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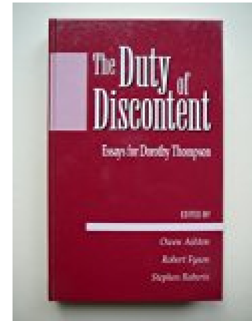
Dorothy Thompson, Owen R. Ashton, Robert Fyson, Stephen Roberts. *The Duty of Discontent: Essays for Dorothy Thompson.* New York: Mansell, 1995. xii + 276 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7201-2201-5.



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Dorothy Thompson is one of Britain's leading social historians. She has played a vital role in recapturing and publicizing the history of radicals, women, and ethnic groups. Though in some ways overshadowed by her husband, the late E. P.Thompson, her published work on Chartism, the Irish in Britain, and–most recently–Queen Victoria rank as important contributions to explaining the influence of "outsiders" (those who are excluded from political power and authority) in British history. Yet, as this *festschrift* demonstrates, her most enduring legacy is just as likely to be the work of students and colleagues who have benefited from her intelligent and selfless supervision and encouragement.

Twelve such scholars contributed to *The Duty of Discontent*. The title, taken from a lecture by the English radical Thomas Cooper, captures "… the passionate radicalism, sympathy for the underdog, and a critical approach to conventional orthodoxies" evidenced in Thompson's career (p. xi). The essays can be loosely grouped into four categories: an introductory analysis of Thompson's method; three essays on Chartism; another three on social relations; and five on outsiders. As a representative sample of Dorothy Thompson's academic interests and influences, this is a fine book. Ironically, it does not reflect the political concerns that infused her work with such passion, empathy, and iconoclasm.

Dorothy Thompson's first widely known book was an edited volume of documents called *The Early Chartists*; probably her best-known work is a history of the Chartist movement,[1] described by one reviewer as "… a great social history that ought to be read as a companion volume to Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*."[2] Her research into the roles of women and the Irish in British radical movements shattered any notion that the two groups can be dismissed as politically inconsequential or culturally undifferentiated. Equally groundbreaking was her study of Queen Victoria. Thompson paid close attention to republican critiques of her reign and presented Victoria as a passionate woman quite unlike Strachey's stereotype of the virtuous Victorian. Her assessment of Queen Victoria was favourable–the presence of an intelligent, generally popular woman as head of state prepared Britons for the changing nature of gender relationships during the twentieth century.[3]

As she readily admits, however, publishing was not one of Dorothy Thompson's leading priorities.[4] As the distaff side of what she called the "Thompson academic factory"[5], her days revolved as much around "bringing up children, running a household and taking an active part in contemporary politics…" as around teaching and research.[6] She was born Dorothy Towers in 1923 into a family with "artisanal" roots. Her grandfathers were a shoemaker and a merchant seaman; her father owned a music shop and her mother gave piano lessons and recitals. Her interest in "outsiders" developed from her experiences as a village girl of modest means at a private suburban school, and from her sense that there was more life and joy in the "…villagers and gypsies on the common … than the people at school and their parents."[7] One of the few girls who progressed to the sixth form in her state secondary school, Thompson encountered teachers committed to an egalitarian society and political activism. Inspired by their example, she entered Girton College, Cambridge, in 1942. War work–she was an industrial draughtswoman for Royal Dutch Shell–interrupted her formal education but derailed nei-

ther her progress toward a career in history nor her political activism. She joined the Young Communists, married Edward Thompson, and moved to Halifax where both Thompsons worked in adult education and the peace movement.

Teaching took a more prominent place in her life when Dorothy Thompson accepted a position at the University of Birmingham to relieve the strains of evening classes on her growing family. A secure teaching post enabled Dorothy Thompson to pursue her early interest "...in Chartism and in the agitation for political rights for working people and for women."[8] She acknowledged sacrificing some of her own time to her husband, explaining that "In a working partnership exact equality is seldom achieved, and I have had less time and space for my work than Edward has."[9] Nevertheless, she imbued numerous students with this interest in Chartism, as the volume under review testifies.

One of these former students, Neville Kirk, provides a fine analysis of Dorothy Thompson's method in the opening essay of *The Duty of Discontent.* Kirk, who teaches at Manchester Metropolitan University, links Thompson's interest in social history with changes in contemporary society, especially the political maturation of women, increased social diversity, a more open system of higher education, and the increasing use of theoretical approaches to the past. He describes her method as "...a tough minded historical practice..." which demands an active and ongoing engagement with the past, a process of exchange between hypotheses and facts (p. 1). Crucial to this method is her constant questioning of accepted interpretations and assumptions. This engagement has led her to recreate "more or less single-handedly ... the history of women in Chartism" (p. 20). It has also allowed her to view the history of the Irish in England from the perspective of labourers and radicals rather than officialdom (clerics and bureaucrats: p. 24). Kirk indicates that Thompson constantly tests and clarifies her definitions of class. Neither she nor her students, however, question the privileged position of class as an analytical category in social history.

