

From the Upper West Side
to Wick Episcopi¹

DON'T GO BAREFOOT TO A SNAKE-STOMPING!
LOOSEN YOUR WIGS!

It's no use hooking them both on the same circuit—
The English and American traditions.
It won't take the play out of the loose eccentrics.
Cattlemen, sheepmen and outlaws, that's American writing,
And few enough outlaws at that.

And it's no use
For the lonesome radicals to raise up the ghost of Tom Paine,
Los Muertos no hablan

Them dead don't walk, either.
No, ghost-eaters, they'd like

To cuddle up to the bourgeois liberal tradition—

These are lines from Tom McGrath's poem *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*.² I like to remember them because I've often wondered: Are the English and American traditions hooked on the same circuit? Tom and Edward were friends having met as comrades of war and comrades of the CP in 1946, they were radicals, they delved into their respective traditions. Edward sought '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', and Tom said,

—I'm here to bring you
Into the light of speech, the insurrectionary powwow
Of the dynamite men and doomsday spielers
to sing you
Home from the night,
Night of America.

Each of the friends had set himself a redemptive, writing task on his respective circuit, and about at the same time. *Letter* was published in 1962 and 1970, while *The Making of the English Working Class* was

¹ For their encouragement and library help I thank Noel Ignatiev, George Caffentzis, Wendy Goldman, Michaela Brennan, and Marcus Rediker.

² Thomas McGrath, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend, Parts I & II*, Chicago 1970, p. 63.

published in 1963 and 1968. I looked at these books with considerable interest, since I am a person caught within these two circuits myself. My father was born in Muskogee, Oklahoma—not that he was a Wob but he had ridden bulls at the rodeo—and worked for the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square between 1947 and 1953 befriending the Labour opposition and Aneurin Bevan, while my mother who drank, smoked, and supported Spain came from a line of strong western New York women. I didn't know whether to swing a baseball or a cricket bat. Like immigrants everywhere, I was confused by the experience—How to speak? What to say?—and for many years I sought a guide. When I came across *The Making*, and then Edward, I cathected politically and by feeling.

My first personal lessons (the official one in 1969 at the University of Warwick was stern: 'Over here when we refer to Lenin, it is to John!') were conducted on the road to his cottage at Hafody, Llanfrothen, Penrhyndeudraeth, Merionethshire, north Wales. On the road he announced that this is where he gave intelligence tests. Yes, the gates across the roads, controlling the movement of the sheep and cows, had to be opened, the car driven through, and the gate then closed. The ingenious mind of the Welsh cattlemen or sheepmen had devised as many different ways of fastening gates closed and keeping them temporarily open as there were gates to open and shut. Worse, it was at night. Glee danced in Edward's eye as he rammied the gear stick home, and impatiently lurched the Land Rover forward. Gate after gate after gate.

The next day he took me for a walk in the pastures. Side-stepping the cow pies, he quoted at length to me from Wordsworth. I knew at the time I was supposed to remember this, but for the life of me I couldn't and to this day, can't. I was stunned. He noted that when he was my age he had already published *William Morris*. (Who?) Then he told me that the previous American to visit Hafody had been C. Wright Mills who'd driven a motor cycle. 'Mills', he looked at me inquiringly, hopefully, 'called me "Ed".' I would have instantly said 'Yes Sir', but anti-militarist as I was and conscious of the Jeffersonian struggle against titles, the best I could manage then and ever after was 'Edward'.

Our relationship had begun in 1965 when I read some of *The Making*. Characteristically, the book was outside the curriculum at least until the early seventies; its power depended on marginality, as the class was recomposing politically at the margins. Just shy of a thousand pages in the English second edition, 858 pages in the American paperback, with footnotes on most every page, without photographs, woodcuts, maps, or engravings to vary the reading or illustrate the text, quite unsuitable to the beginning student of history with its assumptions that kings and queens and prime ministers are known and that the geography is clear; with a vocabulary of dialect, of political economy, of the Bible, not to mention the Romantic poets; all the while with a working-class diction breaking into print, the book nevertheless, in the words of Bryan Palmer, 'blew across the doldrums of the transatlantic academic community like a breeze of liberation'.³ As one of

³ Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History*, Toronto 1981, p. 65.

several breezes, it should be said, after the Beatles tour and the boom-rangs of Eric Clapton and Peter Green brought the Blues back home to American white people.

