

# E.P. Thompson: Feminism, Gender, Women and History

Friday 27 December 2013, by [WINSLOW Barbara](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2013).

I READ *THE Making Of the English Working Class* in 1966 when I was on my junior year abroad at the University of Leeds, not realizing that E.P. Thompson was a lecturer in the Extramural (read adult education) Department at the very same university.

It was not until I studied with Thompson at the University of Warwick, in Coventry England in 1969, and reread his book that I began to fully appreciate its importance. It changed the way I looked at history. Its passionate, involved, activist historical and theoretical approach transformed the study of the formation of working-class identity in England in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century and then elsewhere.

Those trying to look at a new way of looking at history from the bottom up embraced Thompson's much quoted declaration on intent: "to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'Utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity." (TMotEWC, 12)

But what bowled me over was Thompson's acknowledgement to his wife, "Mrs. Dorothy Thompson, an historian to whom I am related by the accident of marriage."

Unlike most men's book dedications at the time, Edward did not thank Dorothy for having his children or keeping his children from bothering him so he could write his masterpiece. Nor did he thank her for cooking his meals and keeping the house clean.

Instead he explained how he discussed each chapter with her and declared that "I have been well placed to borrow not only her ideas, but material from her notebooks." (14) Her collaboration is to be found not in this or that, but in the way the whole problem is stated. This dedication was a revelation, for I was involved in the women's liberation movement and painfully aware of the bad treatment according graduate student wives and faculty wives (yes, that was an official designation at many colleges and universities).

The academy was as sexist toward women, graduate students, faculty, partners or spouses as was the rest of society. I vowed, and with my then husband's support, never to be relegated to typing my spouse's notes or thanked for housewifely tasks in a book dedication.

Thompson was the most important academic influence on my life, as professor, mentor and friend. While he was not politically sympathetic to the women's liberation movement, in part because he thought it was an American import, he was not hostile to women students or their feminist research agendas.

I always believed he was both fascinated and frightened by the passion of the feminists in his seminars. At Warwick, a number of women graduate students worked with him and he encouraged our interests in researching and writing women's history. We were all constantly amazed at his wealth of knowledge about European and U.S. women's history.

He knew every place to look for original material. Unlike most graduate professors, he called upon women in seminars, listened to them, argued with them and mentored them. While he remained skeptical about issues of gender and history, he never created obstacles for further study. He engaged with an infamous/prominent feminist scholar Germaine Greer, author of *The Female Eunuch* (1970), who was then a lecturer at Warwick over interpretations of William Blake — all to standing-room audiences.

When I began my research on Sylvia Pankhurst, he held the belief shared by orthodox labor and Marxist historians that Pankhurst was simply an ultraleft gadfly, irrelevant to the labor, social and communist movements. By the time I finished my MA, then my PhD and finally a book about Pankhurst, socialist and feminist in London's East End, he told me I convinced him of Pankhurst's contributions to suffrage, socialist and working-class history.

In 1988 a prominent U.S. historian, Joan Wallach Scott, published a series of essays, *Gender and the Politics of History*, including a chapter "Women in the *Making of the English Working Class*." She critiqued Thompson's gender blindness, meaning the universalizing of the working class as male, i.e. identifying men who work at the point of production with the concept of a working class. Other historians have also critiqued Thompson's failure to comprehend slavery, race and empire in his *Making*. Scott's essay, understandably, was a point of debate by feminist historians.

Sheila Rowbotham, a close friend of the Thompsons and one of the original pioneers of the new women's history, believed that Scott was both unfair and ahistorical. In an interview she explained that of course Thompson did not have a gender perspective in 1963 — remember that the women's movement did not have a gender perspective when we began.

Rowbotham's point is telling. The first phase of the post-1965 women's history was characterized by writing women into history. More sophisticated analyses including gender, sexuality and intersectionality, came later.

Because Thompson saw class as being formed by community and not just the work place, he provided many of us feminist historians a methodology to write about women, gender, class, community and activism.

For all of Thompson's gender blindness, he was more aware than most, wrote more about women than did his contemporaries (read his brilliant essay on Mary Wollstonecraft), admired and had close friendships with feminist historians, such as Rowbotham, Temma Kaplan and, yes, Joan Scott. On this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Making*, and sadly the 20<sup>th</sup> of his passing, feminist historians can claim Edward Thompson as an ally.

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