

Dorothy Thompson and the Thompsonian Project

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Dorothy Thompson, née Towers (1923-2011), known to her friends as Dotty, was a highly distinctive person and historian. Her unique qualities have already been warmly commemorated in a number of obituaries and tributes,² and there are more to follow.³

This brief appreciation takes a different approach. It assesses Dorothy Thompson's contribution to what can be termed the 'Thompsonian project'. Of course, no such schema ever existed in any official sense. Yet Dorothy shared for most of her adult life a great emotional, physical, and intellectual partnership with her fellow historian Edward Thompson (1924-93).

¹ This account draws upon the author's personal friendship with Dorothy Thompson since they met in October 1968 as colleagues in the History Department of Birmingham University. The text is also to be published on *Historical Materialism* website (2012).

² Sheila Rowbotham, 'Dorothy Thompson Obituary', *The Guardian*, 7 Feb. 2011; further appreciation by Penelope J. Corfield, *The Guardian*, 25 Feb. 2011. See also Penelope J. Corfield, 'Dorothy Thompson and Birmingham', in *Centre for West Midlands History Newsletter* (August, 2011), pp. 2-3; and contributions by Stephen Roberts and Owen Ashton.

³ See papers at same Conference session by Bryan Palmer, scheduled to appear in *History Workshop Journal*; and by Owen Ashton, now published in *Labour History Review*, 76/3 (Dec. 2011), pp. 227-8. Other tributes in that journal also come from Joan Allen, Joe White and James A. Epstein.

He too was utterly distinctive. The charismatic Edward Palmer Thompson, who published as E.P. Thompson to differentiate himself from his father,⁴ echoed his literary parent by remaining a rather old-fashioned man of letters: writing poetry, letters, and a novel. But he was more prolific and much more of a polymath. Thus E.P. Thompson became an outstanding historian, public intellectual, socialist theoretician, and peace campaigner.⁵

Edward and Dorothy wed in 1948, after the speedy ending of her first marriage. There followed a joint personal and intellectual odyssey. He cannot have been easy to live with, as Edward often had volcanic shifts in moods and political hopes. At times, he joyously predicted the regeneration of the left. At many other times, he darkly foresaw the coming apocalyptic devastation of the left and the destruction of human rights. He polemicised urgently, both publicly and in private letters. The Hegelian dialectic of rejecting the views of a named individual helped E.P. Thompson to clarify his own thoughts. However, the recipients of his wrath did not always appreciate it. He thus made friends with ease but also shed various political allies on the left.

Often, for all his charisma, fame, and international networks of friends, Edward Thompson was intellectually a lonely figure. After he quit his post at Warwick University in 1971, he remained a freelance, albeit punctuating his time with some teaching fellowships in the USA. His working life was solitary,

⁴ See Edward John Thompson (1886-1946), *Rabindranath Tagore: Life and Work* (Calcutta and London, 1921) – reissued many times; as well as E.P. Thompson, *Alien Homage: Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore* (Oxford University Press: Delhi, 1993); and Uma das Gupta (ed.), *A Difficult Friendship: Letters of Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore, 1913-40* (Oxford University Press: Delhi, 2003).

⁵ See variously Harvey Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (Cambridge, 1984); Harvey Kaye and Keith McClelland (eds), *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (London 1990); Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History* (Toronto, 1981); idem, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (New York, 1994); assessments of EPT by Robin Blackburn, Penelope J. Corfield and Peter Linebaugh in *New Left Review*, 201 (1993), pp. 3-25; and Scott Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory: E.P. Thompson, The New Left, and Postwar British Politics* (Manchester, 2011).

based at the Thompson's grand house at Wick Episcopi, outside Worcester. This relative isolation made a sharp contrast to his early teaching for the WEA in Halifax; and to the urban environs of Cheltenham, which followed Halifax.⁶

Throughout all these permutations, Dorothy Thompson was steadfast. Her notable inner calm was a powerful and necessary antidote to Edward's turbulence. The marriage itself was not without inner tensions at times. Which personal alliance is not? Indeed, how many relationships with EPT could remain entirely tranquil? But the Thompsons' personal loyalties and intellectual partnership never faltered.

