

# Remembering E.P. Thompson

Saturday 14 September 2013, by [BUHLE Paul](#) (Date first published: 1 September 2013).

A YOUTUBE VIDEO dating to 1982 surfaced some months ago, with E.P. Thompson and C.L.R. James discussing the exciting developments of the day.

Thompson, a leading figure in the European anti-missile/antiwar movement directed against Reagan's global madness but also closely in touch with East European dissidents, foresaw a potential radicalization on both sides of the Iron Curtain. James, in his last major initiative, hailed the achievement of Polish Solidarity, pushing against the very idea of representative government by demands for direct democracy from below.

These promising moments passed, of course, with the Cold War settled on very different terms: an outright surrender to Capitalism, with many an erstwhile hero (Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia at the top) turned into an amoral booster for State Department/CIA wars/invasions and the inevitable ideological justifications.

Still, seeing the two greatest living historians so long after we had lost them in life reminded me of how lucky I was to have known both at close range and to have fallen into becoming the authorized biographer of one — that is, James. Writing about Thompson here and there, most volubly in the *Village Voice*, was the best I could do in the other direction.

Edward had perhaps a year earlier spent a semester teaching at Brown University, and I had sat in upon a seminar, mostly about Wordsworth and Blake, and attended an incredible public lecture on the latter as a "Muggeltonian," a member of a radical Protestant sect whose ideas had been drawn from Emmanuel Swedenborg, that is indirectly from a big favorite of mine, the German mystic Jakob Bohme.

Blake's membership in the radical religious sect has been disputed by others, but Thompson was always after a larger point, the meeting-place of radicalism — political, cultural, intellectual and in every other imaginable sense. Soon enough, by the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century if not before, English poetry would depoliticize. But the inspiration of Revolution (in this case, the French Revolution) operates on the most poetic minds as well as the most political.

I'd first known of Thompson only a few years after *The Making of the English Working Class* was published. Radical graduate students in history, not just British labor history, rumored it to be the luminous Marxist text of the day, perhaps any day.

My journal *Radical America*, aimed mostly at SDSers, published an essay about the book in 1968. Meanwhile Madison circles buzzed with conversation about what it meant for U.S. labor history, just undergoing a shift from institutional-based histories toward the kind of close history of the working class that David Montgomery and Herbert Gutman were writing and teaching.

We began corresponding, Thompson and myself, because I needed a quote from him for the C.L.R. James *Anthology* (published as an issue of RA, 1970) and he supplied one, published earlier obscurely. Thompson wittily described C.L.R.'s insight as coming from somewhere that Americans could not understand: Cricket. A decade passed, and with it some notes back and forth. I was deeply

flattered that he had the time.

Perhaps then rather than later, I began to receive Christmas messages, mostly poems by E.P. It was like having him in the room. I was in the room, that is, an overnight guest of his parsonage-become-farm-homestead, the week after C.L.R. James died in 1989, because I was invited by British television to be part of a panel led by Tariq Ali. Looking back, I would remember more of the conversation if he had not supplied me with so much ale.

Now I recall that I was also on a mission: Verso editor and intellectual-at-large Robin Blackburn, whom I'd visited in the London office, asked me to raise the subject of a meeting (reconciliation?) between those who had parted politically in the 1960s and remained on distant if respectful terms. Did I succeed? I wonder. (Blackburn had accompanied me to visit James in Brixton, London a few years earlier, so perhaps my role was intellectual peace-maker or matchmaker after all.)

### **Thompson, Morris and C.L.R.**

I loved to talk with E.P. about his first big book, on my great favorite, William Morris, and of course about C.L.R. James. Likewise, I would query him about Thompson's current American devotees, of whom labor history circles had an almost uncountable number but I think instantly of my own sometime collaborator, Alan Dawley.

Thompson was a great and kindly talker as well as a phenomenal speaker and movement builder. And he had a great sense of humor, notably in responding privately to a few sharp comments about his philosophical polemics, in my *Village Voice* piece.

On issues of British socialist history, peace and class, cheerfully defending him against the curious (or envious) personal attacks by C. Castoriadis and others on Euro-Missiles (he opposed, they supported), I was with him 100% — and I think he appreciated the American support — while on the odd virtues of English philosophy, not so much. He claimed that I'd chosen one E.P. Thompson, the cheerful version, over others, the grumpy ones — and he was right.

To spend time with Edward was a pleasure not to be forgotten. To have organized memorial services for him, as for James, was not only my obligation but my last gesture to parting giants. We won't see their like again.

**Paul Buhle**

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