A salute to Willie Thompson

Comments on some of the work of this journal's founding editor

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A lifetime of commitment

Willie Thompson's death in June 2023 was first and foremost a painful loss to his partner Myra, his son Alan and his wider family and networks of personal friends. Beyond those intimate circles, many people in socialist, green, and progressive organisations and those concerned with labour movement history have felt his passing: there have been many tributes to his work as a teacher, a radical activist and as a historian.

Willie was born in Edinburgh in 1939 and then brought up on Shetland (maintaining a strong interest and close links to the Islands for the rest of his life). In 1958, he attended the University of Aberdeen, reading history, becoming chair of the university's Socialist Society, signing up for the Labour Party Young Socialists (and writing letters 'home' to *The Shetland Times* about the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which caused consternation among the Islands' clergymen).

On graduation, he moved to Glasgow, trained as a teacher, and worked in the city's schools for three years. He also joined the Young Communist League and the Communist Party of Great Britain, of which he remained a member until its dissolution.

In 1969, he gained his PhD in economic history from the University of Strathclyde with a thesis (anticipating today's decolonisation agenda) on *Commercial Connections between Glasgow and Africa 1870-1900*. Following a short spell in Wigan, working in further education (and editing the short-lived CPGB bulletin *Wigan Red*), Willie returned to Glasgow in 1971 and took up a post at the newly established College of Technology, continuing there as the institution became Glasgow Polytechnic and then Glasgow Caledonian University, latterly becoming Professor of Contemporary History.

Amongst many other contributions during three decades as a communist, Willie acted as the Party's Scottish student organiser; edited *Scottish Marxist*; was a key member of the Communist Party History Group; and served on the editorial committee of *Marxism Today*, whilst also often taking on local organisational tasks. After leaving Glasgow Caledonian in 2001, he moved to northeast England, becoming there an active member of the Green Party – in which he characteristically gave much encouragement and consistent support to younger activists.

This piece for *Socialist History* comes nowhere near being a comprehensive or considered account of Willie's published work, but offers some reflections on a few of his books which we have been re-reading in recent weeks.[1] Nevertheless, even this short survey indicates the range, variety and value of his published legacy – and we were pleased to be reminded of what Francis describes here as Willie's 'characteristically accessible style, laced where appropriate with a dry wit'. Though we won't experience again the twinkling smile that often accompanied his observations and insights, delivered to the end of his days with a recognisably Shetland twang, Willie Thompson's writings are to be promoted as a major resource for progressive people in these weird and dangerous times.

'Historical memory, analysis and understanding are essential'

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 'fall' of the Berlin Wall and the ascendancy of neo-liberal economics and politics, the early 1990s were a disorientating time for many on the left. One small expression of this disorientation was the sequence of decisions which led in 1991 to the dissolution of the CPGB, to establish the short-lived Democratic Left organisation.[2]

Willie Thompson supported these decisions – though he subsequently expressed mixed feelings about them and wondered whether dissolving 'the Party' had been a premature and mistaken move, even whilst 'moving on' to play a central role in helping to establish and develop Sunderland's branch of the Green Party.

He did, however, consistently maintain that finding ways to confirm, sustain and extend the tradition of the Communist Party History Group was important and worthwhile. Rather than declining as the CPGB headed towards its final congress, the history group was *increasing* its output of publications and attracting new members. Active members saw it as ever more urgent that we should make sense of 'our history' and critically evaluate the socialist and communist political traditions, together with other radical and progressive movements.

Responding to this energy and potential, whilst recognising that it came from 'the experience of defeat', Willie became one of the clearest voices proposing that the history group continue, and that it reconstitute itself as the self-standing Socialist History Society, with membership becoming open to all interested persons, regardless of party affiliation, and 'with a remit … to promote historical discussion and research on the left'.[3]

Not everyone was convinced that the plan would succeed: in a 1991 telephone conversation with Willie, Eric Hobsbawm suggested that another option would be for the CP History Group to merge with the Society for the Study of Labour History – an entirely positive proposal, though Hobsbawm soon accepted that there was space at that time for both organisations (and others concerned with labour movement and radical history), and was pleased to serve as the Socialist History Society's Honorary President.