What they were trying to do was both to write *and* to live a left-wing political commitment. Dorothy's chosen form for writing was history. Edward's included history but his remit also extended to socialist theorising, political commentary and literary works.

Especially over time, they became strongly committed to writing their histories to a rigorous professional standard. E.P. Thompson was galvanised by reactions to his best-selling *The Making of the English Working-Class* (1963; and still in print). He got what he called a 'generous but critical reception in the academic press'. Five years later, he added a detailed postscript to *The Making's* second edition,⁷ in which he conceded a number of points, while firmly reiterating his overall case. After that, he once told me, he was determined to make his intellectual position as professionally water-tight as possible. Dorothy, who always wrote more slowly and painstakingly, strongly concurred. They disdained 'mere' historical propaganda. What they wanted to write was robust left-wing history that would withstand professional criticism.

⁶ There is scope for a personal biography of E.P. Thompson, which Dorothy Thompson during her lifetime always opposed. Alternatively, perhaps the best outcome would be a joint biography of the two of them within the marriage, turbulence and all.

⁷ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968 edn), pp. 916-44; and quotation, p. 917.

Equally, both were simultaneously committed to grass-roots activism, campaigning in left-wing politics within Britain and in the pan-European movement for Nuclear Disarmament (END) between 1982 and 1991.⁸ It was an intensive life-style commitment, which, incidentally, put considerable pressure upon their writing time. All this, while the Thompsons were bringing up three lively children. And then, once they were grown, Dorothy Thompson was working as an academic in the History Department at Birmingham University.⁹ Again, it was her inner calm, plus her resolute efficiency, which proved to be bedrock qualities for them both.

Above all, the Thompsons were committed to their lives of writing and campaigning within an evolving Marxist framework. They were not just left-wingers. They were, at first, joyously partisan members of the communist party. And, after 1956, when they resigned their membership, they continued to seek for a non-communist Marxism. They had a tolerant but distinctly dismissive attitude to ‘comrades’ who worked within the Labour Party. Their aim, as articulated primarily by Edward Thompson, was to update and humanise Marxism. They believed that it would grow as an ideology. Marxism should eradicate its conceptual and organisational weaknesses but retain its core values. In that way, the Thompsons hoped to live within the flowering of a truly revolutionary *Zeitgeist*, which they hoped also to influence.

To these tasks, Edward Thompson brought his originality as a thinker, his determination to pursue arguments through to the end, and his immense passion. He was both an historian and a Marxist theoretician. Meanwhile, Dorothy

⁸ See the END appeal in E.P. Thompson and Dan Smith (eds), *Protest and Survive: A Penguin Special* (London, 1980); and context in Lawrence S. Wittner, *Toward Nuclear Abolition: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1971 to the Present* (Stanford, 2003).

⁹ See the already cited *Centre for West Midlands History Newsletter* (August, 2011).

Thompson, like other friends among the Marxist historians (such as Christopher and Bridget Hill), was not at all interested in writing anything that might be dubbed ‘Theory’. She was quick to decide upon other people’s intellectual standpoints. Indeed, she could be quite sharp in verbal confrontations.¹⁰ Yet she resolutely steered clear of both abstraction and polemics in her writing.

Furthermore, Dorothy often declared that her gifts as a historian were inferior to those of Edward. She was not as original as he; and she did not resent it. So there was no direct competition between them. Edward had ‘Theory’ to himself and led the way in ‘History’. The public fame – and the criticism and opprobrium – came to him. If there was an element of unintended competition, it appeared in terms of their respective speeds of writing. Dorothy was always the tortoise. She struggled, while he wrote not only rapidly but with great linguistic versatility. The contrast must sometimes have been galling for her. Nonetheless, she persevered. And once she had produced her big book in 1984, entitled *The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution*,¹¹ she relaxed. By then, she was sixty. She and he both knew what she could achieve. The partnership had worked intellectually for her as well as for him.

