On the Doorstep

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Abstract

I discuss the disjuncture between supervising generations of students in the Warwick History Department who used the Modern Records Centre collections for research, and finally using the University archives myself for the purposes of researching how social history came to Warwick. I reflect on the role of administrative records - the University of Warwick's own administrative records sequence (the 'UWA') held at the MRC in particular - and the role and identity of the worker within them. I further explore the relationship between Thompson and his research assistant E. E. Dodds, illuminating the 'making of history' through the use of paid work, which comes to light through the correspondence between them held as part of the University's administrative records.

Keywords: archive theory; threatening letters; historical research

I began my contribution to the *MRC at 50 Symposium* with the idea of the oddness of having an archive on the doorstep, a stone's throw away from a place of work, which in my case was the old Humanities Building, Library Road, University of Warwick. That was where the Centre for Social History (and the History Department) were located. The Centre for Social History was founded, or so Wikipedia will tell you, in 1968, by E. P. Thompson. Actually, the archive (the Modern Record Centre [MRC]) will tell you that the last (the Thompson part) isn't quite true, as I *could have* related on the day, at very great length.[i] I was also hoping that with my use of the word `archive', the audience might be willing to discuss nomenclature. Does terminology matter to the historical reconstruction of place and time? The vocabulary `archive' is relatively new: in the pre-Derrida era, before the publication of *Archive Fever* in 1995, we used `record offices' - as in `county record office', or `the Modern Records Centre'. We spoke about `getting to the records' not `going to the archives'. The Public Record Office became The National Archives (TNA) as late as 2003. (**Derrida, 1995**) [ii] Does it matter, at all, that we use a vocabulary to reconstruct visiting the Modern Record Centre or the Public Record Office, in say 1975, that wasn't then current? Now there is also `the *the archive*', a happy formulation of the compendious new collection *Archives. Power, Truth and Fiction*. `The the archive' evokes `archive' as idea, as theory and philosophy, as `fluid and multi-vocal space' (**Prescott & Wiggins, 2023**) as its cover-copy claims, far more than it denotes a place like Warwickshire County Record Office.[iii]

I joined the Centre for Social History in 1992 and my relationship with the MRC was tangential. I knew it at second hand, through the work of supervising dozens of Social History MA and PhD theses based on the records it held. The original MA - in *Labour* History, not Social History - was inaugurated in 1968 and it involved a 40,000-word dissertation rather than the much shorter one supervised in the Centre in the 1990s. These later, shorter dissertations are not held as records - anywhere. I do not know what happened to the ones I packed up and buried in a cupboard in the History Department Office when in 1998 the Centre for Social History was disestablished, and its staff was transferred to the Department from whence, in administrative and institutional terms, it had emerged, in the 1960s.

The early, substantial MA dissertations are preserved and catalogued in the Modern Records Centre, as a kind of material marker of the relationship between the Centre for Social History and the Modern Records Centre. I was later to understand more of this relationship in that extraordinary MRC class mark UWA: `University of Warwick Administration', where you will find that at a meeting of Senate in March 1968, the Centre for Social History was declared `independent' of the History Department, and the MA course in `Labour History, 1867-1926',

was approved. `Social History Independent' announced the University of Warwick *Bulletin* in April. The MA comprised taught courses in comparative labour history, labour in England and the US, and in `States and Industrial Relations' (`the system of industrial relations in Britain and its central problems. An introduction to relevant economic and sociological tools of analysis, and to the legal basis of the system').[iv] Its first intake of six students was in 1969; it was the only MA offered by the Centre until the late 1970s.

In the 1990s I was at a supervisor's and teacher's distance from the records held in the MRC. I came to the Centre for my own historical purposes in 2016, after I had retired from Warwick. So actually - let's be accurate here - travelled the seven miles from Leamington Spa to `the archive'. That's more like it! I thought: `going to the archive' involves time and trouble and perilous journeys, even if it's only on a bus from Leamington. That's my own pathetic little workerist fantasy of the archives, and yes: I have written about it.[v] It was not until 2015 that I understood how much the records held here interpolate *me*, or interpolates any employee who explores the administrative and legal records of the place where he or she works. Finally, in 2015, came that acknowledgement that arrives when you're in say, Warwickshire County Record Office, or The National Archives: that you are caught in a particular kind of state or institutional power, that inscribes in legal and administrative - and always distant and indifferent - terms who you are, and the place where you have your existence.