Given Thompson's seminal contributions to the history of Chartism, it is appropriate that the next three essays deal with that nineteenth-century political reform movement. James Epstein, a professor of history at Vanderbilt University, provides an analysis of the relationship between Chartist leaders and their followers. Sympathetic to the difficulties Feargus O'Connor, Bronterre O'Brien, Peter Murray McDouall, and other prominent Chartists faced, Epstein accords "general coherence" to Chartist language (p. 36). He concludes that Chartist rhetoric rested on an expanded understanding of "constitutionalist action..." (p. 39). This action could potentially take many forms, as he recognises, from petitioning Parliament to armed violence. Epstein digs deeply into the wealth of primary sources from the Chartist movement, paying close attention to the precise language Chartists used.

The next two essays offer further examples of the empirical heart of Dorothy Thompson's method. Stephen Roberts, a fellow at the University of Birmingham, examines letters to the *Northern Star*, the most important Chartist newspaper. It is easy, he acknowledges, to drift away into the advertisements and correspondence columns of the *Star*, but it is easier to dismiss them as trivia. In the range of voices represented by meeting reports, poems, legal advice, humour, and reader's inquiries is evidence of a participatory press. Roberts lists the seventy-four poets whose work appeared in the *Star* and claims that much more poetry was submitted but never published. One of his most interesting conclusions is that "poetry was being produced by the working class on a scale not seen in any other decade of the nineteenth century" (p. 60).

Another important facet of the Chartist movement is the galaxy of leading Chartists virtually unknown outside their own small areas. One such individual is John Richards of Staffordshire. Robert Fyson's "Homage to John Richards"–the title deliberately echoes E. P. Thompson's "Homage to Tom Maguire"[10]–relates the biography of this little-known provincial Chartist leader. Fyson, a research associate at Staffordshire University, deftly shows the human vagaries and political inconsistencies of a local agitator trying to survive in the world of outsiders. Richards was active in political reform and trade unionism before Chartism, and wandered briefly into "foreign-policy Chartism" (an attempt to blame a pro-Russian aristocratic conspiracy for the restrictive franchise) in 1839.

Social relations form the general theme of the middle three essays. In a most innovative contribution, Kate Tiller suggests that rural resistance to enclosures "involved solidarities of greater complexity than any analysis based simply on monolithic views of class will allow" (p. 98). Her findings from a study of rural Oxfordshire counter much received wisdom about agricultural areas. Acknowledging her debt to the pioneering research of George Rude and Eric Hobsbawm, she discovers that the

commons "provided a workable way of life" well into the nineteenth century (p.110). The guardians of custom turned out to be not the mass of landless poor who might be expected to protect the commons but a few landowners (p. 112). Tiller, who coordinates the history offerings of the Oxford University Department of Continuing Education, engages in precisely the type of detailed dialogue between hypothesis and practice modeled by Thompson.

Clive Behagg takes us from the farm to the factory in "Narratives of Control: Informalism and the Workplace in Britain, 1800-1900." This study of "the culture of the workplace" (pp. 122-23) proposes a way to circumvent two dominant narratives of the shop floor. Contending that the managerial and trade-union "stories" ignore the activity of workers themselves, Behagg focuses on informal workplace practices. Like Tiller's essay, this one suggests that custom may not have been as completely extinguished as some historians think. Behagg, who teaches at the Chichester Institute of Higher Education, interprets workplace bacon frying and cardgames as informal gestures toward control of the working day, a late-nineteenth-century equivalent to Saint Monday. Like Dorothy Thompson, he presents workers as active agents in making their own history.

Given Dorothy Thompson's commitment to recovering the history of forgotten and excluded groups, it comes as no surprise to find not one but two essays dealing with pauper lunatics. The first, by L. D. Smith, a fellow at the University of Birmingham, illustrates the ways in which class standing came to determine the treatment of lunatics. As the number of "people deemed insane" grew at the end of the eighteenth century, the ability of local poor law guardians to care for them declined. The guardians responded in many cases by contracting their care out to county insane asylums. As a result, county asylums began to differentiate lunatics by class in the early nineteenth century. Although the author evinces some conceptual uncertainty–he conflates rank and class (p. 143)–Smith presents a valuable overview of the incomplete transition to "the segregation of the classes in public asylums," pointing to similarities in their treatment as well as differences (p. 155).

A second essay touching on this topic is Glen Matthews's "Poverty and the Poor Law in the First World War in Worcestershire." Matthews puts orthodox views of the social history of World War I to the test. He studies how the poor law dealt with the elderly, the provision of medical services, the insane, and vagrants. These groups were outsiders in the sense that they did not share the generally higher standards of living enjoyed by civilians in Britain during World War I. Lower benefits and an increasing cost of living meant increased mortality rates. Matthews, who teaches at Evesham College, Worcester College, and the Open University, concludes that the poor law administration survived the war intact despite the strains placed on local guardians.

Owen Ashton explores the link between W. E. Adams, the Chartist journalist, and Henrietta Stannard, "an eminent Victorian" known for her novels of military life written under the pseudonym John Strange Winter (p. 168). Stannard was an outsider for her political beliefs: she agitated for animal rights, rational dress, and fair treatment of children. She was also an outspoken critic of domestic violence. Her husband acted as her agent and she promoted a "zealous domesticity" (p. 173). Ashton, a principal lecturer at Staffordshire University, records Stannard's connection with Adams as their shared concern with animal rights campaigns in the 1880s.

