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History as a form of literature: EP Thompson's The making of the English working class

Abstract:

Of the vast number of historical texts available to us, only a few acquire a reputation as being particularly well written, as being in themselves a form of literature. Older examples include Edward Gibbon's *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire* and Thomas Macaulay's *The history of England*. A more recent example is EP Thompson's *The making of the English working class*, first published in 1963. In this essay, I explore the literary nature of this text in some detail, considering issues such as narrative voice, the relationship between narrative and analysis, the creation of character, writing style, and sense of audience. Very often writers and historians find the rules and protocols governing history-writing – such as detailed citation, careful acknowledgement of relevant work by others, limited use of speculation to 'fill in the blanks' in the record – to be limiting, leading some to prefer historical novels or perhaps memoirs where such constraints do not apply. Yet *The making of the English working class* seems to manage to obey the rules and yet come up with engrossing and moving writing. How, I ask, and to what extent, does it manage to do so?

Biographical note:

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Introduction

History, John Docker and I proposed in our book, *Is history fiction?* (2010:11), has a double character, operating in an always unstable space between History as rigorous scrutiny of sources and History as part of the world of literary forms. This doubleness, we suggested, is 'the secret of history's cunning as a continuing practice, an inventive, self-transforming discipline'. Yet, despite the intervention of historical theorists such as Hayden White (1978) and the effects of the 'linguistic turn', most discussion about historical texts still focuses on their scholarship, use of sources, interpretation and argument rather than their literary or formal properties. In practice, most historians find a textual approach beside the point, while literary critics generally have far more interesting texts to examine than your typical history book. Today the liveliest arena for examining history as a form of literature, and for discussing historians' discursive and narrative strategies, is neither history nor literary criticism, but rather the scholarly and pedagogical world concerned with creative writing, making *TEXT* an eminently suitable journal for my ensuing discussion.

In this essay, I explore the notion of history's double character, and especially its literary nature, through consideration of one of the most famous and enduring of modern historical texts, EP Thompson's *The making of the English working class* (1968). This major historical work tells the story of how English working people, who between 1790 and 1832 were experiencing the effects of the agrarian and industrial revolutions and of an authoritarian, oppressive, and undemocratic political system, gradually came to have a sense of identity as a working class. First published in hardback in 1963 and then in a much cheaper and more accessible Pelican paperback in 1968, its fiftieth birthday was widely celebrated in 2013. Over the years it has been widely praised as exceptionally well written, for being in itself a form of literature. Yet in the vast literature on *The making*, as I will refer to it from now on, detailed studies of its literary form are relatively rare. Hayden White provided an innovative analysis in the introduction to his influential book *Tropics of discourse* (1978), which, together with his earlier *Metahistory* (1973), outlined a theory for examining historical texts *as* texts. White's approach was to inspect these texts' narrative strategies and techniques, poetic devices, uses of plot and character, voice and tone. He insisted that historians necessarily write within a limited number of narrative genres – such as tragedy, comedy, romance, irony, and epic – which are chosen by the historian rather than inherent in the subject matter (1978: 83-99). White applies this approach to *The making*, describing its structure in tropological or literary terms: the book's four parts are, in order, he suggests, metaphorical, metonymic, synechdochic, and ironic (17-18). He insists that Thompson has imposed a pattern on his material, as all writers necessarily do: 'the issue here surely is not whether some pattern was imposed, but the tact exhibited in the choice of the pattern used to give order to the process being represented' (19). A somewhat similar point was made by the anthropologist, Renato Rosaldo, who some years later argued that Thompson 'treats his own narrative as if it were a neutral medium, rather than a culturally constructed form selected from a range of possible modes, such as tragic, comic, ironic, pastoral and melodramatic' (1990: 115-6). In fact, Rosaldo argues, *The making*'s mode is that

of melodrama, conveying conflict and oppositions in heightened form without recognising or constructing a middle ground.

Here I try to understand what it is about this book's form and writing style that has attracted such widespread praise, and to explore whether it in fact conforms to our usual notion of what constitutes 'good' historical writing. Having co-authored a guide to writing history myself (Curthoys and McGrath 2009), I am interested to see to what extent our modest suggestions, and the oft-praised *The making*, coincide.

