

Review of All Knees and Elbows of Susceptibility and Refusal: Reading History From Below by Anthony Iles and Tom Roberts

Strickland Distribution, London and Glasgow

ISBN 978-0-9565201-3-5

Anthony Iles and Tom Roberts take their cumbersome but memorable title from the great socialist historian and peace activist E.P. Thompson. They use it to capture 'the necessary awkwardness of effecting transformation by writing history' and their fine book discusses many different attempts to create 'history from below'. A key focus is the rich flourishing of Marxist social history in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, of which figures like Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm were only the most significant and famous exponents. Crucially, Iles and Roberts also discuss a range of figures and movements that have taken these ideas forward, especially through more critical discussion of gender, race and nationalism.

The book provides a unique, valuable and readable over-view of different elements of the 'history from below' tradition. A central concern is with the remarkable body of work associated with the American labour historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker which has sought to recover the forms of motley resistances that shaped opposition to early forms of capitalist globalisation. They discuss figures such as Robert Wedderburn the radical preacher and revolutionary, also a brothel keeper, who envisioned solidarities between the working class in London and Jamaica in the early nineteenth century and Olaudah Equiano the freed slave and abolitionist who was a co-founder of the London Corresponding Society, one of the first popular radical organisations in Britain.

Some recent writing on the new left historians has risked preserving figures such as EP Thompson, Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm in aspic. One of the vital things about this text is that in the tradition of writers like Thompson it speaks to present political questions. Thus Iles and Roberts develop incisive critiques of writers such as Maurice Glasman and Philip Blond, the so-called red Tory, who have mobilised radical traditions of Englishness to re-assert the importance of 'flag, faith and family'. They contend that such work 'erases working class history of its antagonisms'. Their book by contrast asserts the importance and creative force of traditions of struggle in both the past and present.

Dave Featherstone