Always ready to put in the work which followed on from proposals he had advanced, Willie's discussions with the radical publishers Pluto Press led to them publishing the first issue of *Socialist History* in summer 1993. Willie was the central person in the initially small editorial team, with David Parker and I providing some input and support. He introduced the journal as focussing 'upon socialist history in both senses of the term, namely the history of the specifically socialist (as distinct from the broader labour) movement … and on history produced from a socialist perspective but according to the highest standards of evidence and analysis'.[4] Willie himself contributed a range of articles and reviews to the journal, including a series of 'profiles in history' on figures including Samuel Pepys, Edward Gibbon and Maximilien Robespierre.

In 1998, Willie continued as the key member of the significantly enlarged editorial team as, from issue 13, the journal struck a new relationship with Rivers Oram publishers. In 2000, he stepped back from the editor's role, though continuing as an active and committed member of the editorial team until overtaken by the health issues that led to his death.

With *Socialist History* now at another turning point in terms of our publishing arrangements, and with a track record of publishing high-quality material across sixty-four issues over the last thirty years, Willie's observation in his survey of the Communist Party History Group tradition remains as relevant as ever: 'these are indeed challenging times around the globe and far from being the most hopeful. They are the contemporary culmination of processes which stretch back over decades and centuries. If the present realities are to be effectively faced and comprehended, historical memory, analysis and understanding are essential'.[5]

(*MMW*)

Preserving the legacy of the people's historian

Writing in the collection *Rebels and their Causes* (London, 1978), Eric Hobsbawm was clear that the Historians' Group of the Communist Party 'played a major part in the development of Marxist historiography in this country'. Willie Thompson added that an important impetus for its formation was A.L. Morton's 1938 volume, *A People's History of England*, a book still in print and widely translated. Morton, though not an academic, became the group's chair and, to quote Willie Thompson, its 'fountainhead'. His close interest and admiration surfaced again in Willie's contribution to a CP History Group pamphlet to mark the bicentenary of the 1688 'Glorious Revolution' which Morton had been working on before his death – and again in 2005 in a paper on Morton to a Socialist History Society conference celebrating Bill Moore.[6] Despite this support, Morton continued to be a generally neglected figure after his death in 1987. A recent exception was a substantial article by Christian Høgsbjerg assessing Morton's book and its wider context.[7] Though some of Morton's extensive journalism is online and his small collection of other books can still be found, an important starting point for any new study of his life and work would have to be *Rebels and their Causes* together with another essential collection, *History and the Imagination: Selected writings of A.L Morton* (London, 1990): Willie was closely involved with both volumes, either as co-editor or contributor.

Christopher Hill observes in *History and the Imagination* that Morton's *People's History* filled what was largely a void in Marxist work on English history, adding that it was 'a foretaste and one of the best examples of history from below'. Willie described Morton's focus on 'the historical nature of class struggle throughout British history'.

The great strength of Thompson and Margot Heinemann's collection, and its contribution to Morton's legacy, is that it presents the wider and prolific Morton. Not simply the 'peoples' historian' but an outstanding literary critic, who wrote for T.S. Eliot's *Criterion* magazine, and who was able to blend the two fields together 'as social struggle and the imaginative expression and understanding of that struggle'. The collection drew on Morton's extensive writing to select key texts that would encompass the 'full sweep' of his interests and his intellectual contribution to radical thinking – no mean feat given the extent of his output. The material included essays, articles and reviews covering radical political history, literature, and music, together with a selection of Morton's poetry. They are supported by two appreciations by Hill and Raphael

Samuel. The essays ranged from the linkage between the French revolutionaries and English democrats, a personal memoir of his friend, the renowned folklorist and singer A.L. (Bert) Lloyd, to literary figures such as Eliot and E.M. Forster, and radicals such as John Ruskin and William Morris. For Thompson and Heinemann, even towards the end of his life, the clarity of Morton's thought never dimmed. He was a master of popularising historical and literary journalism, producing masterpieces of compression: a man, according to Christopher Hill, 'incapable of writing badly'.

