared war against the 500-year-old “economic man” whose latest guise went under the dissimulating moniker of neoliberalism. This whistling wind swept through the streets of Seattle in late 2000 as the anti-neoliberal-globalizers took the war back to the hegemonic home country where neoliberalism was born. *Customs in Common*, if read collectively within this contemporary context, may yield us a Movement reading that made *The Making* come so vividly alive for the social struggles of the previous generation.

Such a new Movement reading, initially coming upon *The Essential E.P. Thompson*, might take at its point of departure *Customs in Common*’s “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century”; this chapter rescues popular riots from the condescension of our ruling ideologues who fetishistically cast these complex forms of popular direct action as “simple responses to economic stimuli.” And, from Thompson’s critical reconsideration of “moral economy” as a communal antithesis to the enclosing cupidity of the market economy, we may draw sustenance to plot renewed direct actions against the IMF and World Bank in strategic solidarity with food rioters still engulfing the world, from Indonesia to Venezuela. “The Grid of Inheritance” can offer us a method of redefining the existing inheritance system of corporate capitalist private property as “property in the usufruct, or a place within a complex gradation of coincident use-rights,” inducing us to contemplate means of radically reversing the decomposition of not only eighteenth-century English customary tenure rights but those of the global commons today, from Palestine and Africa.
to East Timor and Latin America, that are confronted by the “New Enclosures” of structural-adjustment and military imperialist policies. We can adopt “The Crime of Anonymity” that carefully analyzes the “anonymous threatening letter” as “a characteristic form of social protest in any society which has crossed a certain threshold of literacy” to decipher the limits and possibilities of contemporary cyber-class-war wherein anonymous hackers can leave defiant messages, spread computer viruses, and generate havoc within corporate and state memory banks. And, at a time when large sections of the Left and social justice groups employ the language of international law and human rights to critique the aggressive malfeasance that the US-and-NATO-centered Empire perpetrates, we can ponder on Thompson’s critical appreciation of “The Rule of Law” as “a cultural achievement of universal significance” that may stay the hands of the ruling class even as they distort and misuse it to their own ends. “The Rule of Law” prods us to works out our own solutions—on the terrain of the twenty-first century—to the historical paradox of eighteenth-century English rulers who surrendered to their law instead of shattering “their own self-image” by repudiating “150 years of constitutional legality” and thus “threw retrospective light back on the history of their class and retrieved for it something of its honour.”

Perhaps it is possible for us to retrieve the honor of our own class by retracing the origins of feudal and bourgeois legal discourse to the popular consciousness and customary practices of the ancient commons in so-called prehistory, under whose mythical and ecological memory (characterized as the “Tao”) the personified collectivity known as Lao-Tze wrote: “The more rules you have, the more unhappy people are;/And the more weapons there are, the worse things happen./The more we want luxuries, the more we abandon simplicity—/And the more laws you pass, the more we will break them” and, on the limits of “rule of law” from above, “A legal man acts judiciously/But he is still serving his own ends./And the rigid man uses laws/And if people don’t like it, force./If the true Tao is lost/then morality takes its place (141). Many of the commons that form the basis of contemporary “Asian and African villages” still retain the “Tao” or the unwritten, non-statist “rule of law” from below, and they face, as Thompson said, the same pressures of capitalist market revolution that assaulted the eighteenth-century English villages.

If, for example, we take Japan, one of the most enclosed and modernized of these villages and whose peculiarities rival those of the English, we find that even here The EEPT can serve as a fertile resource for rethinking its history. Weighing in on the “academic battlefield” of scholarship on the Industrial Revolution in “Exploitation” (a defining “structuralist statement” in The Making, according to Thompson), Thompson contrasted the “classical catastrophic orthodoxy” that, with the common syllogistic thesis of “steam power and the cotton-mill = new working class,” stressed the economically revolutionary and disruptive nature of this historical moment with the then “new anti-catastrophic orthodoxy” that, with empirically cautious, statistical circumspection, shifted the terrain of debate to the continuity of economic growth throughout the period.
Thompson’s attacks on the first for its tendency to assume an “automatic, or over-direct correspondence between the dynamic of economic growth and the dynamic of social or cultural life” and the latter for its “moral complacency, a narrowness of reference, and an insufficient familiarity with the actual movements of the working people of the time” are also applicable for the postwar developments in Japanese historiography.

Until the 1960s, the prevailing orthodox Marxist and modernization schools of scholarship have disagreed over the late-nineteenth-to-early-twentieth-century Japanese “Industrial Revolution” along similar lines as the catastrophic and anti-catastrophic orthodoxies in English history, prompting the emergence of grassroots rebellion that took the form of “people’s history” (minshū-shi). As Irokawa Daikichi, a leading practitioner of this “people’s history,” wrote: “We advanced our studies as both a critique of the times and a movement, according to this problem consciousness [posing as “a doubt and challenge against the mainstream of our country’s postwar historiography, namely Marxist (historical materialism) and modernist historiographies”]. Although often grounded organically in popular activism and excavation of regional histories through ethnological, oral methods—e.g., democratically participatory scholarship and organizing in the fishing village of Minamata which devastatingly suffered the effect of corporate mercury poisoning as well as among various Ainu and Buraku communities—its wholesale rejection of Marxism has tended to brunt the class dimensions of the histories and social relations that it constructively rescued.

