E.P. Thompson’s The Making of the English Working Class at Fifty

Introduction

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In this section we continue our discussion of E.P. Thompson’s The Making of the English Working Class, initiated in our last issue of Labour/Le Travail. This dialogue helps to mark the 50th anniversary of the publication of this unrivalled text, which is being commemorated in 2013 in a number of international conferences as well as in articles in most major social and working-class history journals in regions where Thompson’s impact was decisive: the United Kingdom and Europe, and throughout the Americas.

As in LLT 71, we have asked a range of commentators to address Thompson’s book, and the result is a broad-ranging assessment, in which The Making is subject to a diversity of “readings.” Our interlocutors, like those in our last number, agree on much, but also develop their understandings of The Making differently, drawing on insights that come from different generational experiences, national contexts, conceptual frameworks, and disciplinary backgrounds. In addition to those who provide short essays on The Making we also provide brief personal statements from three historians who were, like so many others, profoundly influenced by Thompson. Finally, this collection of commentaries on Thompson’s major book bridges to our review essay section, where Wade Matthews offers an extended commentary on a recent book exploring the history of Thompson, the New Left, and post-war British politics.

Again, we thank Josh Brown for the use of an image of Thompson he penned more than thirty years ago. This was a time when Steven Spielberg’s E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial was attracting movie-goers and when E.P. Thompson was in full-stride campaigning to challenge “the doomsday consensus” and bring an end to the nuclear arms race and its “logic of exterminism.”

Abstraction dreams of destiny again.
The mind is sealed with absolute nouns
Which steal our names and alienate our powers:
The Emperor hisses in his funeral mound.
It’s time the oppressed arose
And cut down categories with their hoes.