Rebels and their Causes had been published a decade earlier to honour Morton on his seventy-fifth birthday. It was, said its editor Maurice Cornforth, a collection of historical and literary essays written not only by friends, such as Hobsbawm and Hill, but also colleagues and admirers. One of those was Willie, who was testimony to Cornforth's assertion that: 'There is no British Marxist today, young or old, who does not owe a debt to Leslie Morton's works'. While Thompson performed the crucial task of compiling the index, he also celebrated Morton's legacy by contributing an essay building on the tenets of Morton's research on the Ranters and other radicals of the English civil war period. Traditional historiography, said Thompson, had buried the 'naïve communism' of these groups who within the prevailing religious framework had developed a 'vision of social equality and property redistribution'. Thompson's own focus was also on a period of popular resistance, in seventeenth century Scotland. Picking up Morton's point about the Ranters, that historians failed to see the underlying political and class implications, Thompson argues that the Scottish revolt can be seen as a bridge between the popular movements of the Middle Ages and the emergence of modern revolutionary processes.

The framework was also a religious one and centred on the independence of the Scottish Presbyterian Church (the 'kirk'). The resisters were 'Covenanters' who pledged to resist the Stuart regime's attempt to impose new forms of church governance and worship, overriding the traditional primacy of the Scottish leadership. Greed and power grabbing were also involved. Thompson notes that the kirk had a 'deep penetration among the peasantry' and the leadership of the resisters became increasingly 'plebian'. As Stuart repression became more violent and widespread, resistance shifted from civil disobedience to armed struggle. Its most militant and uncompromising wing were the 'Cameronians', named after their founding leader Richard Cameron. In a tight narrative, Thompson re-interprets the historical record in terms of class, to offer a better understanding of

the Cameronians who had been portrayed either as saintly Calvinists or bigoted brigands. For him, 'the uncompromising stand of poor men and women in the face of arbitrary and ferocious state power deserves to be respected'.

While these two books represent a fraction of his output, they remain important contributions to preserving the legacy of A.L. Morton and preparing for an appropriate time to lift him out of relative obscurity. It would be a fitting tribute to Willie Thompson if that were to happen.

(*MM*)

The Good Old Cause: the author's own reflections

At the end of the 1980s, Willie Thompson responded to the likelihood that the CPGB would dissolve by working on what became the first one-volume assessment of the party's entire history. *The Good Old Cause: British communism 1920-1991* (London, 1992) covered the seventy-odd years from 'origins and development' to 'prostration', combining succinct summaries of key moments and debates with Willie's personal assessments of often controversial issues: reviewers in both the *Morning Star* and the Trotskyist journal *Revolutionary History* were united in being most unimpressed (if for divergent reasons).[8]

For many younger historians who saw British communism as a political movement and tradition which deserved to be studied and understood, however, the book became a key reference point even as, over subsequent years, a large body of relevant documentation became accessible for the first time with the opening of the Moscow archives.

In 2002, ten years after its publication, Willie spoke about his book in an interview carried out for *Socialist History* but not published at the time.[9]

Willie Thompson (WT): It's full of faults. If I were writing it now, even without what we have learned in the interim, I would write it very differently. Of course, one of the problems was that I only had 100,000 words, and it all had to be compressed in.

I am not saying that I reject it. It was a decent enough history on the basis of what was at that time available. I didn't use the party records, and it is very deficient in that respect. I used published material, of which I have quite a large collection of my own, but I didn't use the party archives.[10] They hadn't been organised at that point and … it was a sensitive time … I was writing when the party still existed.

Mike Makin-Waite (MWW): Would it therefore be worth writing another one-volume history of the party?

WT*:* I would like to. I would like it to be bigger. All the subsequent ones which have been published to date have been terrible, actually.

MMW: What is there that's worth saying about the history of the CPGB that you didn't say in *The Good Old Cause*?

WT: I would like to give it a more considered analysis. I would like to deal with the differences between different parts of the country. I would like to be able to substantiate what I was saying from the party archives.

MMW*:* And there are aspects of the party's history which haven't yet had any significant treatment – the CPGB's representation and involvement in local government, for example …

WT: Yes, that would be very interesting. And the whole gender dimension still awaits a full treatment.

