

# Commemorating a Classic of History - E. P. Thompson

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THE YEAR 1963 was momentous on many levels. In our previous issue (#165) we commemorated the assassination of civil rights organizer Medgar Evers, one among many martyrs of the bloody racist response to the growing civil rights movement. It was also the year of the military overthrow and assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem, the ruler of South Vietnam, in a coup approved by the administration of U.S. president John F. Kennedy, who would himself be assassinated in November.

Less noted but of great importance in the writing of working class history was the appearance of the classic work of Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class, 1780-1832*, viewing the violent transformation brought by the Industrial Revolution as it was experienced from below, in the lives of people being formed into a modern working class.

Too often considered solely as the product of an objective economic process that produced “progress” despite the attendant difficulties, in Thompson’s view, this working class needed to be understood as an agent of its own formation and coming to consciousness. Creatively and controversially, Thompson’s work developed this theme in ways that shaped a new generation of left and labor historians.

Against the Current has asked a number of historians to briefly assess Thompson’s work, its legacy and its impact on their own lives and careers. The first of these responses — Paul Buhle, Bruce Levine, Bryan Palmer and Ellen Meiksins Wood — appear here, and additional contributions are forthcoming in our next issue.

The Editors, *Against the Current*

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## P.S.

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