

## Scottish Workers in History

Tuesday 23 February 2010, by [BUHLE Paul](#) (Date first published: January 2010).

**Review: *The Rousing of the Scottish Working Class 1774-2008*. By James D. Young, Glasgow: Clydeside Press ([www.clydesidepress.co.uk](http://www.clydesidepress.co.uk)), 2009, 277 pages, 10 pounds 50 pence, paperback.**

SO MUCH HAS happened to the world's working class in the last 30 years that we oldtimers may, perhaps, be forgiven for losing focus on the deeper histories of industrial life and struggle. Thanks to the publish-or-perish academic reality, ever more studies in social history actually appear, but fewer treat the labor movement as an important part of that history. Working people are more often seen as victims, too often self-victimized in myriad ways.

James D. Young has spent a lifetime of research and writing in the other direction, on his own native soil of Scotland. He has fought against stereotypes so enduring, between flattery and insult, that the fight is never over and to the outside world, perhaps not much progress has been made.

The recent fate of the Scottish working class amid industrialization, skyrocketing health problems, widespread clinical depression self-treated with alcohol and so on, is enough to break the heart of those who know the story of the Clydeside syndicalists and the socialist sympathies that held on for generations.

Young's own heart has, very likely, been broken many times. But he persists. Less sympathetic readers may view James Young as a Scot with a chip on his shoulder, and proud of it!

A blue-collar worker gone to college, long a teacher and active socialist, he turned his attentions decades ago to the untold and mis-told history of the Scottish working class. The whole saga, romanticized in the worst way by Sir Walter Scott while turned into a story of capitalism's brilliance by the followers of Adam Smith, made and still makes him pretty darn mad.

The volume in question is actually a reprint, from 1979, with added material. It should probably be read in tandem with what I take to be Young's best volume, *The Very Bastards of Creation: Scottish Institutional Radicalism, 1707-1995: a Biographical Study*. The two books have a similar virtue. So little was known of these subjects that Young is creating afresh as he moves along.

He reviles religious-based conservatism, common in that Presbyterian land, racism all too frequent, and a wide range of assorted symptoms that have one thing in common: wholehearted support of the British Empire. In his reconstruction of events and ideas, all Scottish history has been deformed by this impulse, and while individuals and groups have gained much materially, the mass have been crushed underfoot, demeaned by London sophisticates for three centuries as hicks and loonies, and the best hopes for Scotland as a society thus perverted.

Amazingly, the Scottish working class did more than hold on, and a literary class, however small and ill-treated, generously gave its best efforts to the cause. Speaking for my own ignorance, I hadn't known about the 1930s novelist Lewis Grassie Gibbon, who died young but left a magnificent trilogy, *A Scots Quair*, behind. So much else has been lost — but not entirely, because Young brings it back

to us.

There is a downside here and we would be wrong to ignore it. Young has a tendency to veer off course when he feels that his favorite causes have been demeaned, even by accident rather than by design.

His attack on the great socialist peace campaigner and historian E.P. Thompson is a case in point. This seems to me the classic case of an old grudge, dubious from the beginning and grown worse in time.

Young finds Thompson guilty for his world-historic social history, *The Making of the English Working Class*, a book that literally changed the nature of writing about working-class life. Thompson, the devotee of William Morris and part of the Communists' group of history scholars (he left the CPGB in 1956), had written about the English, and not about the Scottish or Irish.

Thompson's 700-page book was already rather long, but for Young the presumption of a radical "Englishness" sounded very much like cultural imperialism. The fact that *The Making of the English Working Class* had an iconic stature like C.L.R. James's *Black Jacobins*, read by many thousands of young people for generations (naturally, in Scotland as well as England) must have rankled.

There was a further irritant, less explicable, when Thompson sought to save the reputation of Marxism from the polemics of Polish exile philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, who was by then embracing capitalism with fervor. Anti-Stalinist Young found a club to beat Thompson, and does so again, citing the distinctly non-socialist historian Tony Judt.

James Young can and should be forgiven for these and other tangential polemics. Readers will find much to enjoy in this updated volume.

**Paul Buhle**

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