Unlike the English Penguin edition whose cover showed a Walker watercolour of an early nineteenth-century gentle-eyed Yorkshire collier, smoking his pipe and drudging along with a sizeable wicker dinner basket in the crook of his arm, the American cover had a photo of an anonymous apron-wearing man with his head and his feet cropped out—a heavy mechanical feel, and undocumented! John Gillis remembered it as a big black and yellow book, decidedly not a little red book, like that of Mao Tse-tung.

Each one of Edward's history books bore a relationship to politics; each one could be read in a political way. This became explicit with *The Making*, and it affected, I believe, the way Edward chose to write his subsequent history books. To be told, in America of 1963–65, that class is something that happens is to say what everybody knew but never said. Since Malcolm's return from Mecca the talk was race *and* class. Edward's book fit right in.

It landed like an apple into the Golden Age of Higher Education, as the period from 1960 to 1970 has been called, when the student body expanded from 3.8 million to 9.2 million.⁴ Over the same decade the number of faculty in four-year institutions expanded by 138 per cent. The graduate student body more than tripled between 1960 and 1975. In 1960 10,000 doctorates were awarded, by 1976 annual production of PhDs amounted to 34,000. In the 1960s investment in higher education went from one billion dollars to seven billion. This was the 'human capital' strategy developed in the New Frontier to overcome low rates of accumulation, and high rates of unemployment, redundancy, and juvenile delinquency. *The Making* was a shield for the troops in this strategy protecting us from the shafts and cuts of the Old Boy Network. The escalation of bombing and the commitment of troops against the National Liberation Front in Vietnam after February 1965 put a choice between remaining in school, to maintain a 2-s deferment, or possible death in the jungle.

At Columbia University on the Upper West Side of New York, the entering history student was faced with the Historiography course (History G6000x) taught by Peter Gay, the brilliant historian of the bourgeoisie. He compared us as captives. Our problems, as students, he wrote in a brochure for each of us, were Laziness and Stupidity. 'You are joining a profession in which competition is tough, and life is hard'. 'In the months to come', he warned, 'you will hear, and perhaps tell, stories of injustice and neglect, but it might just be that not all of these stories are true.' Later, the Cox Commission reported, 'the simple fact is that a constantly growing proportion of the best students does not look forward to careers molded along the established

⁴ Emily Abel, *Terminal Degrees: The Job Crisis in Higher Education*, New York 1984, p. 3. See also Nancy Hoffman, 'La Dolce Vita: The Working Class in the Academy', *Radical America*, vol. 19, no. 2–3 (March–June 1985).

lines'.⁵ In such an atmosphere, it was agreeable to come across Edward. In 1966 in a screed advocating 'History from Below' against 'English History Proper', he wrote 'To this day many academic history schools languish under the Norman yoke, and the seed of William the Bastard occupies the Chairs.'⁶ He continued to make such faces through the decade. 'I have never ceased to be astounded when observing the preening and mating habits of fully grown specimens of the species *Academicus Superciliosus*', began one of his most effective and vicious attacks.⁷

There were the gods that failed among the lit. crits. of Claremont Avenue, and then there were the gods that didn't among the beats at the West End café. Each had their Anglo analogue. For Lionel Trilling, it was Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot; for Allen Ginsberg, it was William Blake. Edward's influence was not yet differentiated into departments and disciplines. In the spring of 1968 SDS invited him to speak on Blake and he did at Columbia. The Fugs sang Blake. Allen Ginsberg's response to the Communist-Capitalist squeeze was pagan, English pagan. Having been beaten by the Czech police and made May King at 'a giant friendly public be-in' he adopted the lyric, prophetic voice of Blake in an airplane and wrote 'Kral Majales'—'and I am the King of May, returning to see Bunhill Fields and walk on Hampstead Heath, and I am the King of May, in a giant jetplane touching Albion's airfield trembling in fear'.