So, to the text. It helps to remember that Thompson wrote it in the early 1960s, when Marxist history was flourishing in Britain. Thompson was close to the British Communist Party Historians group, which at the time was exploring the history of ordinary people and their traditions of political protest (Kaye 1984). Although the individual members of the group differed considerably in their historical period of interest, analyses, and writing styles, they shared an interest in historical explanation, especially of the long-term transitions from feudal to capitalist economic systems and society. It is also useful to know that Thompson had intellectual training in both history and literature; his Cambridge undergraduate degree had involved both disciplines and his first book, *William Morris*, published in 1955, was a literary and political study. He initially saw writing about William Morris as a way to illustrate the significance of literature for people's lives, but while writing the book had become more serious about history:

> I think it is like being a painter or poet. A poet loves words, a painter loves paint. I found a fascination in getting to the bottom of everything, in the sources themselves. I got this fascination with the archives (Abelove et al (eds) 1983: 7).

During the years of writing *The making*, he was teaching both literature and history to adult education classes at the University of Leeds; this meant teaching, as he said later in interview, 'evening classes of working people, trade unionists, white-collar people, teachers, and so on' (13). *The making of the English working class* is, then, a work of history with a literary sensibility; authors including Bunyan and Romantic poets like Blake, Byron, Coleridge and Shelley appear in its pages alongside rural labourers, political radicals and urban artisans. As readers, we feel we are in the company of a historian attentive to literature both as a form of historical evidence and as a model for narrative form.

The Preface

In discussing Thompson's text, it makes sense to start with its most famous element, the Preface, its text within a text, yet also a text floating free in an independent existence, like an island on the edge of a continent. Endlessly cited, and very often these days the only part of the book history students typically read, often for a theory and method course, the Preface famously states that class is a process not a thing, it is not a structure but rather something that happens. For the working class, whose emergence the book will trace, this means that class is not a structure that happened behind the back of its members; rather, the working class was present at its own

making. In its day, this was a reply both to sociological conceptions of class as a static category and to economic determinist forms of Marxism that saw class as the inevitable product of changes in the modes of economic production, distribution, and exchange. Against them, *The making* asserts the primacy of human action, or agency, in specific political, economic, and cultural contexts, and the importance of individuals, ideas, and collective action.

Both these ideas – class as a process not a thing and the working class as present at its own making – have inspired generations of History students. Part of the attraction lies in the flow and rhythm of the writing, so wonderfully quotable in student essay or History course:

> The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.
>
> I do not see class as a 'structure', nor even as a 'category', but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.
>
> Like any other relationship, it [class] is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomize its structure (Thompson 1968: 9).

He likens class to 'love', in that each can be defined only relationally, and not in isolation – an analogy that leads us to think of love and passion as entertained in the Romantic poets: love not only as fixed, immutable, and assured, but also as possibly involving uncertainty, pain, disappointment, betrayal, failure, or tragedy (9).

Yet Thompson in the Preface is not all on the side of agency, for his Marxism leads him into questions of structure too, especially the changing character of the economy and its complex relations with politics and culture. 'The class experience', he says, 'is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily.' His emphasis on structure is, however, immediately qualified. Class experience does not necessarily translate into a fully blown class society: *that* requires the development of class consciousness, a cultural phenomenon 'embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms' (10). In other words, if class experience is determined by productive relations, the emergence of class consciousness is not. Later, Thompson again ponders the relationship between economic, political, and cultural change. 'We should not assume', he writes, 'any automatic, or over-direct, correspondence between the dynamic of economic growth and the dynamic of social or cultural life' (211).

Just as frequently quoted from the Preface as the comments on class are its warnings against teleological and moralistic readings of history, that is of writing history too rigidly in light of our current preoccupations, remembering only 'those whose aspirations anticipated subsequent evolution'. In this kind of history, 'the blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten' (13). The problem is not only one of noticing only those aspects of the past that lead directly to us in the present, but also one of making unwarranted and unfair moral judgements against those who had other aspirations and whose causes were lost. Others, including Herbert Butterfield in *The Whig interpretation of history* (1931), had previously made the same point, but

now Thompson made it in a striking new way. In what have become *The making*'s most memorable sentences, Thompson writes:

> I am seeking 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. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not (Thompson 1968: 13).

There has been no more stirring call to respect the aspirations, and to attempt to understand the experiences, of the people of the past.