So what were Dorothy Thompson’s specific contributions to the Thompsonian project, since their aims were conjoint? One answer must be her continual and unflappable inner calm, which had an intellectual as well as personal bearing upon their work. E.P. Thompson’s mental world was volcanic in its explosive power, with a marked strand of melodrama. Dorothy’s

¹⁰ Dorothy’s directness sometimes led her into sharp and/or abrupt face-to-face confrontations, which could surprise some meeting her for the first time. She did not intend personal hurt, although both the Thompson’s intensity could sometimes have that effect.

¹¹ Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution* (1984). This study was preceded by J.F.C. Harrison and Dorothy Thompson (eds), *Bibliography of the Chartist Movement, 1837-1976* (Hassocks, 1978); and the essays in Dorothy Thompson and James Epstein (eds), *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working-Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830-60* (London, 1982). Her big book was then followed by Stephen Roberts and Dorothy Thompson (eds), *Images of Chartism* (Woodbridge, 1998).

steadiness provided calm and ballast. As the two of them continually discussed history, politics, and Marxism, she was the down-to-earth questioner and critic on the hearth, while he exploded with ideas.

One example bears repetition.¹² In E.P. Thompson's study entitled *Whigs and Hunters* (1975), he wrote about an egregious example of eighteenth-century class-biased legislation. The book then ended with a final section discussing the rule of law generically.¹³ A simple reader might have expected to find a denunciation of the legal system as class-based and oppressive. Yet E.P. Thompson instead offered a ringing endorsement of the rule of law – individual bad laws and poorly functioning court systems notwithstanding. Both Edward and Dorothy separately told me that this section was prompted by Dorothy's probing. She felt that a duty to challenge was part of her dissenting (Huguenot) heritage.¹⁴ It was very much her teaching style too. She sought to prod people to thought, not to create cloned followers. Fittingly, therefore, her students named the *Festschrift*, published in her honour, as *The Duty of Discontent*.¹⁵

Needless to say, Edward returned the compliment by critiquing Dorothy's work in turn. Their joint distillation from his fizz and her quizzical questioning worked intellectually for them both.

A second key element that Dorothy brought to their project was her sensitivity to gender issues. Both the Thompsons were committed to bringing

¹² This example is referenced in Penelope J. Corfield's review of Scott Hamilton's *Crisis of Theory*, in electronic *Reviews in History: IHR London – featured review no 1137* (29 Sept. 2011): see URL <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1137>.

¹³ E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origins of the Black Act* (1975), pp. 258-69.

¹⁴ 'The Personal and the Political: Dorothy Thompson Interviewed by Sheila Rowbotham', *New Left Review*, 1/200 (July-Aug. 1993).

¹⁵ Owen Ashton, Robert Fyson and Stephen Roberts (eds), *The Duty of Discontent: Essays for Dorothy Thompson* (London, 1995).

empathy into their study of the past. They hated arid Marxist doctrines, just as they disliked the impersonal trends invoked by economic historians or sociologists. All such abstractions made no reference to real historical people. Hence their joint credo was encapsulated by E.P. Thompson. He wrote, in a much-quoted phrase in the Preface to *Making*, that his aim was to rescue the unknown and often despised radicals, protesters, and eccentrics of history ‘from the enormous condescension of posterity’.¹⁶ Dorothy strongly agreed.

Nonetheless, it was obvious from his writings that Edward Thompson was chiefly interested in the male artisan workforce and, particularly, in men like John Thelwall, who were active radical campaigners. It was not a case of misogyny. Edward Thompson was not one of those fusty male scholars who seriously dislike women. He was a decided feminist. He also enjoyed the company of women and expected much from them. Quite possibly it was the pressure of his expectations that weighed upon Dorothy, when she began her own academic career and was struggling to write.¹⁷ Yet Edward Thompson’s historical focus was chiefly upon men. And it was not their ‘masculinity’ which preoccupied him. He was completely uninterested in questions of ‘identity’, which have recently been very fashionable among historians. Edward’s focus was always upon ideas and the struggle between classes. That for him was the central dynamic, which he sought to explore historically.

By contrast, Dorothy Thompson was genuinely interested in questions of gender. She was generally sympathetic to the so-called ‘second-wave’ feminism in the later 1960s and 1970s. And she enjoyed reading and debating works like

¹⁶ Thompson, *Making*, p. 12.