In *Ripsaw* (named after the Missouri journal of pre-WWI, its goal was to encourage radical scholarship in order to create 'a truly democratic, communal, and libertarian society'), Fred Whitehead referred to Blake in 1793 ('the Eternal Hell revives'), trying to break out of the inadequacies and limitations of literary criticism of the Cold War. He dumped on Lionel Trilling's apologia for imperialism. As for 'those cynics and liars who say that Blake's Orc must himself inevitably become Urizen, [they] distort Blake, Blake's view of history, and history itself.'⁸ It began to seem very likely that if you could hook the two traditions it was going to be via Blake.

We, the Lazy and Stupid, studied *The Making* at a public meeting (1967):

THE COMMITTEE FOR
A RADICAL HISTORY

will not be meeting Tuesday, *November 14*, so that its members may attend the Foreign Policy Association dinner (black tie)—with its guest of honor Dean Rusk—which will be held at the New York Hilton, 6th Avenue and 53rd Street at 5:30 PM.

On Tuesday, *November 21*, there will be an informal spaghetti dinner (red shirt) and discussion at 309 West 106th St. Apt. 5C, at 6:30 PM. All history graduate students are invited to attend.

⁵ *Crisis at Columbia: Report of the Fact-Finding Commission Appointed to Investigate the Disturbances at Columbia University in April and May 1968*, New York 1968, p. 22.

⁶ 'History from Below', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966.

⁷ E.P. Thompson, *Warwick University Ltd: Industry, Management and the Universities*, London 1970, pp. 153–4. See as well, Jonah Raskin, *The Mythology of Imperialism*, New York 1971.

⁸ 'The Discipline of Literary Study', *Ripsaw*, published by the Graduate Student Union of Columbia University, no. 2 (spring 1969).

Then on the following Tuesday the auditorium of Earl Hall was filled to hear a discussion of *The Making of the English Working Class*. The book cost \$2.95. The message was without 'Cattlemen, sheepmen and outlaws'; but our wigs were beginning to loosen.

The SDS national office in Madison published Jesse Lemisch's 'Towards a Democratic History', as a Radical Education Project Paper in 1967. 'Edward P. Thompson has in many ways shown the way with his attention to workers . . . harlots and publicans and thieves.' 'The common man is in court records, and historians must remember that a man in court is a man in trouble.' 'Thompson finds great selectivity and self-discipline in the English mob and sees in crime and riot the fighting out of a class war.' Which is what we saw too. That summer twenty-six were killed in Newark, and forty-three were killed in the Detroit rebellion. At the Socialist Scholars Conference in September 1968 Herbert Gutman delivered a paper on 'New Views of American Labor History'. John R. Commons and the Wisconsin School spun a cocoon around the American worker isolating him from his own culture. Gutman's paper was deeply influenced by Thompson, and in many respects Herb was to determine the way that Thompson was to enter the university discussion.

I am suggesting a hermeneutics of *The Making*: in America it had both a Movement reading and an Academic reading. It had been an iconic text in some ways in the Movement. This is how Marge Piercy described it in *Braided Lives*, with its underground existence among the hip-grad-student-auto-workers of Detroit. It was a text of a particular class composition and a particular political moment. This changed in the early seventies. Once again let us look at the demographic context.

Demographically, the university stagnated in the 1970s and 1980s. Enrolments stopped growing so fast, and staffing levels fell. The composition of the staff and student body also changed. In 1965 39 per cent of students were women; in 1985 they constituted a majority at 51 per cent. The major area of growth was the non-white, black and Hispanic. The US-born white male was 52 per cent of the university in 1972, and in 1989 it was 39 per cent and falling. Tuition and other fees rose by a real 60 per cent in the 1980s while at the same time tuition increased its proportion of total university income.