The excerpts from Thompson’s The Making of the English Working Class in The Essential E. P. Thompson, to say nothing of the entire book, can then still serve as a model to redress the limitations and strengthen the merits of this “people’s history.” Reading “Class Consciousness”—the book’s coda that explores the indigenous intellectual and cultural traditions of English popular Radicalism in the first half of the nineteenth century—under the “Satanic light” of Japanese popular radical traditions, we find ourselves reassessing the dynamics of the late-nineteenth-century jiyū-minken undō (“Freedom and Popular Rights Movement”), as Irokawa’s own seminal Meiji seishin-shi (History of Meiji Mentality) did. Observing the split within this Movement between its reformist wing, centering on the urban bourgeoisie, that incorporated British parliamentarian ideas and its village-based radical democratic wing influenced by the French revolutionary tradition, we can comparatively situate the proponents of English Radicalism, such as William Cobbett, Richard Carlile, John Gast, and John Wade, as useful points of reference for their counterparts among the jiyū-minken radicals, such as the civil libertarian Nakamura Keiu, democratic radical journalist Nakae Chōmin, the footloose writer Kitamura Tōkoku, and radical constitutionalist Ueki Emori; follow the popular armed insurrections in the 1880s that developed out of the militant elements among the latter in Chichibu, Kabazan, Gunma, and Handa, which attacked the local police and moneylenders with the aim of overthrowing despotism and establish a free government; connect these struggles to the earlier ones of 1860s Yanaoshi and Ecijanaika mil-
lenarian peasant movements as well as to the 1870s anti-privatization peasant rebellions against the New Meiji state; and reconsider on its own terms the popular genealogy of radical Emperor-centered ideas and practices that modern Japanese scholarship, including that of minshū-shi, have tended to dismiss as reactionary or insufficiently democratic, tracing the historical roots of the Emperor system’s prevailing power over the popular imagination and revolutionary ideas to its hegemonic capacity to incorporate the folk Shinto mythologies and rituals of the Japanese commons.

It is possible to turn this hegemony on its head if we look, for example, at the major Japanese participants in the pan-Asian revolutionary nationalist movements from the turn of the century to the 1920s, such as Kita Ikki and Miyazaki Tōten. Kita’s father was an activist in the Freedom and People’s Rights Movement; Miyazaki’s brothers, while imbibing Rousseauian ideas, participated in the restorationist military struggles of Satsuma samurai against the central Bakufu government. Kita became the theoretical forefather of the Japanese radical right—whose tactics of assassinations and anticapitalist conceptions of the land parallel in some fundamental ways those of the nineteenth-century Russian Narodniki—and maintained close relationship with the antiwar socialist and anarchist Kōtōku Shūsui who, in turn, forged international links with the American Wobblies. Both Miyazaki and Kita actively aided the Chinese nationalist movement under Sun Yat-sen’s leadership and exhibited in their writings and activism an indigenously Romantic ethos of radical loyalist hatred for social injustice and communist sympathy for the peasantry.

In order to reclaim this tradition that suffered obliteration and institutional co-optation under the modern militarist and capitalist state in Japan, Thompson’s exemplary reading of the Romantic roots of William Morris’s socialism is of considerable value. Thompson characterized Morris’s “attempt to invent (or re-invent) a language which would put at a distance Victorian society” according to “his stubborn attachment to Keatsian and pre-Raphaelite notions of ‘Beauty’” as “rash” and judged its premises “wrong” but at the same time recognized Morris’s “youthful Romantic rebellion [as] not a rebellion of individual sensibility against ‘society,’ but a rebellion of value, or aspiration, against actuality.” We witness in the struggles of Kita, Miyazaki, Kōtōku, and others following the generation of the Freedom and People’s Rights Movement just such a retrenched, internationalist “rebellion of value, or aspiration, against” the actuality of emergent Japanese industrial capitalism and bureaucratization of state power even as we critically acknowledge their limitations. This dialectically committed style that suggested Marxism to “close down one counter in its universal pharmacy, and cease dispensing potions of analysis to cure the maladies of desires” and “allow a little space, not only for literary Utopians, but also for the unprescribed initiatives of everyday men and women who, in some part of themselves, are also alienated and utopian by turns” would be an essential one to emulate in rereading this historically critical moment at the birth of the modern Japanese working class and pan-Asian revolutionary struggles from below.

For, no less than so for Mills, it is above all Thompson’s style—infectiously
polemical, metaphorically supple, relentlessly detailed with more than a few recalcitrant *iskra* of archival fever, and paradoxically luminous with antinomian, moral energy—that irresistibly draws us in and vigorously stirs us to continue fighting for what he meant by another name. I have sketchily conjectured here that one such “another name” may be the anti-neoliberal-globalization movement that sprang up from the fiery fountainheads of the Zapatista and Seattle, along with the struggle to rewrite a sort of Japanese—and, by implication, world—history from below that wrestles with the customary practices and popular laws of the commons as the revolutionary fulcrum of the new global proletariat that may cut through the historically structured Gordian knot of contemporary capitalism.

We may thus bring together, with incendiary intent, both the Movement and Academic readings of Thompson for a renewed conjuncture of the international New Left that is already struggling under other names, categories, and possibilities that some of its predecessors may not recognize and even find misguided according to a set of obsolescent ideas that still bind them in the night of the political living dead. The polemically sardonic fire encased in crystalline rational analysis and unclouded stocktaking—found among the pieces collected in the last section “Reading and Writing History”—furnishes us with a model of a style for surviving this night of combat; it is a style that sagaciously defended the historical materialist logic from Althusserian “static, anti-historical structure” while admonishing that “radical history should not ask for any privilege of any kind” and that such a history “demands the most exacting standards of the historical discipline” and “must be good as history can be.” *The Essential E.P. Thompson* gives us a necessarily imperfect, intensely illuminating selection of texts for us to arm ourselves in the coming wars against “unreason, or . . . the reasons of power and the reasons of money,” in and outside academia, and, no less importantly, to recommence arguing with the undisputedly inspired tank commander of historical materialist reasoning and Muggletonian Marxist imagination who had inimitably penned these writings, as he would have wanted us to.

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