The Preface here also challenges us to consider more carefully the notion of historical time we deploy when we determine just who our forerunners really are, and who are not. We might think here of Walter Benjamin's (1996: 28-47) critique of Rankean history for its assumption that historical time is a continuum, arrowing forward to what is significant in the present, and his suggestion of an alternative historical method which is always moving sideways, looking for particularities and interesting peculiarities. Such an approach undermines any simple notion of which causes in the past failed, and which succeeded. Thompson's Preface, likewise, invites a complex sense of the relationship between past and present, and of success and failure.

Yet if the Preface, like a manifesto, provides a call for action, for a sympathetic, activist, and fair-minded history, and is the most oft-quoted part of *The making*, it is, of course, only the beginning, suggesting themes and motifs to be explored in what turned out to be a vast 950 page tome. What notions of history does the book as a whole assume, explain, or encourage, and how does it capture our attention, impart new information, or affect our thinking? How, that is to say, does it work as a literary non-fiction text? Does it in fact pursue the themes and motifs suggested in the Preface?

Narrative and analysis

One of the most striking features of *The making* is the way it mixes narrative and analysis. The text moves constantly from one to the other. This happens in two ways. Sometimes the text begins with an anecdote, or story, about an individual person or event, and then pulls back to draw out the broader implications and context of this story, to illuminate some large-scale social processes. In chapter one, for example, we read about the first meeting of a radical group called the London Corresponding Society in 1792, learning about its individual members and its rules. Then the text quickly widens the focus to comment on the nature of class relations at this time: the protagonists were, he writes, 'rehearsing in curiously personal encounters the massive impersonal encounters of the future' (Thompson 1968: 21). Thompson's technique here is similar to that of the historical novel, pioneered by women writers like Maria Edgeworth and made famous by Walter Scott. Literary critic Georg Lukács, in

particular, admired Scott's novels for the way they featured characters across whom larger forces and patterns move (Curthoys and Docker 2010: 62; Lukács 1937; Tuite 2005: 240-8).

More often, though, the text reverses this process, and we find ourselves immersed in a historiographical debate, perhaps even a discussion of problems of sources, before we are given a detailed blow-by-blow narrative of particular events. In the book's extended section on Luddism, for example, we have a lengthy meditation on the limitations of the sources and the ongoing contest over the meaning of Luddism before we have any detailed story of the Luddite outbreaks. This practice, which recurs many times in the book, suggests a text meant for an already knowledgeable audience, one that has already heard these names, places, and key events, and wants to know more.

Whichever comes first, the particular story or the general discussion, there is continual movement between the individual case study and the broad sweep of history. Too often, in conventional historical writing, histories are either mere stories, *sans* analysis, or heavily theorised abstractions conveying little or no sense of individual or collective choice or experience. *The making*, however, has an unusual mix of individual action and broad patterns of historical change, a mix, that is to say, of agency and structure in a fluid relationship.

We can see this fluidity clearly in the evocation of the Luddite protests of the second decade of the nineteenth century, when textile artisans, furious at the threat of the new machine-based textile industry to their traditional livelihoods based on hand spinning and weaving, smashed the machines. Throughout this section, the Luddites remain at the centre of the story, sometimes as agents, at other times subject to the agency of others:

> The main disturbances commenced in Nottingham, in March 1811. A large demonstration of stockingers, 'clamouring for work and a more liberal price' was dispersed by the military. That night sixty stocking-frames were broken at the large village of Arnold by rioters who took no precautions to disguise themselves and who were cheered on by the crowd (Thompson 1968: 605).

When *The making* moves on to the next phase of the Luddite protests, it heightens the sense of combined action:

> early in November 1811 Luddism appeared in a much more disciplined form … a very large force of Luddites, armed with muskets, pistols, axes and hammers, destroyed seventy frames at a large hosier's workshop in Sutton-in-Ashfield. Night after night, for more than three months, the attacks continued (605).

In exploring the political context in which Luddism erupted, Thompson turns to a fictional text, Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*. Through her characters, whose historical models he identifies, we read of the 'half-Whig, half-Radical' mill-owner, the 'rabid 'Church-and-King' Tory parson, and the Jacobin-Whig squire (613). He is, however, less impressed by Brontë's treatment of the Luddites and their sympathisers. His portrayal of Luddism's crisis point in mid-2012 is all his own: 'Sheer insurrectionary

fury has rarely been more widespread in English history' (624). Within a few months, however, the story ends in confusion: Luddism in Yorkshire had 'petered out amidst arrests, betrayals, threats, and disillusion' (125).

