

Reading Raymond Williams in 2012

Recent years have seen written interest in Raymond Williams re-emerge from narrow academic critique, to engagement with the whole life. We might date this progress from 2003 and Daniel Williams' *Who Speaks for Wales*, the first comprehensive collection of

Williams' published engagements with Wales, and what the country could teach about ethnicity and nationhood but also culture, community and the nature of a sustainable society. Three years later in 2006 Raymond's first novel *Border Country* re-appeared.

Republished under the banner of the Library of Wales, rapid sales demonstrated a new generation were ready to meet Williams through the medium of literature. The reappearance of *Border Country* also served to open a window onto questions asked as far back as 1979 when Raymond talked of unpublished novels in interviews published as *Politics and Letters*.

In 2008 *Raymond Williams A Warrior Tale* appeared, creating a 'new Jim', a young

Raymond who grew to take full comprehension of his experiences and turned these to writing that has to be seen as a whole if it was to be understood to the full. Raymond's biographer, Dia Smith, built *A Warrior's Tale* on hitherto unseen letters, diaries, teaching notes, and precious, notebooks in which were contained Raymond's plans and sketches for an extraordinary journey of work but which showed its integration regardless of type.

The three works briefly discussed here appear alongside the opening of the archive containing these notebooks and papers, but also manuscripts of unpublished novels known beyond Williams' own brief references, to only a few. The Raymond Williams

Papers are housed in Swansea and details can be found on the Raymond Williams Foundation website at, <http://www.raymondwilliamsfoundation.org.uk/>

Chronologically, we must start with *The Long Revolution*. Written in the wake of *Border Country*, *The Long Revolution* expresses Williams' engagement with continental social thinking and a first section that discusses cultural and literary ideas in what Anthony Barnett describes as Williams' 'Germanic prose'. The historical second section contains essays ranging across reading, education, drama and the press. By connecting these advances

Williams demonstrates that changes in communications must be placed alongside those in democracy and industrial means. The last part is a sociological essay on Britain around 1960, cutting across debates about culture and class, family and media, leisure and work to produce a statement and critique, that was to send waves rolling forward and invoke a mountain of responses from progressives and reactionaries alike. The Parthian reissue contains the essays unaltered with a Forward by Anthony Barnett. Barnett is well placed to front this collection, being originator of openDemocracy and a friend of Raymond's from the mid seventies when once more internal strife at New Left Review, may have enhanced a relationship.

His Forward to the new Edition is helpful in guiding the reader to core themes and issues, beginning importantly with the title. *The Long Revolution* is not, Barnett suggests, a description of a prolonged development, but rather a concept, or process within which we exist and which therefore is hard to measure. *The Long Revolution* is in a sense an attempt at such a measurement, as can best be seen in Part Two, where each of the historical processes discussed, education, reading, press, drama etc are means of assessing change and where possible, progress. It is fair to say that the balance sheet Williams draws up is largely positive and that is surely right, even the most pessimistic conservative bemoaning 'the fall' would be hard pressed to sustain an argument that we are not better educated and read than at the start of the C19. Anthony Barnett's stress is that while an industrial revolution is recognised as unfolding alongside a revolution in democracy, Williams proposes there is also a substantial change in culture and communication of which we are as yet still at an early stage. The essential difficulty of recognising this, because of being inside it, is what makes the total process of *The Long Revolution* difficult to comprehend. openDemocracy, is a good place from which to be writing this insight into Williams' meaning and intent, being a means of opening communications toward potential futures in just such manner as Williams wrote of in *Communications* and elsewhere, and so push forward elements of this Long Revolution.

Republication of *The Long Revolution* might seem to mark a different sort of engagement with Williams from *Border Country*, yet we might remember the concluding sentence to his Introduction where he writes.

With this book and *Culture and Society*, and with my novel *Border Country* which I believe to have in its particular and quite different way, an essential relevance to the two general books, I have completed a body of work which I set myself to do ten years ago.

Taking this as our guide, it is perhaps better to drop the English academic habit of demarcating fiction from critical work, and read *The Long Revolution* with *Border Country* as two expressions of Williams' project as it stood at the outset of the 1960s, from where we move forward to the middle of the decade and the beginning of another republication. *The Country and the City* has appeared in a new edition from Spokesman, who also publish *Key Words*, the journal of the Raymond Williams Society.

First appearing in 1973, the book, like *The Long Revolution*, is in a sense part of a larger whole, the other side of which was *The Fight for Manod*; the last in the Welsh Trilogy. Both novel and critical work had been started in 1965, and in answer to his New Left Review interlocutors, Williams suggests that the novel had been speeding along well when problems of length and breath of subject, made it necessary to transfer issues to this other book. It would therefore be worthwhile to read *The Country and the City* and *Fight for Manod* in parallel so to better enter into Raymond's thinking as he worked through the problems they commonly address.