MMW: But the big story from your book is that the CPGB was always caught, stymied, trapped, in this mismatch between having revolutionary, transformative aspirations and …

WT: … the reality of the situation, of being in a political culture inimical to its ambitions … I wouldn't want to change that general conclusion …

MMW: But the micro-stories, of mainly good people trying to do mainly good things and good things coming out of that …?

WT: Yes, there are many of those stories still to be told.

MMW: There's an interesting debate taking place now about the degree to which the CPGB was shaped by being a section of the Communist International. What's your view about the extent to which the party had genuine domestic roots in British political culture?

WT: Well, after the 'Class Against Class' period at the end of the 1920s, the CPGB was always running to catch up with where it had been in this respect.

MMW: Are you saying that this 'sectarian' phase in the party's history was determined by impositions from Moscow?

WT: Well, in his recent excellent book, Matt Worley demonstrates pretty clearly that in the end the orders came from Moscow, but that there was a powerful pressure from within the British party in the same direction … Moscow was pushing at an open door.[11]

There's the example of the Independent Labour Party to consider on this. The ILP seems to suggest that a party that was (semi-) detached from Labour but at the same time didn't have the connections that the CPGB had couldn't survive. On the other hand, the ILP was very badly led, so that argument isn't decisive.

Looking at it conceptually, there seems to have been so many opportunities that a left-wing party without the communists' disadvantages could have made use of in order to establish itself as a real force in British politics. But nowhere do you find an example of that. You do not find a really revolutionary party unconnected to the communist movement which is successful in advanced capitalism.

Remember, too, that the CPGB's liabilities were also its assets. The Soviet connection damned it, in the Cold War, but on the other hand it was the Soviet connection which had enabled it to increase to about 60,000 members during the Second World War.

MMW: And in the 1930s, the Soviet connection had been crucial in attracting the cadre that shaped the party throughout most of the rest of its existence.

WT: It's interesting, counter-factually, to imagine something that certainly might have been a possibility – that the Stalin revolution hadn't happened, that the Bukharinite agenda had won out and the Soviet Union had reverted openly to capitalism sometime in the early 1930s.[12] We would have had an uneven and fragmented left, adapting to local conditions … now, of course, we have a much greater problem, in that all varieties of socialism are discredited …

History as a progressive science: countering the excesses of postmodernism

In *What Happened to History?* (London, 2000) and *Postmodernism and History* (Basingstoke, 2004), Willie Thompson explained the 'postmodern

turn' in history, and offered assessment and critique. The two books overlap a little in terms of themes and material, but they are organised differently, and both are well worth revisiting.

The first of his specifically historiographical books begins with Thompson's account of how his own theoretical standpoint developed, and a clear statement that 'verifiable knowledge is possible, though mostly provisional and always incomplete'. He then provides an account of 'historiographical evolution' in Europe and the United States up to the 1960s, before sketching the transformations which began in that decade, and the 'conceptual conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s'. He highlights the work of E.P. Thompson (no relation), 'which was to set the trend with which we are concerned and in due course to revolutionise English-speaking historiography'.

This is not to say that E.P. Thompson himself promoted postmodernist approaches. What happened was that his concern in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963/1968) with 'the losers as well as the winners in the historical process', and his conviction that these 'losers' had 'historical validity in their own right', was 'the initial step in putting a new conception of social history at the centre of historiographical debate'. This new conception generated much of great value – but then the 'near-total defeat' of the left resulting from the rise of neo-liberalism, the collapse of communism and the hollowing of social-democracy 'encouraged certain courses which are … largely though not altogether misconceived in their approach to historiography'.

The 1980s saw 'a marked turn … from social history to cultural and intellectual history, with society treated as "social text"'. Taken together with the significant influence of poststructuralism, this laid the basis for postmodernist sensibilities. Willie noted that 'the great majority of poststructuralists/postmodernists would regard themselves as being on the left in some sense of that overworked term', and 'as standing in opposition to the powers-that-be': postmodernists were certainly seen 'by the political and academic right wing … as subverters of Western values and Western culture'.