The making is suffused throughout with tensions, alternatives, and oppositions. Witness, for example, the contradictory aspects of Luddite protest in this lyrical passage questioning the usual notion that the Luddites can be dismissed as failures in history:

> On the one hand, it [Luddism] looked backward to old customs and paternalist legislation which could never be revived; on the other hand it tried to revive ancient rights in order to establish new precedents … [Its specific] demands looked forwards, as much as backwards; and they contained within them a shadowy image, not so much of a paternalist, but of a democratic community (603).

Earlier in the book, Methodism has received somewhat similar treatment.[1] Thompson is no friend of Methodism, as we see when we read:

> At one level the reactionary – indeed, odiously subservient – character of official Wesleyanism can be established without the least difficulty … Thus, at this level Methodism appears as a politically regressive, or 'stabilizing,' influence, and we find some confirmation of Halévy's famous thesis that Methodism prevented revolution in England in the 1790s (45).

Yet that is by no means the whole story, for Thompson reflects on other aspects of Methodism:

> But at another level, we are familiar with the argument that Methodism was indirectly responsible for a growth in the self-confidence and capacity for organization of working people … Methodism provided not only the forms of the class meeting, the methodical collection of penny subscriptions and the 'ticket', so frequently borrowed by radical and trade union organisations, but also an experience of efficient centralized organisation (45-6).

This sense of duality and complexity does not mean that Thompson sits on the fence, or simply and dispassionately gives both sides of the story, leaving the reader to choose. Rather, as others have noted, he appears throughout as an impassioned narrator. In Rosaldo's words, Thompson 'positions himself more as a partisan than as an omniscient narrator', for he sees the antagonisms he describes and evokes as living on into the present (1990: 118). For feminist historian, Joan Scott, 'Thompson did not present himself as an analyst outside the historically situated discourse; instead he spoke from within it as an advocate' (1998: 71).

We can see Thompson's commitments not only in his outbursts against Methodism – he writes of Methodism's 'psychological atrocities committed upon children' (Thompson 1968: 414) and its 'pitiless ideology of work' (416) – but also in the final 134-page chapter, 'Class Consciousness'. Covering the development in the 1820s of a sense in working people of 'their predicament as a class' (781), the chapter is replete with the familiar tropes of opposition and paradox.[2] For every right denied, he writes, the working people protested and asserted new rights: 'The Yeomanry rode down

their meeting, and the right of public meeting was gained. The pamphleteers were gaoled, and from the gaols they edited pamphlets. The trade unionists were imprisoned, and they were attended to prison by processions with bands and union banners' (914). Its sympathies are clear, and the book ends with a tribute: '[The working people had] nourished, for fifty years, and with incomparable fortitude, the Liberty Tree. We may thank them for these years of heroic culture' (915).

Narrative voice

One secret to the charm of *The making* is precisely its strong accessible narrative voice. There is no hidden narrator here; Thompson is everywhere talking to us directly, explaining what he is doing, what he thinks may have happened and how we might best understand the ideas, people, and events he describes. He is everywhere argumentative and often judgmental, yet allowing plenty of room for alternative views and perspectives.

Thompson wrote *The making* at a time when questions of truth and fiction in history were under serious consideration; while he was writing it, EH Carr's classic *What is history?* first appeared, in 1961. Carr seemed to historians then (and still does to many) to succeed in striking a balance between empiricist and relativist positions, though for later generations influenced by poststructuralist critiques, it now reads as insufficiently aware of the importance of speaking position, discourse, and literary form.[3] Thompson was later to enter theoretical debates within and beyond Marxism with a strident defence of history as an empirical discipline, but at the time he wrote *The making* these debates were still in the future.