Politically the turning point in American higher education was the strike of May 1970 following the massacres at Jackson State and Kent State. In May 1970 more than half of US colleges were touched by the strike, involving nearly 60 per cent of the students, or 4,350,000 people. At this point commenced the fiscal crisis of the university, a punitive and restructuring strategy.⁹ In 1969 and 1970 as SDS fell apart the student movement began to link up explicitly with the struggles in the ghettos, the army, and the prisons. In the seventies the feudalization of the disciplines began. Discipline was re-established,

⁹ George Caffentzis, 'Throwing Away the Ladder: The Universities in the Crisis', *Zero-work* 1 (December 1975).

less by grades than by work-study. In this period, the first half of the seventies, *The Making* entered the curriculum.¹⁰

Meanwhile, I had begun to study crime, a job that needed doing according to *The Making*. Jesse Lemisch had pointed to this, so had Hobsbawm, in an unnoticed discussion in 1964.¹¹ I told this to Professor Peter Gay who sneered loftily and said 'Why do you read those people?' So I sailed from New York chanting 'Omm' and matriculated at the Centre for the Study of Social History, University of Warwick. 'It would be possible to have a sense of a collective of a kind', Edward had written. Oh, Joy! While I began to study crime in earnest (did it have to do with class defeat? was it incipient communism?) at Warwick, Edward fought the business university which was spying upon David Montgomery, his colleague and co-worker in setting up an Anglo-American comparative labour history course.

A comic element entered our purposes: What I wanted to learn from him he wished to suppress, and what he wanted to teach I wished to ignore. You can see it in his advice of the time: 'If you can see an opportunity to use three words instead of two, use one.' 'If you are interviewed, be brisk, talk facts, and don't be fluffy.' 'If you teach, then TEACH, and don't put on a great fraternal anti-authoritarian act pretending that snotty-nosed 18-year-olds know as much as you do.' 'Stop intruding on the reader and stop confusing the reader by mixing information and moral instruction.' He wanted me to get in the archives and to produce a British PhD thesis that could meet the toughest standards. OK, but. I had seen the spirit of this advice before in reviews of his own work.

He moved to Wick Episcopi, near Worcester, and so, not having victory enough at the Islington Rent Tribunal, did my ex-wife, our baby, and I. He was turning to academia, changed as it was. Of course it affected his outlook. He explained this in his interview with Michael Merrill.¹² Referring to *Whigs and Hunters* and to his 'irreverent attitudes to the academic proprieties': 'I've become a bit more inhibited since, simply because, although the book has been received very generously in some academic quarters, it has also been subjected to very sharp attacks, especially in Britain. In order to meet these I have had to sharpen my own scholarly equipment. When you suddenly realize that you are being watched by the largely conservative profession you have to be very sure . . .' He protested that *Whigs and Hunters* 'is not so formal and reverent a book as it may appear. In the first half, yes, it appears to be academic and almost antiquarian. . . . this had to be done with minute brush strokes.' 'It is partly written within an English historiographical argument which may not be wholly apparent to the American reader.' Los Muertos no hablan.

Personal isolation and praise of law were combined in the epilogue to the book. Its effect upon readers was very different from *The Making*

¹⁰ URPE, *Reading Lists in Radical Political Economics*, vol. 2 (summer 1974).

¹¹ *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, no. 9 (autumn 1964), pp. 4–5.

¹² Michael Merrill, 'An Interview with E.P. Thompson', *Radical History Review*, vol. 3, no. 4 (fall 1976).

twelve years earlier. The 'rule of some kind of law is . . . a profound human good'. This contrasted with the antinomian spirit we thought we heard coming out of his mouth in 1968, as he sang Blake or confided that he was a Muggletonian Marxist. Nevertheless, in this interview, he apologized for his tone. Yet the circulation of arguments into prisons, into the remaining poverty agencies, into community colleges, seemed to come to an end with this pronouncement. At a practical level, the message was Go to Law School. The book played some part in the American movement of Critical Legal Studies. As a sign of the times, this was the year the Supreme Court authorized the resumption of the death penalty.