But postmodernist approaches made space for the voices of 'previously marginalised and subordinated subjects' in a particular way, by promoting 'theories which deny the validity of an accepted "universal" definition of reality, which show how the dominant ideology has constructed "the Other" and insist upon the equivalent appropriateness of ways of seeing and acting deriving from the margins'.

Such relativising theories reflected the left's defeat: many 'purportedly radical' writers and commentators accepted the triumph of 'global

capitalism … as permanent and irreversible, at least over foreseeable time horizons'. This view was sometimes accompanied by the comforting delusion that 'by deconstructing categories and concepts', one was doing all that was possible to confront the structures of power in the academy or in society. Furthermore, whatever the progressive intentions of many postmodernists of the 1980s and 1990s, the idea that there is an intrinsic validity in the voicing of subjectively perceived 'truths' has also proved to be extremely productive for the populist right: as well as being 'a powerful corrective to teleological complacency … it can also be an invitation to relativism, rejection of interpretative truth and a perspective on the historical past which denies it any coherence or evolutionary direction whatever, let alone one of improvement'.

Willie positioned shifting intellectual trends within a materially grounded account of the institutions in which historiographical production takes place: the changing world of universities, archives, journals and publishers. This means that he avoided what so many have done – generating 'historical theory … in isolation from what most historians have actually been doing'. Instead, his explorations of issues to do with 'reality, representation, truth and narrative', and questions to do with 'grand narrative' ('does history have a meaning? is history going somewhere?') are both stimulating, peppered with wry and witty observations, and based on the understanding that 'the situation of historiography in the present has itself to be explained historically if it is to be meaningfully understood'.

His overall judgement is that however valid some of the themes which postmodernists promoted, such as pointing out that 'the degree to which historians have unthinkingly internalised a model of progress based exclusively upon the experience of Western Europe and North America' is a problem, 'none of those perceptions necessitates the insubstantial theoretical structure in which the postmodern sensibility has embedded them'.

Willie Thompson saw *What Happened to History?* as 'the best thing' he had written up that point, a book 'more or less just exactly as I want to be', whereas he was 'only too conscious of gaps, shortcomings and deficiencies' in his earlier publications.[13] He had 'wanted to provide a response, a contribution to the fight against … ultra postmodernists … who were threatening the destruction of history in the same way that they had destroyed literary studies'. Nevertheless, he developed his thinking in the year or so after the book's publication, distinguishing more clearly between postmodernism and poststructuralism, which are 'not the same thing: a lot of people who are sailing under the banner of postmodernism have made not only useful contributions to historical knowledge, but

have also advanced some valid methodological arguments … the term postmodernism is a fashionable term which some people have adopted, whereas I think that all they are really doing is extending the bounds of historical investigation in the same way that E.P. Thompson did with *The Making of the English Working Class*'.

Willie's recognition that 'many people who would be termed postmodernist are not poststructuralist' made him hopeful that what was valid in their approaches would 'be assimilated into mainstream history', and this perspective shaped his next book.[14] *Postmodernism and History*, commissioned as part of a Palgrave MacMillan series on theory and history, is for the most part arranged thematically, clarifying the concept of postmodernism; interrogating 'debates' about 'the status of historical evidence'; and considering issues to do with representation, narrative and relativism. Alongside substantial considerations on theorists including Hayden White and Keith Jenkins, Thompson makes space for a chapter on Michel Foucault, who 'deserves a separate discussion' because of his 'enormous' impact on social criticism, though Thompson dryly concludes that Foucault's 'reputation owes a great deal more to his rhetoric and promotion as an intellectual superstar than to the substance of his writings – even if these are not wholly negligible'.

Thompson carefully notes a range of 'new and valid insights into society and culture' which 'have expanded the scope of historical understanding'. These 'include paying attention not only to what is said in the record, but the manner and form in which it is said and also the silences … the identification of instances of previously unrecognised permeation of social consciousness by discriminatory and exclusionary practices; identification of the exercise of coercive power in what has been assumed to be benign relationships', and an emphasis on 'the difficulty of reaching, from the surviving evidence, the consciousness of the denizens of past centuries (possibly even of past decades)'.

