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Would 'The Making of the English Working Class' get made today?

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Would 'The Making of the English Working Class' get made today?

Abstract

It is fifty years since leftist publisher Victor Gollancz published *The Making of the English Working Class* by English historian Edward Palmer Thompson (1924–1993). During 2013, this event has been, and is being, commemorated globally in political and scholarly conferences and journals. My dilapidated copy is the Penguin revised edition (1968), purchased in 1970. Still in print, and with more than a million copies sold worldwide, Thompson's hugely influential doorstep book is regarded as a pivotal exploration of social history, as much an historical classic as it is a literary classic. The book runs to some 900 pages and over a quarter-million words.

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Would *The Making of the English Working Class* get made today?

By [Rowan Cahill](#)

12.Sep.13

(8 Comments)

It is fifty years since leftist publisher Victor Gollancz published *The Making of the English Working Class* by English historian Edward Palmer Thompson (1924–1993). During 2013, this event has been, and is being, commemorated globally in political and scholarly conferences and journals. My dilapidated copy is the Penguin revised edition (1968), purchased in 1970. Still in print, and with more than a million copies sold worldwide, Thompson's hugely influential doorstep book is regarded as a pivotal exploration of social history, as much an historical classic as it is a literary classic. The book runs to some 900 pages and over a quarter-million words.

Footnoting and referencing in *The Making* is simple and hardly existent compared to current academic practice, with its predilection for masses of endnotes, or footnotes that threaten to exile the text from the page. Thompson's bibliography is equally sparse, the author declaring that, given the expanse of time covered in the book (1780–1832), a complete listing was impossible: instead he sufficed with a four-page 'Bibliographical Note'. Collectively, especially through the device of internalising source

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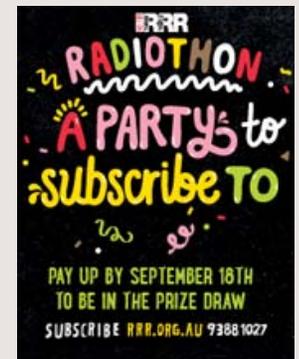
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references unobtrusively in his text as part of the narrative, Thompson indicated and acknowledged his most relevant primary and secondary sources. As Thompson later explained, he deliberately set out in the book to manifest 'rather irreverent attitudes to the academic proprieties'.

The Making is not a continuous narrative, but takes the form of a literary triptych of related themes and studies. Contrary to current scholarly practice, it is not swamped in theoretical language and intellectual refinements accessible only to niche audiences, but is written in an accessible manner, with the intention of being read. As politics and sociology, it demonstrates that class is not a thing, but a happening, made in the contexts of place and time by action, reaction, conflict and change; as social history it demonstrates the rich cultural life, the thoughts and ideas, of 'the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, the "utopian" artisan', people who, prior to 1963, had been largely absent from histories of culture, ideas, and scholarly discourse.

Thompson's book was produced post-WW2, while he was employed at Leeds University, working in adult education; it was his work in this field, and the knowledge there was an audience, that shaped his determination to write an accessible text. He had previously published a book on William Morris (1955), and was associated with leftist journals and publications (*The Reasoner, New Reasoner, Past & Present*) concerned with historical writing and the expression of socialist humanist ideas. These were partisan publications in which he had initiating, editorial and contributor roles, and not publications that would rate highly today as prized scholarly destinations/outlets. Indeed, his mode of publication was the sort of thing which today is not regarded as career friendly for an academic, nor conducive to employment certainties.

Indeed, I wonder if Thompson's book would see the light of day in today's world where academics are directed to 'publish or perish', ideally in top-rated outlets (no matter only a handful of people will read your work), with niche readerships for journals, and global print runs of a few hundred very expensive copies for books.

The Making is a sprawl, a phone book linked by narrative, way longer than the preferred 80,000 word limit of today's publishers and thesis supervisors. Its documentation is on the light side, not the sort of extensive listing made possible today by cyber technologies and programmes. And where would Thompson find the time to read and write in today's market-oriented university, where academic production is straitjacketed by punishing teaching loads and administrative burdens? Where, too, the encouragement to take on a huge task, a big slab of time and a cast of thousands, when the system and the work loads encourage, if not demand, topics that are minute and discrete? And how would *The Making* eventuate in a writing climate attune to the formulaic production of academic/scholarly genres, where the writing process is templated, constrained and shaped by word limits, structures, and mandatory theoretical exegeses?

Sadly, in the modern university, with the role and concept of 'academic' shaped by market forces, and related management, accountability and performance processes, the making of another *The Making* is more likely to be terminated at conception rather than allowed to run full-term.



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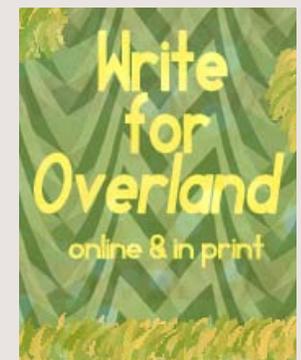
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