¹⁷ After his initial study of *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (published London, 1955; reissued New York, 1961; 1976), Edward Thompson moved his historical focus back to the 1790s-1820s and thereafter further backwards into the eighteenth century, since he considered the 1830s onwards to be allocated by their unofficial pact to Dorothy.

Hidden from History, by her younger friend Sheila Rowbotham.¹⁸ It is important to stress, however, that Dorothy was not a feminist hard-liner. She did not accept that all women constituted a separate ‘class’, with a common interest against all men. Nor was she an ‘essentialist’, believing in ‘essential’ differences between the male and female of the human species.¹⁹ For her, economic divisions were more socially powerful than were shared gender identities. Indeed, *The Guardian* in the early 1970s once featured a debate between Dorothy Thompson and Sheila Rowbotham on precisely that point.²⁰ The exchange was amicable. There remained, however, a bedrock difference. Economic class, for the Thompsons, always trumped other alignments.

Having said that, Dorothy became something of a mediator between feminism and Marxism. Thus her book on Chartism paid careful attention not only to labour history, but also to the roles played by women as it did to the contributions of other ‘outsiders’ such as the Irish.²¹ She did not endorse a postmodernist preoccupation with identity as purely socially constructed. Dorothy always remained far too much of a materialist for that. Yet her angle of vision was wide and her interest in cultural and gender history grew increasingly eclectic. So it was less of a surprise than it initially seemed that

¹⁸ S. Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women’s Oppression and the Fight against It* (London, 1973).

¹⁹ An ‘essentialist’ interpretation was fairly widespread in the 1960s; but was later replaced by the ‘social constructionist’ viewpoint, which again could be overdone. See J. Lorber and S.A. Farrell, *The Social Construction of Gender* (London, 1991); and K. Crowley, *Feminism’s New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism* (Albany, NY, 2011). Some social psychologists still expound an essential mental difference, as in P.A. Hancock, *Cognitive Difference in the Ways Men and Women Perceive the Dimensions and Duration of Time: Contrasting Gaia and Chronos* (Lewiston, NY, 2010); and Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference: Men, Women and the Extreme Male Brain* (London, 2003).

²⁰ I kept a cutting of this exchange in *The Guardian* for some years but cannot now trace it.

²¹ See also Dorothy Thompson’s collection of essays *Outsiders: Class, Gender and Nation* (London, 1993).

Dorothy's next book was a study of Queen Victoria, subtitled *Gender and Power*.²² The interesting cross-tensions between femininity and monarchism, wifely submission and presidential primacy - all experienced by a woman at the top of the class structure - were expertly explored. Ultimately, Queen Victoria appeared as more of a conservative/monarch than she was a female/innovator. No startling revelation here. Nor had Dorothy expected to find one. It was the detailed analysis of how class and gender intersected that was of historical interest, contributing an important new element into the Thompsonian *oeuvre*.

Thirdly and lastly - in addition to her quizzical questioning and her gender awareness - Dorothy Thompson provided an unflinching emphasis upon 'grounded' history. Her mantra was 'back to the archive'.²³ All theory, from whatever perspective, was to be tested against the evidence. This viewpoint has for some years been coming back into favour. Dorothy would have agreed that a 'pure' empiricism is impossible. The facts don't 'speak for themselves'. A simple narrative of events would be nothing more than antiquarianism. (Indeed, positively unfair to antiquarians). Yet reliance upon 'pure' theory or abstract proposition, untested by historical evidence, was highly dangerous in the other direction. If historians already knew what they were going to find, then empirical research was wasted effort.

The answer was a constant dialectic between theory and evidence. Dorothy Thompson never argued this position theoretically. She simply enacted it, via her work as a teacher and scholar. In terms of studying the history of the Left, a 'grounded' source-based approach meant acknowledging the failures as well as successes of radical movements. It equally entailed analysing the

²² Dorothy Thompson, *Queen Victoria: Gender and Power* (London, 1990).

²³ In earlier times, the Marxist historian Dona Torr (1883-1957) influenced Christopher Hill and others in the Communist Historians Group with the same appeal. See Antony Howe, 'Dona Torr', in *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (London and Basingstoke, 1972-).