By 1977 one quarter of faculty consisted of academics of working-class origin. They feel they are imposters. Half committed, half resentful, an imposter syndrome develops as careerism and conformism pervert relationships and clash with meritocratic and egalitarian ideals.¹³ The disputes between Herb Gutman and Eugene Genovese, eminent examples of the new-style academic, indicated a serious fracture and diminution of the mass discussions of the sixties. The strident voices of these academic titans bellowed or hissed within the university walls. 'Genovese, like Gutman, came to see culture as the terrain of class warfare. But where Gutman viewed the struggle from the bottom, Genovese saw it from the top.'¹⁴ This happened to be a snake stomping where I didn't wear shoes, and I was bit. As Gutman was influenced by Thompson, now speaking of capitalism and class, so Thompson's presence in the university discussion was influenced by Gutman who emphasized the cultural, the symbolic, the anthropological.

Influenced less as a result of those debates than by the changing political and class composition of the university, the limitations of *The Making* began to be expressed. There was hardly anything in it about the slave trade, hence, of African-American history, and surely that belonged to the working class in England.¹⁵ Its remarks about Irish workers in England were found by American students to be belittling. Why wasn't there any Irish history in it, after all there was a lot of English in Ireland? The book seemed to some critics to be about artisans and skilled workers, while neglecting other workers. Joan Scott took the author to task for having a male-centred outlook.¹⁶ So, while *The Making* had been removed from the Movement, nevertheless, great movement remained in *The Making*.

Edward did not disavow Gutman's presentation; indeed, I think that he welcomed it. Again we see the new emphasis in the interview with Merrill. In the case of *Albion's Fatal Tree* and *Whigs and Hunters*, 'I m not only concerned with recovering forgotten evidence of class

¹³ Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey, *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class*, Boston 1985.

¹⁴ Herbert G. Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, edited by Ira Berlin, New York 1987.

¹⁵ As I pointed out in my Reply to Sweeny, *Labour/Le Travail* 14 (fall 1984), p. 180.

¹⁶ Joan Scott, 'Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*', in *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York 1988.

struggle: I am also much concerned with structure of dominance, the ritual of capital punishment, the symbolic hegemony of the law.' Already, he is conceiving class struggle as being different from, other than, law, hanging, and dominance. His contributions to *Albion's Fatal Tree* as well as *Whigs and Hunters* do not include that attention to labour process found in 'Homage to Tom Maguire', for instance, or many parts of *The Making*. The question of the sixties radical, What is the Working Class? no longer exercised him. Hence, we wrote an elegy to that Thompson.¹⁷

In his letters of early 1973 he is despondent. 'Politics? Almost none around. Back to magnolias!' And much the same in 1974: writing at his fiftieth birthday, 'Now it is all downhill. It scarcely seems to be worth while planting any more trees.' And yet he'd write of the garden: 'there is: rasps, strawbs, red, white and black currants, worcesterberries, wineberries, gooseberries, loganberries, lettuces, radishes, asparagus, tomatoes, globe artichokes, Jerusalem artichokes, marrow, cucumber, broad beans, peas, runner beans, french beans, rhubarb, cabbage, broccoli, carrots, leeks, spring onions, celery, CORN, apples, peaches, nectarines and weeds.' This is the garden where he died 28 August 1993.

This is the garden that provided practical riches against 'The Poverty of Theory', his last attempt to beat the bounds of 1956. From that point Edward went (back) into the Peace Movement, and our paths diverged. The Cold War ended; Peace did not arise. I still don't see why the working class is boring, as he wrote this last summer in *Dissent*. By contrast, that old thirst has once again been aroused by his forthcoming Blake book. Will Haiti be in that particular snake stomping? Will the wigs off?

¹⁷ Midnight Notes, 'Elegy for E.P. Thompson', *Posthumous Notes* (1983), pp. 13-16.