Nevertheless, his concluding overall judgements are severe: 'historiographical postmodernism … rests upon a theoretical basis which is irredeemably flawed. Its foundation is a presumption which is not merely counter-intuitive but preposterous, namely that language is constitutive of reality, not the other way round. The contrary presumption, that language is purely a reflection of material reality, is also severely flawed, if not quite so drastically. Rather there is, in traditional Marxist terminology, a dialectic between them – they work to constitute each other, and that is how historical change and development occurs, but non-linguistic reality is the primary term of the relationship'.

This is just one of the many succinct, sometimes aphoristic, programmatic statements which shape the *Postmodernism and History.* Concluding one chapter in positive tones, Willie reiterated that 'history as a progressive science – and I see no reason for not brazenly making this claim – is all about correcting the errors of its past practitioners and constantly refining their concepts and their constructed representations – on occasion overthrowing them, but more often improving them and bringing the past into sharper focus rather than insisting that it must always remain blurry if not invisible'.

(*MMW*)

Developing a rich tradition

Willie Thompson's final book, *Work, Sex and Power: The forces which shaped our history* (London, 2015) represents the culmination of his career as a historian. Written in his characteristically accessible style, laced where appropriate with a dry wit, it reflects the remarkable breadth of his interests and knowledge. It covers a much greater timespan than his earlier works: the entire history of *Homo sapiens sapiens* in fact, but with particular emphasis on the last 10,000 years.[15] This sort of (very) *longue durée* history is particularly suited to Marxist and Marx-influenced analytical frameworks. It permits an examination of underlying trends and directions of development without getting too bogged down in the minutiae of specific events. In this Thompson is following a rich tradition, starting with Friedrich Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), and represented in the mid-twentieth century by such works as V. Gordon Childe's *What Happened in History?* (1941) or A.L. Morton's *A People's History of England* (1938). A basic premise of *Work, Sex and Power* – that the development of agriculture from the dawn of the Neolithic period allowed the production of the surplus required for the emergence of class society – will be familiar to anyone versed in the 'materialist conception of history'.

However, the classic Marxist studies of primitive society have been largely superseded by subsequent work and discoveries, not least in archaeology and anthropology. Thompson therefore draws far more extensively on the work of more recent scholars such as David Graeber, Michael Mann, Perry Anderson, Ellen Meiksins Wood and others in order, as he puts it, to 'outline and assess' their conclusions 'within the context and interpretation of historical materialism' (p3). The title indicates the three main areas of human relations in which the inequalities of

class society have played out over the centuries, and work, sex, and power are the threads running through Thompson's exploration of various historical themes.

His 'key propositions' on work and power are that for at least the last 7000 years 'human history has been principally the history of forced labour in multiple forms' (p4), while 'the most significant of power relations is the means by which elite groups [...] forcefully acquire a greater or lesser part of the product of basic producers' (p5). These observations are not startling; very similar points were made by Engels back in 1884. However, Thompson is not only building on a much greater corpus of work – anthropology was in its infancy in Engels' days – but also on the accumulated experience of modern workers', socialist, and anti-imperialist attempts to resist the power of the exploiting classes, as well as a growing awareness of the ecological consequences of human activity.

This more recent information necessarily shakes confidence in some of the certainties underpinning earlier Marxist historiography. When Karl Kautsky posed the alternative 'socialism or barbarism' in 1892 he surely had no doubt that barbarism was avoidable and socialism would prevent it.[16] Thompson, who by 2015 had embraced Green politics, seems less certain. After all, Marxist and Green critiques of capitalist modernity are fundamentally different. Marxism traditionally envisages that the productive potential created by capitalism should be socialised and controlled to work for the benefit of all. Green critiques, in contrast, stress the destruction which that productive potential necessarily inflicts on the biosphere. Reflecting this, he strips the concept of 'progress' of any *inherently* desirable connotations (p6). While the book's peroration is a call to action that seeks to combine 'the emancipatory agenda of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' with 'the effort to save the human world' from environmental disaster (p250), elsewhere the likely effects of climate change are presented in an altogether more fatalistic light, as 'likely to kill billions and fit the survivors to re-experience all the horrors of pre-modern living' (p215).