The making's view of truth in history is similar to Carr's. It stresses many times the active interpretative role of the historian but at the same time has a notion of historical evidence existing prior to interpretation, an empiricist position challenged by later poststructuralism, for example by Hayden White when he said any description of events is always already an interpretation (1978: 95). Nonetheless, Thompson looks forward to and welcomes historical disputation about differing interpretations. 'By all means', *The making* declares, 'let there be arguments. But let them be about the actual historical evidence, rather than in defence of prior ideological presuppositions' (1968: 934). And arguments, it suggests, there will inevitably be. It offers its historical explanations as necessarily provisional and always open to revision in the light of further investigation and discussion. In its discussion of the relationship between revivalist religion and political radicalism, for example, *The making* says, 'it is possible that religious revivalism took over just at the point where 'political' or temporal aspirations met with defeat' (428). After giving some examples, it goes on: 'The suggestion is tentative. To take it further, we should know more about, not the years of revivalism, but the months; not the counties, but the towns and villages' (429). It is not only a matter of needing further research, then, but also of acknowledging the essentially collaborative nature of history, where historians develop knowledge and understanding jointly, bit by bit. 'I by no means suppose that

… I have always uncovered the truth', Thompson writes in the 1968 postscript. 'No single historian can hope to cover, in any detail, all this ground' (934).

These are attractive ideas for a historian, perhaps for any non-fiction writer – share with your readers the nature and sources of your knowledge and the processes of exploring and extending it. Attractive too are *The making's* articulation of the need to treat the people of the past with due respect. The Preface warned us not to condemn those like the Luddites, whose protests against industrialisation took the form of smashing machines, and indeed *The making* does not. Rather, it shows them as attempting to protect themselves from displacement in the belief that this was indeed their constitutional right, and attempting to assert their rights to protection against the ravages to particular people and occupations that can arise in a free market economy. If we understand Luddism, the text suggests, we can grasp just how much industrial capitalism differed from the paternalist semi-feudal system that preceded it. After a mass of detail on Luddite protest, we read:

> A way of life was at stake for the community, and, hence, we must see the croppers' opposition to particular machines as being very much more than a particular group of skilled workers defending their own livelihood. These machines symbolized the encroachment of the factory *system* (599).

The persona of the historian in this text, then, is one of a humanist, sympathetically and passionately engaging with the people whose history he addresses.

Yet I wonder whether Thompson really does avoid condescension entirely. His test case must surely be those 'deluded followers of Joanna Southcott' he mentions in the Preface. Joanna Southcott first reappears on page 420, when *The strange effects of faith*, her first 'cranky prophetic booklet', appeared. However, before *The making* tells the reader the substance of her ideas, it considers the reasons for her widespread appeal. One is 'the vivid superstitious imagination of the older England', another the lurid imagery of Methodist communion, a third Joanna's own style of combining 'mystic doggerel' and autobiographical information, and most of all the 'misery and war-weariness' of these Napoleonic wartime years (420-1). Joanna, we learn, conveyed to the poor a sense that 'revelation might fall upon a peasant's daughter as easily as upon a king' (421). Only then do we learn something of the content of her prophetic booklets, in which Voices speak to her of the future. One day, she wrote, she found a commonplace seal, and thereafter her followers could gain from her a special seal guaranteeing the bearer would '"inherit the Tree of Life to be made Heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ"' (423). Many thousands, *The making* continues, 'were "sealed" in this way' (423). Her followers, known as 'Johannas' or 'Southcottians', were not inspired to revolution or indeed to any kind of social action; rather, their desire for personal salvation was brought to a state of 'hysterical intensity' (424). As a cult of the poor, Southcottianism first appeared in 1801, but reached a climax in 1814 when the ageing Johanna promised to give birth to 'Shiloh', the Son of God. She died soon after, but many claimed her mantle thereafter. At this point, the Southcottians largely disappear from *The making*, except for occasional references. They recur in a perhaps surprising place, in the discussion of Robert

Owen, the paternalist mill owner and theorist of co-operatives of the early nineteenth century. Owen sought social change, and lacking, according to Thompson, any theory of 'the dialectical processes of social change', he thought social transformation would come from a sudden change of heart, a 'millenarial leap'. 'Mr Owen, the Philanthropist', says *The making*, 'threw the mantle of Joanna Southcott across his shoulders' (865).

