

Bryan D. Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London and New York: Verso 1994).

There is little doubt that E.P. Thompson will be the subject of a fully realized biography at some point in the future but the short work under consideration acts as both homage to an intellectual mentor and as a stop-gap until the time arrives for the major work. Bryan Palmer has produced a work which demonstrates his regard for Thompson the man and the historian, and a work which will prove invaluable for students facing Thompson for the first time. Palmer approaches Thompson with respect and admiration; sentiments which are suggestive of his lengthy close personal relationship with his subject and examines Thompson's work and life with intellectual integrity. He is observant and aware at all times of the influences working upon his subject; particularly those which operate at the political level and yet he wisely eschews any attempt to evaluate the residual effects of Thompson's relationship with his father or his father's religion. He also does not shy away from the tougher edges of Thompson's character; a toughness which involved him in many a polemical battle and which manifested itself in much of his historical writing. Thompson was no saint and never seems to have shied away from a fight but he was also generous with his time offering his hospitality to a wide variety of people and his critical response to even more. Through a careful and critical examination of Thompson's work as political activist and especially as historian, Palmer gives us a highly articulate rendering of the life of one of the post-war generation's most important English intellectuals.

What better way to remember such a vital and full life; a life which demonstrates a range of activities unequaled by most intellectuals during the past fifty years. Writer, poet, historian, social, political and peace activist and one of the best known and highly regarded men in Britain during the 1980s. This was a man who believed that you had to act in order to make a difference and there is little doubt that his influence represented a stirring motivation to people all over the world. The peace movement was a tribute to

Thompson's intense activism and the need to make a difference; it also represented the continuation of his political objections which had appeared in a variety of journals since the 1950s and which saw in Thatcher and Reagan a significant threat of nuclear war. He continued to attack the assumptions of a state which was forever encroaching upon the rights of individuals; rights which he viewed in historical perspective and which he believed were suffering increasingly debilitating effects in the face of state interventions into the justice system and the desire of governments, both Tory and Labour, to streamline that system and eliminate criticism and opposition.

From his earliest days Thompson was involved in various forms of opposition. His father, Edward John Thompson, was a Methodist missionary whose life in India was far more involved in education and understanding and promoting Indian independence than in missionary zeal. Since his father was a friend of Nehru and other Congress leaders, Thompson was exposed to criticisms of imperialism from an early age. Later, as a student at Cambridge, he joined the Communist Party and became passionately involved in the anti-fascist crusade, fighting as a tank commander in Italy and then returning to Cambridge after the war. Thompson never took a post-graduate degree, instead he found his way into the adult education program at Leeds University which was expanding in the post-war years and which was to be both his work and his inspiration for the next seventeen years. Meeting workers with a variety of experience and seeking to learn from them as much as to teach them, Thompson began the movement away from the CP which culminated in the break after 1956. Reason and experience were the guide, not dogma. The first major publication, the book on William Morris, was an essential part of the process which took Thompson away from the party and party practices. It was socialism with a human face and one which recognized the necessity of transforming man concomitantly with the attempt to change society.

Teaching at Leeds also prompted research into the effects of the Industrial Revolution and the work which appeared in 1963 challenged the complacency of all academic work on the subject. *The*

Making of the English Working Class was a monumental intervention into academic history and at the same time changed it forever. Drawing fire from all quarters, the book nevertheless became one of the most influential ever written on the subject. Thompson found himself moving more and more into historical writing and produced several pieces of equally influential writing on the eighteenth century. The work on the crowd and relations with the gentry and the book on the Black Act all helped to alter perceptions of the underside of society during the eighteenth century. Again he received criticism from the academy but he continued to produce work which was influential and well received by a younger generation. His teaching position at Warwick University brought him closer to these students but it was writing that really interested him. After 1970 writing came first and until the peace movement of the early 1980s, Thompson researched and thought about William Blake, intervened in the arguments on the left regarding the role of theory and practice firing off a massive broadside against Parisian Marxism in *The Poverty of Theory*, and continued his jousts against the state.

The peace movement brought a public awareness of Thompson the charismatic speaker and passionate defender of rights against the presumptions of the state and what he felt was the path to certain nuclear destruction with the cruise missile program. Like very few other intellectuals before him, Thompson assumed a public persona which made him a household name. Yet this was also a period during which his health, not always sound at the best of times, began to give out. Constant travel and little sleep created a debilitating environment and Thompson became ill by the late 1980s. He faded even more during the years leading to his death in 1993 but he managed to complete the work on Blake which was published posthumously.

This is a relatively short work but one into which Palmer manages to pack a great deal of thoughtful analysis regarding Thompson the historian and through which the man emerges as a well rounded and committed human being. The key to Thompson's character must surely be found in two dominant influences in his

intellectual life: Blake, whose maxim “He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence,” encouraged action and that of Marx “To leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality.” Until the arrival of the full biography this is a book which presents the essential Thompson, with his virtues and his faults.

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Robert J. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge 1995).

Colonial Desire examines conceptions of race, culture, civilization, hybridity and sexuality through their development in Victorian England and America. These concepts are shown to have emerged in a complex manifold of myth, religion, science, and superstition during the height of colonialism. They were foundational to the development of the West’s self-image as the global civilizing force, and were thus structurally critical to the enterprise of colonial oppression. These concepts do indeed form a web since they are mutually supportive in composing the colonial image of race, culture and sexuality. What is truly fascinating in the book is that Young is able to show that while these structures served to legitimate the drive for English global cultural supremacy, they at the same time fueled a desire for inter-racial sex. This desire propelled an image of English culture, for Victorian England in turn defined itself by its repulsion towards this desire. Desire for a kind of hybridity, miscegenation, is thus shown in constant tension with the disgust of the alien, inferior other — the black races. This tension lies at the heart of a certain conception of “Englishness,” and destabilizes it. This is Young’s overall thesis — that culture, in the nineteenth century and now, is racially defined at the margins where the potent desire for inter-racial sex along with its taboos are located. It is here, in cultural hybridity, that colonial conceptions of culture are found, and are shown to be inherently unstable.