

E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* at Fifty Introduction

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PRESENTATION / PRÉSENTATION

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

Introduction

Bryan D. Palmer

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."



Edward Palmer Thompson, circa 1981, Wick Episcopi

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.

E.P. Thompson, "The Rectification of Names" (1986)