Does Thompson truly avoid the condescension of posterity in his discussion of Joanna Southcott and her followers, as well as the possible influence of her kind of millenarianism on Robert Owen? Perhaps, in his emphasis that this is a cult of the poor, but I tend to think that in paying greater and earlier attention to explaining Southcott's appeal than to conveying the content of her beliefs, Thompson comes close to condescension, a kind of rationalist superiority, after all. As Joan Scott points out, *The making* contrasts the rational political radicalism of Tom Paine with the charismatic hysteria of Joanna Southcott, the former representing the positive hope for working class politics and the latter its antithesis (1998: 76-7). Scott draws our attention to feminist historical work critical of this kind of opposition and which suggests that visionary religious sects could articulate profoundly radical critiques; she concludes that the lines 'between the language of politics and the language of sexuality, seem not to have been as clear as Thompson would have them'.

Character

Readable history is novelistic and filmic, requiring not only plenty of action, a sense of agency, but also of character. As readers, we want to know who these historical actors were, and get a sense of their individuality and aspirations, their quirks and passions. We want to know not only what they thought, but also what they felt, and for the narrative to matter to us, we have to care about what happens to them. *The making* has many characters, some well-known, others less so. Here I consider the way *The making* represents just one: William Cobbett, journalist and leading radical reformer of the first few decades of the nineteenth century.

As with Joanna Southcott, Thompson assumes that his readers have all heard of Cobbett and that he needs, therefore, no introduction; he refers to him obliquely and offhandedly many times before discussing him in any detail. This, I might say, is quite the reverse of what Ann McGrath and I recommend in our book *How to write history that people want to read* (2009: 143). There we advise historians to be careful to introduce people at least a little at first meeting: 'Historical individuals need to be introduced properly – just as in a social situation … It helps to introduce a person briefly, just enough for the reader to be able to see how this person fits into the story; you can then reveal more details as the narrative progresses'.

Thompson, however, does not proceed this way at all. We first meet Cobbett as one of those who were critical of Methodism's influence on working people during the Industrial Revolution, then briefly as a victim of organised mobs in 1801, and then again as part of a combined Tory-Radical strain of thought which was opposed to

centralised state power. Pages later, we meet him as one of the few popular radical journalists of the nineteenth century who was *not* a true follower of Thomas Paine. There are a few more such references before we finally get to meet Cobbett properly on page 492, where he appears in his early anti-Jacobin days at the beginning of the nineteenth century. We then learn of his turn to Radicalism and of his prominent and influential journal, the *Political Register*, lasting from 1802 to 1835.

Cobbett then disappears from the narrative, but reappears 147 pages later, in a chapter on the 'heroic age of popular Radicalism', as Thompson characterises the history of Radicalism during the four years following the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815. Radicalism by this time was concerned with exposing electoral and other abuses – 'taxes, fiscal abuses, corruption, sinecures, clerical pluralism' (Thompson 1968: 660), and advocating sweeping parliamentary reform. Now, Cobbett resurfaces in the narrative as Radicalism's 'most insistent journalistic voice' (660). Cobbett, we learn, helped create a Radical martyrology and demonology, and during these years achieved considerable popular influence. In November 1816 he began publishing his leading articles for the *Political Register* separately as pamphlets, the first being his famous 'Address to the Journeymen and Labourers' (679), the most popular such publication since Paine's *The rights of man* in 1790. After detailing examples of Cobbett's influence in these years, *The making* pauses to consider his personality. It presents Cobbett as an egotist: 'Cobbett's favourite subject, indeed, was William Cobbett of Botley' (687). His *Register*, *The making* goes on, 'is filled with his affairs, self-justifications, arguments, feelings, chance impressions, and encounters' (687). Yet, Thompson reflects, 'We have to accept Cobbett's vices as the dark side of his genius, a genius which enabled him to exert more influence, week after week for thirty years, than any journalist in English history' (687). There is a lot more on Cobbett, the last reference being to his internationalism, his excitement in 1830 at the common people of Belgium having defeated Dutch armies sent to compel them to pay enormous taxes (911).

In brief, the reader comes to know Cobbett, like so many others, only slowly. Gradually, a picture builds up of the power of Cobbett's ideas, his influence, and the quirks of his personality. Readers come to feel they know who Cobbett was and what he stood for. Many of the characters in *The making* are drawn with much less detail than is available for Cobbett; very often, the sources list only attendance at meetings or participation in a riot. Yet whether *The making* mentions people fleetingly or in considerable detail, it always treats them as *characters*, each of them influencing the course of history in some way.

