4 The Empire and Mr. Thompson: The Making of Indian Princes and the English Working Class with Madhavi Kale

‘England ... taking only itself as its standard.’

Karl Marx¹

‘What do they know of England who only England know?’

Kipling’s mother²

‘What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?’

C. L. R. James³

PROLOGUE

As a child I had no doubt that Indians were our most important visitors: the sideboard loaded with grapes and dates was testimony of this. A little older, I would cadge postage stamps from poets and political agitators. Older again, I stood in awe before the gracious Jawaharlal, as he asked me about my batting technique.

Edward Palmer Thompson⁴

In ‘The Nehru Tradition’ Edward Palmer Thompson described how just before his death in 1946, his father, Edward John Thompson, had received a letter from Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.⁵ ‘My father read it,’ E. P. Thompson wrote, ‘propped on his pillows, in the evening hours when his mind was cleared of drugs. It was a letter with the warmth of an Indian wind, thanking him for his work for India. My father let the letter drop onto the sheet: “Oh Lord, now let thy servant depart in peace!” Several days later he died.’ Accompanying this letter,
Thompson added, ‘There was [one] also for me, in the same generous terms. From this moment, I suppose, stemmed my “deviation”.’

Here, then, is a moment of some significance in the biography of one of the most influential postwar British historians. Indian history, the life and influence of Jawaharlal Nehru, the life and work of Edward John Thompson, were all of great significance in the development of this ‘deviant’. And yet this realization on E. P. Thompson’s part, buried in a relatively obscure essay in one of his less-read works – indeed, in a work which is more political than historical in nature – parallels the status of India in British history itself. It is a central part of the story, but seldom recognized as such. Moreover, there is a distinct irony here that we wish to highlight in this paper. A man so shaped and influenced by the existence of the British Empire as it was represented in Anglo-Indian history, who described himself as having had his ‘political consciousness cut its teeth on the causes of Spain and Indian Independence’, and who modeled himself on his father, almost entirely denied a place for the empire and imperialism in his own historical writing. While the influence of the father is clearly present in the work of the son, empire itself is conspicuous by its absence. This would have a profound impact on E. P. Thompson’s analysis and would consequently shape the development of social history in Britain and the United States.

In this essay, therefore, we intend to highlight an aspect of E. P. Thompson’s work that has received minimal attention in the various articles and festschriften produced in his honor, namely his relationship with the British Empire within which he was born. To describe this relationship fully, we focus on the legacy of the father, Edward John. Further, while we do not discuss here E. P. Thompson’s influence on other Anglo-American social historians, we would argue that his centrality to the emergence of Social History means that this relationship with empire helped to shape the work of a whole generation of historians who followed in the younger Thompson’s wake (a point returned to in Chapter 10). To understand the genealogy of Social History and developments within the Western historical profession over the last 30 years, therefore, the lens has to be widened so that it encompasses not just someone like E. P. Thompson, but, through him, Edward Thompson, Jawaharalal Nehru, and Vinayak Savarkar as well. Unearthing such genealogies should make us more keenly aware of the politics of history writing, ‘its conditions of production, its power to shape knowledge systems and to hide its own (in this case) orientalist origins and presumptions’.