The new Edition is marked with a Forward by Stan Smith, a member of the executive of the Raymond Williams Society, and an editor of *Key Words*. In it, Smith provides a detailed engagement with many points from the book, alerting us to how we might understand these as we read on. The subject matter of *The Country and the City* is wide and encompasses a thorough critique of the golden age of an organic society. In a film made in 1979, Raymond Williams with producer Mike Dibb broke open the ideal of rural tranquillity safe from the ravages of political economy, when they turned to Tatton Estate, recasting its apparent splendours, as that reaped from the destruction of villages and communities to make way for the laying of estate grounds, themselves financed through commercial trade with Liverpool and possibly beyond to plantation and slave. This theme of linking rural patterns to city and trade, runs through *The Country and the City*, demonstrating not merely an obvious interdependence, but the fundamental point that cradle to a once developing political economy was the changed way of life experienced by cottager and labourer, but also, if differently by owner and estate agent.

Itself apart of this wider process, one biographical comment we might pick up occurs on pp298-9, where Williams writes,

It was in the late nineteen-forties that I knew I was at last separated from the village in which I had grown up. I began to write what I thought this experience was in the seven versions that eventually became the novel *Border Country*. It wasn't only, through those versions, that I found myself connecting the experience to a more general history of physical and social mobility, and beyond that to a crisis of education and class which when I had worked it through I went back and read, as if for the first time, in George Eliot, Hardy and Lawrence.

The Volunteers must be seen to exist alongside *The Country and the City* and *The Fight for Manod* in the schedule of Williams' writing. Writing was underway in 1970 and continued typically in fits and starts through to at least 1976, before it appeared two years later. Over these years, each of the three books it seems was being picked up and put down as its period of flow came and went.

The late sixties - early seventies were a remarkably compressed period when politics intervened, notably the alignment of progressive politics around *The May Day Manifesto*, but also a re-engagement with Wales became physically possible with a cottage at Craswel and from that, involvement in the fissures of life in the country. Not autobiographical, but a scene from *The Fight for Manod* may be worth recalling. It is the moment when the plan by a consortium to buy parts of the land intended for the development of Manod are discovered, a three way conversation is occurring

'Well, Mathew Price,' [Meurig] said, smiling, 'you're an exile. Perhaps, I don't know, a voluntary exile. So that none of us yet knows your commitment to Wales'

Mathew leaned forward.

'Enough of a commitment to know the divisions.' he said sharply.

In the new Library of Wales edition, Kim Howells, one time official with the National Union of Mineworkers, and later Labour government minister, has written a Forward expressing his own connection back to writer and the years during when the novel was written. His assessment of Williams' position at the time is considered though his estimation of the 1970s reads a little of retrospective personal revision. Howells' Forward helps remind us of the reach of media corporations into life, as the fictional Insital Global News Corporation for whom Lewis Redfern our lead character works, becomes the real News International. *The Volunteers* is perhaps a political thriller in genre, but issues of where we are placed individually and together by the speed and penetration of media is something we struggle to understand. In like manner, questions of allegiance are centred, as when at the end Redfern perhaps recovers connections between his own past and possible future.

The political thriller is evidently a medium for addressing such issues and they work well through the story. As a more popular form, it is also a means of reaching a readership different from that for *Border Country* or any of the other novels. What it certainly is, is topical, and it may be worth reading the book alongside John Humphries *Freedom Fighters* which seeks to write back into history attempts to wage a physical campaign for Wales' self respect. There is too the pleasure of recognition, when the identity of our "terrorist" is realised. *The Volunteers* is in line with *The Long Revolution*, the transformation in communications continues forwards. The last section of the earlier book has part reappeared in *Toward 2000*, *The Volunteers* is set forwards into the 1980s, we are addressed by works whose difference of form should not blind us from recognising the continuance of project, the unfolding global historical change in how we communicate, and with that how we relate with each other. Looking forward from the seventies, the projection of an authoritarian state, global media corporation, technologies for surveillance and physical resistance, is a measure of not only 'toward 2000' but beyond.

The publication of new editions of *The Long Revolution*, *The Country and the City* and *The Volunteers* in 2011 marks a substantial return to a re-engagement with Raymond Williams that at least some earlier academic writing had failed to do. Discussing a writer cannot substitute for reading their work and making your own assessment. The three new books together with *Border Country*, the collections of essays in *Who Speaks for Wales*,

comprise a sufficient beginning for readers to engage with Raymond Williams whether that is for a first time or after a break, that it is likely many have had. All those involved in enabling these new editions are to be congratulated; their efforts are greatly appreciated. It would be good to think that at least one debate to follow is which work of Raymond Williams might next be made available to generations old and new.

Here I would conclude with a claim for the next new edition to be *The Fight for Manod*. Surely, the step connecting *The Long Revolution* where changing means of communications are central, with the world of Insatel, and the long historical but now global penetration of land and resources, is the consortium buying land/property in mid Wales, while itself operating in a para-national space that hides behind the politics of C20 states.

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