But even if the political message is less certain, the historical analysis remains sure-footed. After a brief survey of humanity's evolutionary pre-history and dispersal from Africa, Thompson examines the origins of social differentiation in the Neolithic agricultural revolution of around 10,000 years ago. As he puts it, 'a settled lifestyle means stuff can be stored' (p32). A surplus in the hands of some permits the emergence of indebtedness and relations of obligation as a constant factor – and so the process develops.

Willie had long been interested in the development of salvation-cult religions, on which topic he gave a fascinating and very detailed talk to the Socialist History Society over two decades ago. He makes good use of this research in his book, examining first the emergence of salvation religions in general, and then the rise of monotheism and its consequences – which in terms of extracting work, controlling sex and exercising power have been very considerable. While he does not doubt the sincerity of the early Christians' convictions, he stresses the material interests driving the forcible conversion of 'everyone within reach' (p138) once their cult became the Roman state religion, and similar considerations applied in the later spread of Islam.

The treatment of sex in the book is less well integrated into the overall narrative than that of work and power, particularly if we consider that, in the final analysis, the entire history of humanity is the history of the species' reproduction. A separate chapter, 'Gender Differentiation, Sex and Kindred' considers a very wide range of questions, from reproductive anatomy to longevity, religion, recreational and non-reproductive sexual activity, women's subjugation, same-sex attraction, kinship patterns etc. from antiquity to the present day. The treatment of each theme is necessarily very cursory. However, unlike much of the most recent discourse around sex and gender, Thompson's approach remains impeccably materialist, and does not lose sight of the most important aspect of the question – its essential biological function in perpetuating the species.

The exercise of power is necessarily closely related to status, hierarchy and, where expedient, the use of coercion and violence. Thompson looks at the history and development of the different social gradations and hierarchies which coalesced into forms of state power with the beginnings of human settlement. Here, as elsewhere, his vision is global, as he cites examples from the Middle East, China, India and elsewhere. State violence and coercion has to be organised, which is where the history of armies and other military formations comes in, and it needs to be codified and justified, which gives rise to laws, punishments and officially approved moral and ethical codes to determine who is to be punished, how, and on what pretext. A noteworthy – and recent – development is the almost universal rejection in principle of physical torture as an appropriate judicial penalty. The corollary of this has been a massive expansion in the use of imprisonment – a punishment mainly reserved for high-status offenders in earlier epochs.

The latter part of the book deals mainly with phenomena of more recent times – nationalism, imperialism, mass migration, capitalism and

its consequences, and movements of resistance to the existing order. Thompson notes that in Eurasia from at least the time of the Pharaohs, empire in one form or another had been 'the default political system embracing most of the agriculturally settled populations of this area' (p162). The question then arises: why did some of the 'fragmented and mutually quarrelling' successor states to the Western Roman Empire go on to conquer all the great empires of the rest of the globe? (p175) In this context, he considers the massive population movements of the past 500 years, the rise of capitalism, and the numerous contingent factors which ensured that the first industrial revolution took place in Britain, rather than, for example, China or India.

Marxist or Marx-inspired accounts of *longue durée* history would traditionally end on some hopeful note for the future, noting the rise of the socialist or communist movements, the unquashable tendency of the oppressed to resist or even just the fact that the struggle continues. Thompson's final chapters look at the development of social critique and subsequently socialist and communist politics. But, from his standpoint in 2015, with state socialism either in ruins or providing ideological cover for the most rapacious capitalist development, and reformist 'socialism' offering little tangible change, Thompson ruefully concludes that 'the foundations of both were rotten' (p239). Moreover, although he fully recognises the ecological catastrophe facing humanity, his faith in the capacity of politics to deal with the problem seems to have been severely shaken. As Thompson observes:

> So far as it is possible to speak about a fundamental human project across the millennia, that project could be defined as the struggle to escape from nature or to substitute culture for nature, to combat the natural afflictions that characterised the existence of our hominin ancestors, *H. sapiens* and its predecessors – cold, wet, unreliable food source, parasites, predators, early death. Every solution led on to further ambitions and every solution brought with it unforeseen problems (p209).