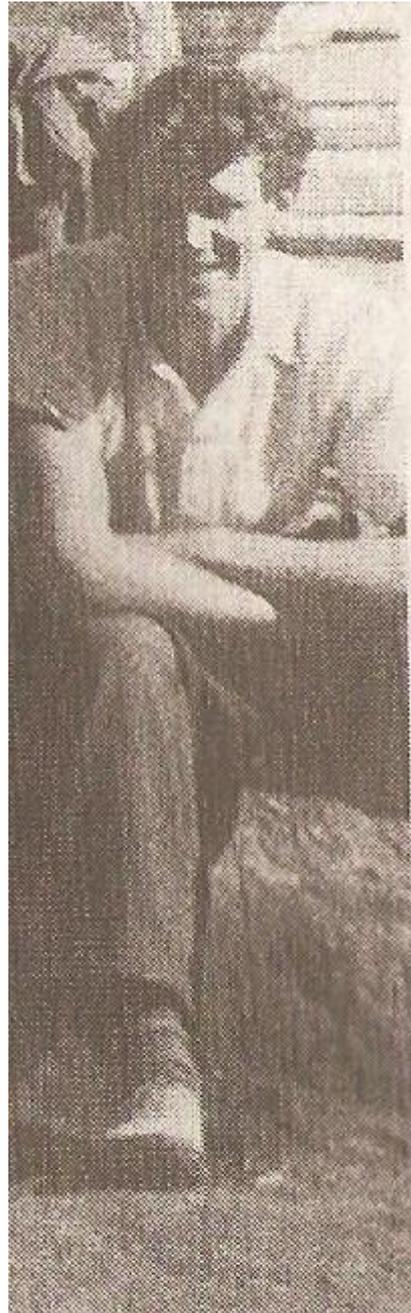
fissures within the working class, as well as their potential solidarity. The aim was a rounded portrait, with the ‘ideal’ and the ‘material’ worlds intertwined.

Ultimately, indeed, the research-based Thompsonian project led both the Thompsons to modify their Marxism. In 1956, they left the British Communist Party. E.P. Thompson then polemicised against Althusser’s depersonalised model of structural Marxism.²⁴ Instead, the Thompsonian project envisaged a humanist Marxism (sometimes called ‘cultural Marxism’). Yet both Dorothy and Edward found, by the end, that their quondam materialist approach was being steadily leavened into a broader holistic history. In his later years, Edward noted wryly that, when confronted by anti-Marxists, he defended Marxism, firmly. Yet when he met orthodox Marxists, he denounced them, angrily.²⁵

They were neither fully in nor fully out. In some ways, they were ‘post-Marxist’. They had evolved into liberal humanists with a continuing sympathy for life’s underdogs. Yet that seemed too vague. In fact, they never stabilised an alternative basis for a progressive ‘Left’ history. Nor were they alone in facing such dilemmas. From the mid-1970s onwards, the Left across Europe and in the USA found itself in political and theoretical disarray. Labour history became unfashionable. And Marxism as an ideology was hollowing out, damaged by its major flaws in practical application as well as by its theoretical rigidities. The Thompsons often despaired at the *Zeitgeist*. On the other hand, while they struggled with the outcomes, they lived the journey with passion and commitment – every inch of the way.

²⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory: And Other Essays* (London, 1978).

²⁵ See ‘E.P. Thompson – Interviewed by Penelope J. Corfield’, for *Nuffield Interviews with Historians* (1993); available on-line via the Institute of Historical Research History Lab: www.history.ac.uk/bookshop/interviews-historians/ep-thompson-penelope-corfield.



The young fellow-historians and life-long partners,
Dorothy Thompson (née Towers) and Edward Palmer (E.P.) Thompson:
photo of D.T. (undated) and of E.P.T. (Yugoslavia, 1947)

Musically speaking – to summarise with a tribute to Dorothy’s lifelong musicality – Dorothy Thompson provided the quizzical counterpoint and the gender harmony that accompanied the fireworks from the E.P. Thompson intellectual volcano. And, throughout, she insisted that the Thompsonian project must advance to the steady drumbeat of ‘grounded’ history.