

BOOK REVIEWS

E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* Merlin Press, 1991. £25.

Like that other late flower from the Warwick School, Peter Linebaugh's *The London Hanged* (1991), *Customs in Common* is a book that has been a long time coming, a long time maturing. The idea that below, behind, or otherwise concealed by official history, there is another story to tell, of resistance and counter-culture, found early expression in Thompson's seminal *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). It has been discussed and developed and honed through three full decades since then, in Thompson's studies of time and work (1967), the crowd (1971), crime (1975), and class (1974 and 1978); and also through the work of such like-minded historians as Linebaugh. Here it is again, then, in a full-length study of custom, which incorporates some of the earlier studies I have mentioned. How is the idea faring? And is there indeed a place, in the allegedly caring 'nineties, for that veteran idea of the 'sixties, 'history from below'?

Judging from *Customs in Common*, the idea remains surprisingly healthy, though it has adapted itself somewhat to changed circumstances. One notices, for example, a greatly increased insistence on those undervalued resources for history: anecdote, folklore, poetry, and oral and literary sources in the widest sense. Thompson uses them not as substitutes for archival and similar evidence, but as equal partners to these 'hard' sources, lending vibrancy to the story, and widening its perspective from social to social-and-cultural history. If this seems like a good thing, it is not necessarily an end in itself. *Customs in Common* has a particular need to use anecdotal and literary sources because it deals with that most anecdotal subject, 'customs'—human interactions based on the *understood*, the *usual*, the *customary*, all unquantifiable concepts as compared to, say, the law, the historians of which have not felt the need to quote much poetry or folk-lore. Worse, 'custom' is, in Thompson's words, 'a place in which many interests contested for advantage in the eighteenth century' (175). So we cannot trust the witnesses either: they might just be using the past, in Raymond Williams's phrase, as a stick to beat the present.

Thompson steers his way past these theoretical obstacles skilfully: the price is quite a lot of theorizing, particularly over terminology, but this is rarely dull or needless (an exception being the chapter on 'The Moral Economy Reviewed', which outstays its welcome once it gets significantly longer than the essay it reviews and defends). The journey itself is a startlingly interesting one. As read through the work of the nineteenth-century collectors, 'folk customs' are usually perceived in picturesque or nostalgic terms, their ancient and ritualistic characteristics seemingly removing them from the social and economic arena. Thompson restores them to these areas, bringing them to life as part of the dynamics of change and continuity in eighteenth-century society. In particular, customs are read as a means of resistance, their qualities as things communally felt and shared making them particularly suitable for countering an increasingly legalistic, depersonalised culture.

Thus 'beating the bounds', a conservatively ritualistic annual re-affirmation activity controlled by the church, could become a means of resisting enclosure (and could even breach royal park walls). Customary controls over the price of corn could lend legitimacy to the seizure and price-setting of corn stocks. The 'customary' celebration of 'Saint Monday' and other such rituals of temporal self-determination

were ways of resisting the trend towards externally timed and controlled work. And even the more disturbing (and sometimes degrading and sexist) 'customs' discussed, such as the rituals of 'Rough Music' and 'Wife Sales, can be read in terms of countering the sexual hypocrisy of society (Thompson's arguments on these topics are rather too subtle to rehearse here).

Readers of this journal will want to know that there is an interesting critical discussion of Clare's role as a witness to enclosure here (pp. 179-84). I suspect that enthusiasts will want to stay longer, however. For this is a thoroughly worthwhile study of eighteenth-century customs. It will be of central interest to anyone working in the period (or indeed just interested in Clare and his 'background').

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