The Muggletonian Message: E. P. Thompson, William Blake and Intellectual Radicalism

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Abstract
I read Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law (Cambridge University Press) soon after it was published in 1993, and following the death that same year of its author, veteran radical historian and anti-nuclear campaigner E P Thompson.

I found the book a source of strength because it dealt with themes and issues I was grappling with as the Greedy 1980s gave way to the Economic Rationalism of the 1990s, corporate banditry, and as post-Cold War intellectuals heaped scorn on anyone who still took socialism and/or Marxism seriously. For me Thompson’s book was a statement of radical affirmation: it was about the passing on of radical faith across generations and centuries; it was about how the no-names of history, those people and outfits not listed amongst history’s winners, may, in a sense, be the real winners.

Keywords
intellectual, blake, william, radicalism, thompson, muggletonian, p, e, message

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

This journal article is available at Research Online: https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/887
I read *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge University Press) soon after it was published in 1993, and following the death that same year of its author, veteran radical historian and anti-nuclear campaigner E. P. Thompson.

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Thompson begins disarmingly. As he explains, *Witness Against the Beast* is his contribution to ‘the overfull shelves of studies of William Blake’. Having said that, Thompson explains what the book is not; it is not an introduction to the poet, nor to his work; nor is it an interpretative study ‘of his life, his writing, his art, his mythology, his thought’.

Rather it is an attempt to place Blake ‘in the intellectual and social life of London between 1780 and 1820’ and identify ‘what particular traditions were at work in his mind’. In particular Thompson seeks to link Blake to the Christian tradition of antinomianism, specifically the Muggletonian tradition, and to reconstruct his eclectic mode of thought and learning, largely inaccessible now, according to Thompson, in times where education institutions, hierarchies and orthodoxies shape and define disciplines and intellectual accomplishment.

It is an eccentric book in the best sense of that term, and modestly prefaced with an apology for its existence. Thompson describes his book as a ‘voyage’ and welcomes the reader ‘aboard’; he creates an atmosphere of intimacy, relaxation, adventure, and discovery, ranging easily through a galaxy of styles, at times relaxed, conversational, colloquial, then argumentative and polemical, other times scholarly. Experiencing the book is akin to being the Wedding Guest cornered and enthralled by the Ancient Mariner.

Thompson thinks aloud as he considers the intellectual options and alternatives his material presents; he fantasizes about what he wishes his data could prove, before settling for what it does support. In some ways *Witness Against the Beast* is also a portrait of a historian at work.

Obviously this Blake book meant a great deal to Thompson. Its roots are in his classic *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963); in 1968 he gave a lecture on Blake at Columbia University organised by Students for a Democratic Society; the book took shape from lectures he delivered at the University of Toronto in 1978. Anti-nuclear campaigning, earning a living, other writing projects, and ill-health contributed to the project going onto the backburner, Thompson finally presenting the manuscript to his publisher not long before his death in 1993; in all, a thirty year ‘voyage’.

Muggletonians are central to Thompson’s study. Originating in the seventeenth century English revolution
with the London tailor Ludowick Muggleton, the obscure Protestant sect survived for 300 years, never more than a few hundred members at most. Muggletonians rejected the laws of the Church and the State as oppressive, were fiercely anti-clerical, and opposed tithes, oaths and the bearing of arms; they met in private homes and taverns, singing ‘divine songs’ to the popular and patriotic tunes of the day; they conducted their affairs in secrecy, by correspondence, and often in the form of hand copied literature and tracts.

The sect was thought to have died out in the nineteenth century; their arduously preserved records were available for historical scrutiny until the 1860s, after which they disappeared. Thompson’s patient sleuthing rediscovered them in Kent in 1975, some 80 apple boxes full of records dating from the seventeenth century, in the possession of 70 year old apple farmer Philip Noakes, the last Muggletonian, who had saved the records from the German bombing of London in 1940-41. The archive is now in the British Library.

Little is known about William Blake’s intellectual evolution, though there is much conjectural history of ideas. Initially Thompson hoped to show that Blake was a Muggletonian, since so much of Blake is resonant of Muggletonian conduct, symbolism, debate, attitudes, and processes. However in spite of his literary and historical sleuthing, and massive archival endeavours, Thompson could only conclude that Blake was deeply influenced by the Muggletonian tradition.

So why did Thompson bother to produce this book? No matter what was intended at the outset of his project, by the time the mature Thompson got around to actually writing his book it had turned into a personal political allegory. ‘I like these Muggletonians’, says Thompson, even though ‘they were not among history’s winners’. Many things about the Muggletonians appeal to him: their tenacity, and survival; their contribution to the late seventeenth/eighteenth century vortex of ideas which was disproportionate to their actual numbers; their confident intellectualising ‘from below’ without reference to official education and religious hierarchies; their preparedness to tackle the great issues of Good and Evil and wrestle with the antagonisms between the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Jesus; their cantankerousness; their resistance to the State; their mode of operation; the richness and complexity of their symbolism which enabled them to conceptualise and debate all aspects of the human condition; and so on. Most of all Thompson seems to like them for the way they ‘struggled to define their own sense of system’.

Thompson admires William Blake. The poet never submitted to the State. And when radical compatriots turned to conservatism and Toryism in despair, as they recoiled from the shambles the French Revolution became, Blake remained a lifelong radical. According to Thompson this constancy drew strength from Blake’s belief system, at the core of which was the affirmation of Thou Shalt Love and Thou Shalt Forgive, and with this the ability to live with ‘constellations of related attitudes and images’ and connected insights rather than a coherent intellectual system. Further, Blake understood that human nature is not finally perfectible and that reason alone is not all there is to life; that there is a ‘kingdom within’ each one of us that needs to be touched and liberated. In the Thompson analysis Blake can provide us with ‘a plank in the floor upon which the future must walk’.

With ‘the plank’ reference to Blake the allegorical nature of the book is apparent. *Witness Against the Beast* is Edward Thompson’s message to the future. There is hope for dissenters, and a point to dissent, in the post-modern world, in spite of the end of ideology and the apparent global dominance of market materialism. In other times, in other uphill struggles against triumphant materialism backed by a ruthless state, the Muggletonians, and Blake, remained rebellious and dissentingly on task, keeping alive alternatives, other expectations, and the possibility for human renewal.

More than a study of a Protestant sect and William Blake, *Witness Against the Beast* is about maintaining radical perspectives and faith when the pressure is on to variously recant, compromise, give up, opt out. It is also about the nature of the sort of radical intellect and faith that survives. Biographically it can be seen as the final personal summative statement by a major radical intellectual, about being a radical intellectual.
In a couple of senses *Witness Against the Beast* brought Thompson full circle: the son of tough liberal, religious non-conformists (his parents had been Methodist missionaries in India, his father a critic of British imperialism) rounded his life with a book about religious and political non-conformity; the academic who cut his teeth on a major study of William Morris (1955), concluded his career with a study of another radical and original literary figure.

For those of us who think of ourselves as socialists, and if we are serious about taking our great visionary, humane, and combative tradition into the twenty first century, *Witness Against the Beast* is worth reading; a book to be reflected upon rather than filleted for footnotes.