The life of an ethnic and occupational outsider is recorded in Angela V. John's essay on Elizabeth Robins, an American actress who became prominent in the British suffrage movement. Robins helped introduce Ibsen to English audiences but left the stage to pursue a writing career. Robins's political activism began in 1905 and included the suffragist play called *Votes for Women!* and the political novel *The Convert*. Robins steadfastly refused to countenance protective legislation for women workers; rather, John stresses, she argued that "...what women needed most was the protection of the vote" (p. 202). It is here that Robins's life provides new insight into the suffrage movement. John, professor of history at the University of Greenwich, suggests that historians may have underestimated the extent of the suffrage movement's efforts to mobilise working-class women.

Two groups of ethnic outsiders form the subject matter of the final essays. John Belchem of the University of Liverpool presents an overview of mutuality among the Catholic Irish of Liverpool. He sees Irish immigrants as practicing a form of collective self-help that falls outside the horizons of most labour histories. Informal and difficult to document, this occurred in two stages. Immigrants initially joined Ribbon societies (secret republican clubs) for access to work and basic insurance. Ribbonism gave way to organised charity in a move by the Catholic church to end the habit of meeting in pubs and plotting revolution. Father Nugent's efforts to offer an alternative succeeded in part because of the support he received from

the parish officials and Irish press in Liverpool. Belchem does an excellent job of presenting the Liverpool Irish as a heterogeneous group unamenable to stereotyping. He also demonstrates the many ways in which this group must be differentiated from other Irish communities on the mainland.

The last essay is an analysis of the Italian community in England's second city. Carl Chinn, who holds the post of community historian for Birmingham City Council in addition to teaching duties at the University of Birmingham, examines the handful of Italian immigrants–a few hundred at most–who settled in nineteenth-century Birmingham. His object is to show the existence of a small community of Italians in Birmingham, and in this he is successful. He establishes their presence using census data and illustrates differences within this small group. He concludes with several questions worth pursuing, amounting to a call for examining the culture of this group and what it meant for them to be in Birmingham.

Is this volume, then, a fair reflection of Dorothy Thompson's contributions to British history? To the extent that she offered innovative interpretations of Chartism, ethnicity, and gender, the answer has to be a resounding yes. The essays all evince the type of dialectic between hypothesis and evidence that is the hallmark of Thompson's research. They are modest contributions grounded in hard empirical evidence and usually questioning received wisdom. They all suggest areas for further research.

For many young historians the Thompsons have been the model for combining political engagement with outstanding scholarship. It is therefore disappointing that this vital synergism has been omitted from an otherwise excellent *festschrift*. Politics imbricated the Thompson household. Dorothy Thompson participated in the Historians' Group of the Communist Party, the New Left, and campaigns for day care and nuclear disarmament. According to Bryan D. Palmer, she took the more active political role in the early years of their partnership.[11] Her political convictions shine through her work.

To give just one example, her concerns about the undemocratic nature of contemporary forms of British governance find an echo in her work on the Chartists. In a volume of antiwar essays she edited, Thompson wrote, "Here in Britain we have one of the most secretive defence establishments in the world, and one of the least accessible to control by the democratic institutions of the country."[12] The origin of this anti-democratic politics is suggested in the conclusion to *The Chartists*, where she records the growing power of a government establishment "accessible only to those who had been educated within a system from which working people were totally excluded" ironically concurrently with the expansion of the franchise between 1867 and 1919.[13] Overlooking the creative and coherent nexus between the political and historical work of Dorothy Thompson is the book's greatest shortcoming.

Notes

[1]. *The Early Chartists*, ed. Dorothy Thompson (London: Macmillan, 1971); and Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

[2]. Duane C. Anderson, review of *The Chartists*, in *American Historical Review*, vol. 90, no.2 (April 1985), 415.

[3]. Dorothy Thompson, *Queen Victoria: Gender and Power* (London: Virago, 1990), p. 145.

[4]. Dorothy Thompson, "Introduction," *Outsiders: Class, Gender and Nation* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 1.

[5]. Thompson, *The Chartists*, p. xiv.

[6] Thompson, *Outsiders*, p. 1. The following biographical information is from the introduction to *Outsiders*, pp. 1-18.

[7]. Thompson, *Outsiders*, p. 3.

[8]. Thompson, *Outsiders*, p. 14.

[9]. Thompson, *Outsiders*, p. 9.

[10]. E. P. Thompson, "Homage to Tom Maguire," in *Essays in Labour History*, ed. Asa Briggs and John Saville (London: Macmillan, 1960).

[11]. Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E. P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1981), p. 35.

[12]. Dorothy Thompson, "Defend Us Against Our Defenders: Democracy and Security," *Over Our Dead Bodies: Women Against the Bomb*, ed. Dorothy Thompson (London: Virago, 1983), p. 65.

[13]. Thompson, *The Chartists*, p. 335.

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