What happened in 2015 was this: I had done some work on `lawyers' letters', that is those letters written by attorneys on behalf of poor and ordinary people in the long eighteenth century to forward their own interests without recourse to a magistrates' court or the summary justice system (**Steedman, 2016**): a letter paid for by a maidservant wanting her wages, or a carter attempting to get paid for the load of corn he delivered last week. `A Lawyer's Letter' was published in 2016.[vi] Then I had an idea - a good one, I thought - that `lawyers letters' could be thought of as types of threatening letter: in an unequal power relationship a maidservant paid an attorney's clerk to write something for her (`a lawyer's letter') that invoked the law, demanded her wages, suggested perhaps that that a magistrate might be involved if she wasn't paid her due. Social historians of Britain had not paid much attention to threatening letters since the 1970s, though important work on nineteenth-century use in pre-famine Ireland and during the Rebecca Riots in Wales had recently been published. Attention to letters themselves had followed the lines drawn out by Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé in 1969 (discussing the Swing Disturbances, in *Captain Swing*), and Edward Thompson in 1975, in `The Crime of Anonymity' chapter in the collection *Albion's Fatal Tree*.[vii] I went

back to Hobsbawm and Rudé and to Thompson, read them properly for the first time in thirty years. It appeared that all that could be said about anonymous threatening letters had already been said - brilliantly by Thompson - forty years before. But not willing to give up on what I thought of as my happy notion - that the letters he discussed were on a continuum with lawyers' letters - I was idly searching the internet when I came across the correspondence of E. P. Thompson and E. E. Dodd, deposited - guess where? - in the University of Warwick's Modern Record Centre!

Edward Ernest Dodd (1887-1981) worked for Thompson as his research assistant between 1964 and 1979, doing much of the legwork for what would become `The Moral Economy of the English Crowd', `The Crime of Anonymity', *Whigs and Hunters*, and many chapters of the later *Customs in Common* (1980). In the Preface to the last Thompson thanked `the late E. E. Dodd, who undertook many searches for me in the Public Record Office' not mentioning here Dodd's work on the *London Gazette* and its weekly notices offering rewards for information about writers of anonymous threatening letters. Dodd and Thompson wrote to each other about the anonymous letter-writers of eighteenth-century England and letters written by alarmed magistrates and (sometimes) sanguine Home Department officials. They opened the letters for a wider view on eighteenth-century society. They wrote letters to each other about letters. It was good fun (maybe only a historian's kind of fun) to work on documents (letters exchanged between two historians) that had eighteenth-century letters as their topic. This was no claim that eighteenth-century anonymous threatening letters were the same kind of written artefact as the typed letters Mr Dodd put into a Richmond post box in - say - 1971 addressed to Thompson's Worcestershire home. (Thompson had left Warwick by 1971; another version of the oft-told tale can be found in `Social History Comes to Warwick'.) An anonymous letter communicating the information that a farmer's barns would be fired in - say - 1795 unless the price of grain be reduced in the neighbourhood, was a one-off statement of threat. No one *replied* to a threatening letter; Thompson and Dodd on the other hand, conducted a correspondence: an exchange of letters over fifteen years. But reading their mid-twentieth-century correspondence together with the eighteenth-century letters they worked on, is illuminating of the making of history, specifically a history made out of materials uncovered by a paid worker. I encountered the felt hurts and resentments that may arise in this kind of labour relationship in the field of historical research.

Thompson appears to have been a good (or good-enough) employer. He paid well, though apparently had little regard for the material conditions of his employee's labour. He *was* concerned when Mr Dodd had a fall in January 1973, but appeared blithe about a man in his eighties shimmying

up ladders in the Public Record Office - all the hard physical work of the archive about which Mr Dodd was so eloquent. I think we *should* read an employment relationship out of the records, with Thompson asking for things to be done (and done again), posting off lists of Public Record Office and British Museum material as instructions rather than suggestions. That it was an employment relationship (and recognized by both parties as such), is witnessed by Thompson's interest in Dodd's tax status: `ps: Let me know sometime if you get taxed on this. I want to know whether I can claim relief or expences [sic]', he wrote. Then, soon after: `Further to yesterday's letter ... Don't bother to check back your accounts for my tax purposes - I find that I have enough'. Later, he told Mr Dodd that he had applied for a research grant and that `Next year I'm hoping to be in a different situation, and then (since I can claim tax relief on your work for me) it becomes a reasonable proposition to ask you if you can do more'.[viii]