In former times, there would have been little doubt among Marxists that the benefits of such a project outweighed the costs, and that it should be developed still further, under popular democratic control, for the good of all. In the light of experience, Thompson can clearly see the intrinsic difficulties of the project – but what other project can a species of conscious social animal possibly have?

(*FK*)

Notes

1 In addition to those we refer to here, Willie Thompson's publications include *The UCS Work-In* (co-written with Finlay Hart), London, 1972; *The Long Death of British Labourism: Interpreting a political culture*, London, 1993; *The Left In History: Revolution and reform in twentieth-century politics*, London, 1997; *The Communist Movement since 1945*, Oxford, 1997; *Global Expansion: Britain and its empire, 1870-1914*, London, 1999; *Ideologies in the Age of Extremes: Liberalism, conservatism, communism, fascism, 1914-1991,* London, 2011; *Out of the Burning House: Political socialization in the age of affluence* (co-written with Sandy Hobbs), Cambridge, 2011; and many articles for academic journals and progressive publications, ranging from *Scottish Labour History*, *North East History* (which Willie edited for several years), *History Workshop* and *Contemporary Record* to *New Left Review* and *Marxism Today*.

2 The UK-wide Democratic Left dissolved into the 'New Politics Network' in 1998, which was in turn superseded by ever-more liberal outfits. Democratic Left's Scottish component separated off and, between 2002 and 2016, published a magazine, *Perspectives*, to which Willie Thompson contributed a range of substantial pieces. DLS continues as a non-party political network: https://www.democratic-left.scot/

3 Willie Thompson, Editorial, *Socialist History,* issue 1, Pluto Press, summer 1993.

4 Ibid.

5 Willie Thompson, 'From Communist Party Historians' Group to Socialist History Society, 1946-2017', *History Workshop*, April 2017: https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/communism-socialism/from-communist-party-historians-group-to-socialist-history-society-1946-2017/

6 A.L. Morton, *How Glorious Was the Revolution? (With a preface by Christopher Hill and a section on Scotland by Willie Thompson),* Our History Pamphlet 79, Communist Party History Group, London, July 1988. Thompson's 8 October 2005 talk at the Working Class Movement Library in Salford is referred to in footnote 8 of Christian Høgsbjerg, 'A.L. Morton and the Poetics of People's History', *Socialist History*, 58, (2020).

7 Høgsbjerg, ibid.

8 John Haylett, 'Left waiting for a full and frank history of the Communist Party', *Morning Star*, 13 July 1992; Al Richardson, review, *Revolutionary History*, Spring 1994.

9 Unpublished notes by Mike Makin-Waite on an interview with Willie Thompson, Sunderland, 6 November 2002.

10 Many of the relevant publications and papers of 'Willie Thompson, professor, historian and Communist Party activist' are now held by the Archive Centre of Glasgow Caledonian University.

11 Matthew Worley, *Class Against Class: The Communist Party in Britain between the wars*, London, 2002.
12 The leading Russian revolutionary Nikolai Bukharin had argued in the late 1920s that accommodating to the needs of the countryside was essential to Bolshevik survival, given that the Soviet Union was still an overwhelmingly peasant country. He proposed extending and developing Lenin's New Economic Policy with the aim of increasing agricultural productivity, so that resulting surpluses could resource 'a rising curve' of steady industrialisation. As well as food for urban workers, a prosperous peasantry, 'enriching itself', would supply cotton, wool, and leather as raw materials for industry. Purchasing power in the countryside would create a growing market for manufactured goods, and both the private and state sectors could 'grow into socialism' in mutually beneficial conditions of market relations and civil peace. A victim of Stalin's terror, Bukharin was arrested in 1937, subjected to a show trial, and executed in 1938.
13 Quotes in this paragraph are from MMW's notes on an interview, 2002.
14 MMW's notes on an interview.
15 Thompson notes, not without irony, that *homo sapiens sapiens*, the 'scientific' name for modern humans, can be translated as 'very wise guy' (p6).
16 Most famously, the phrase was used by Rosa Luxemburg in 1916, but it seems Kautsky used it first. See https://climateandcapitalism.com/2014/10/22/origin-rosa-luxemburgs-slogan-socialism-barbarism/