
E. P. Thompson at 100

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Edward Palmer (E. P.) Thompson would be turning 100 in 2024, and 2023 also marked the 60th anniversary of his pioneering book, *The Making of the English Working Class*. These anniversaries provide the backdrop for Calderdale TUC to commemorate Thompson with a major event in the town of Halifax on Saturday 3rd February, the very day that Thompson would have turned 100.

Halifax has a special connection to E. P. Thompson since he and his wife, the esteemed historian of Chartism Dorothy Thompson, lived here for 17 years from 1949 to 1965. A Blue Plaque marks their former home at Holly Bank in the Siddal area of the town. Standing near the plaque today, it can be difficult to hold in one's mind the centrality of this otherwise-ordinary building to some of the major political movements of the twentieth century. From here, the Thompsons immersed themselves in organising for the Communist Party, until their break with it in 1956, as well as the peace movement and, after 1956, the New Left. Luminaries of each movement and more made the journey to Halifax to commune with them, giving Halifax an under-acknowledged significance to the radical politics of the mid-twentieth century.

Visits to the town could themselves be transformative for those who came. There's a moment, for example, in John Akomfrah's film *The Stuart Hall Project* when Hall remarks on the strangeness of the experience of coming to Halifax, of how Hall thought he'd come to understand England since moving from Jamaica but that coming to Halifax struck him with a realisation of just how much he still had to learn from the industrialised townscape of northern England. Hall's acknowledgement of the incomprehension he felt amidst the world of Halifax in the 1950s gives us an insight into one aspect of the difficulties with the building of the emergent New Left, then centred on a merger between the Yorkshire-based Thompson and John Saville's journal *New Reasoner* and the *Universities and Left Review* of which Hall was an editor.

Halifax animated the historical work of the Thompsons. They shared a reverence for the local Chartist organiser Benjamin Rushton, and events and individuals from the area ran throughout their books and their writings, culminating in the wonderful recent posthumously-published and tremendously detailed co-authored article 'Halifax as a Chartist centre'.

Thompson's educational thinking was closely connected to his politics and to his historical sensibility, all of which were entangled with his interest in the concepts of agency and of experience, and the relationship between each of these and the politics of class. Thompson's political project was itself also an educational one: to recover the agency of working-class folk that had appeared lost to 'the condescension of posterity', to celebrate and interrogate it and to identify the ways in which class was lived, learned, experienced, and made real by working folk at particular moments in history. The working class, Thompson insisted, was 'present at its own making', not merely the passive recipient of structural transformations.

Unsurprisingly, given his work as an extra-mural lecturer, Thompson's writing is shot-through with educational thinking. From his first book, a biography of William Morris, where he not only reconstructs Morris's political affiliations and claims him for the communist left but also refers to Morris's writings and talks as 'teachings' and to Morris himself as a 'teacher', it is clear that Thompson is an historical and political thinker peculiarly attuned to a broad conception of the role of education in the production of political sensibilities.

Please join us in Halifax to explore how we might reinvigorate the work of E. P. Thompson as a resource for the political present. We will be joined by an array of speakers including Sheila Rowbotham, Julian Harber, Kate Hudson, Gawain Little, Matthew Roberts, Katrina Navickas and others. The event, supported financially by contributions from the Society for the Study of Labour History, and also by Yorkshire CND, is free, though we will welcome cash donations and contributions on the day. A small lunch will be provided, and the event will take place in Trinity Sixth Form Academy (HX1 1UN). Doors will open around 9.30am from a prompt 9.55am start, and we will end around 3.30pm, with a social event in the Grayston Unity pub in Halifax town centre to follow from 4.15-6pm.

Tickets can be booked here:
<https://www.tickettailor.com/events/calderdaletuc/1097983>.