Style

A major attraction of *The making* is its achievement of a fluid style and its mastery of rhetoric. At times, there is an almost musical quality, of repetition with variations:

> Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy (13).

It turns into advantages those aspects of historical writing usually thought to be hindrances – scholarly protocols such as careful citation, quotation of primary sources, generous acknowledgement of the work of others, and abjuring the temptation to make up the missing parts of the narrative. While the referencing may not always be as extensive as is now usually expected, it is nevertheless substantial. In addition (and all credit to the publisher, Penguin), the presence of footnotes rather than endnotes make it so much easier for readers to link the text with its sources, foregrounding a connection between the historian's prose and the sources from which he draws. Quotations short and long appear throughout the text, bringing the narrative and the characters to life and reassuring the reader of the plausibility of its interpretation. Thompson never hides, however, behind these literary and archival quotations, always coming forward with his own judgments and analyses, his own sense of why these people and events still matter, and his own deep conviction that knowledge of them helps change the way we see the world today. And far from avoiding reference to other historians, *The making* discusses the work of others in such a way that it becomes a major part of the history itself, informing the narrative and setting up puzzles for solution and interpretative choices for the historian to investigate. The unknown parts of the story become challenges to be met, either by Thompson himself or in the future by others.

I find it hard to apply Hayden White's categories of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony to this text; it involves them all but none predominantly, either in the whole or any particular part. It has, for example, far too much identification with its actors, or at least some of them, to be called ironic. Nor does Rosaldo's characterisation of the text as grounded in melodrama seem justified, given the text's sense of ambiguity and complexity. In genre terms, *The making* is above all a drama, in which people find their old collectivities challenged and dispersed under conditions of massive technological, economic, political, and cultural change and respond by forming new ones.

Readers real and imagined

The making's focus was firmly on England and it assumed considerable familiarity with English history. This English focus influences its portrayals and passionate stances, most movingly perhaps in Thompson's admiration for those working people who insisted that they were freeborn Englishmen and in so doing nourished the Liberty Tree. Subsequent commentary has pointed to the serious limitations of this vision, in giving so little attention, for example, to the wider British imperial context, even though it concerns a period in which imperial adventures were flourishing (Gregg and Kale 1997: 2273-88). While Thompson was writing *The making*, the British Empire was collapsing around him. It would be several decades before

historians considered how the empire had made Britain as much as it made the empire.

Yet if Thompson saw little direct connection between events in England and those elsewhere, he did see English history as relevant beyond England's borders. As a historian and a citizen, he had his eye on the struggles and conflicts going on in the wider world in the 1960s, especially concerning the threat posed by the nuclear arms race. He hoped his book would provide lessons for the developing world as it underwent industrialisation. As he said in the Preface,

> the greater part of the world today is still undergoing problems of industrialization, and of the formation of democratic institutions, analogous in many ways to our own experience during the Industrial Revolution. Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won (1968: 13).[4]

As it turned out, there were many lessons drawn from *The making*, though less to do with industrialisation than with historical method and conceptions of class and culture. One reason for its influence throughout the English-speaking world and beyond is that it transcends its immediate subject matter and draws out theoretical and methodological issues that concern historians of any place or period – questions of agency and structure, freedom and necessity, economics and culture. Another is its literary qualities – rhetoric and poetic language, dramatic narrative interwoven with analysis, portrayal of character, and sense of politically inspired passion. Even while we may challenge its particular arguments, and some of its lacunae on questions of empire, race and gender, we can admire a text that combines originality of argument, depth of scholarship, and captivating writing. Little wonder, then, that has become an enduring and inspiring international classic.

Endnotes

1. On Thompson's ambivalence towards Methodism, see Roland Boer 2012 'EP Thompson and the psychic terror of Methodism' *Thesis Eleven*, 110, 54-67.
2. On Thompson's use of paradox, see Bryan D Palmer 2014 'Paradox and polemic; argument and awkwardness: Reflections on EP Thompson' *Contemporary British History* 28:4, 382-403.
3. For a fuller discussion, see Ann Curthoys and John Docker 2010 *Is history fiction?,* Sydney: UNSW Press, 32, 203-4.
4. On this point, see Dipesh Chakrabarty 2013 'The lost causes of EP Thompson' *Labour/Le Travail*, 72, 207-12, especially 211.

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