In the way of the eighteenth-century service relationship, the employer told much more of his personal life than did the employee, graciously bestowing confidences in an entirely one-way traffic of the self. Thompson's letters frequently described family events - holidays with the children, breaks in Wales with his daughter, visitors irritating and otherwise (`We seem to be something like Buckingham Palace and Stratford that sight-seers have to take in') sometimes, it appears to this reader, as an excuse for not having met Mr Dodd in London as he had intimated he might. He described his writing life and work routine in a way that Mr Dodd never did. In their letters, they discussed the shape and form of threatening letters; they speculated about the motives of eighteenth-century writers. Mr Dodd had been this way before: he had published a substantial article on threatening letters in the *Bradford Antiquary* in 1964, before he became Thompson's assistant. The article is not referenced in `The Crime of Anonymity'.[ix]

The subtitle of my first draft of `Threatening Letters' had been `The Service Relationship in Historical Research', for Thompson and Dodd operated under a service agreement, called a contract in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that any master or mistress and any servant of the time would have found familiar.[x] In such an asymmetrical arrangement, the employer often threatened the security of the worker. In 1969 for example, Thompson wrote to Dodd to say that he appreciated all the difficulties of xeroxing Assize papers in the Public Record Office that Dodd had outlined, but that xeroxing was what he wanted: `Indeed', he wrote, `I think that I or Mr Thomas will probably have to do this ourselves'. This could be read - I read it - as Thompson's own threatening letter: the hint of a suggestion that he could always use a different, more academic and accomplished researcher.[xi]

I wanted to ask questions about the product of the servant's (the researcher's) labour. Who does the work in the archive? The note taking, the xeroxing, later the photographing and scanning, the opening of filthy ASSI (assize) bundles in The National Archives? Who owns the research done by a paid worker, in an archive? Contract law has told us unambiguously for three hundred years that he or she who pays the piper owns the tune. But there are other theories of labour and ownership that might give us pause for thought about *who* is doing the research, there, at the table next to yours, turning over the contents of a file, making notes. Will they be in a position to make history out of what they note? Or are they a paid worker, providing someone else with the means to *make history*? This is a much more important question than any raised by fretting about the etymology, semantics, and history of `archive', `the archive', and `the the archive'. That was my own lesson learned from the MRC at Fifty Symposium.

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[i] For the long version, Carolyn Steedman, `Social History Comes to Warwick'

[ii] Derrida, J. `Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression', *Diacritics*, 25:2 (1995), pp. 9-63; *Mal d'archive. Une impression freudienne*, Editions Galilée, Paris, 1995; *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996; Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2001.

[iii] Prescott, A. and Wiggins, A. (eds) (2023) Archives. Power, Truth and Fiction, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

[iv] MRC, UWA/M/S/7 Senate, Minutes of the Meeting held on 13th March 1968, p. 7; UWA/PUB/8/2/5, University of Warwick *Bulletin*, Vol. II No. 5, April 1968: `Senate has granted independence to Social History'; UWA/M/BFA/1/2 Board of Arts Oct 1967-Sep 1968, Minutes of a Meeting held on 28th February 1968.

[v] Steedman, *Dust*, pp. 17-37.

[vi] `A Lawyer's Letter. Everyday Uses of the Law in Early Nineteenth-Century England', *History Workshop Journal*, 80:1 (2016), pp. 62-83.

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[viii] WMRC MSS 369/1/30, EPT to EED, 25 March 1971; MSS 369/1/62 EPT to EED handwritten note, 13 November (1972); MSS 369/1/84, EPT to EED, 6 December (1973)

[ix] Dodd, E. E., `Alarm at Elland', *Bradford Antiquary,* 12 (1964) pp. 124-30.

[x] Steedman, C, *Labours Lost. Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009.

[xi] WMRC MSS 369/1/8, EPT to EED 30 Jan 1969. For Malcolm Thomas, Dorothy Thompson (ed.) *The Essential E. P. Thompson*, The New Press, New York, 2001, p. 423; `Crime of Anonymity', p. 257, Note 3; `Malcolm Thomas (1945-2010)', *Library of the Society of Friends Newsletter* 7, 2011. Thompson wrote several threatening letters of resignation to the Warwick Registrar this year: Steedman, `Social History Comes to Warwick'.