

# Raymond Williams and the creativity of division

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**F**rom 1946 to 1961 Raymond Williams taught in adult education. His area was south east England, but his own learning had been away in the 'border country' of Wales. These sharply contrasting environments were typical of the divisions that threaded through Williams's life and which he refused to diminish or displace. That between the Welsh working-class background of his early years and the teashop culture found in Cambridge he memorably responded to in the celebrated essay 'Culture is ordinary'. The pattern of his life was to refuse easy answers, seeking rather the complex and problematic, which yet remained committed to learning that could creatively contribute to a full democracy.

'Culture is ordinary' was something of a turning point. What followed were the remarkable years of the New Left when, to borrow his terms, Raymond Williams connected again with people in all sorts of ways. Yet the years as adult education tutor may have been something of a preparation. In his *The Emergence of Cultural Studies 1945-1965*, Tom Steele proposes that after 1945 there was a turn in adult education classes toward forms of representation as the focus of study. The disproportionate increase in literature classes may be cited as evidence. Tom Steele argues that this trend created a distance between tutor and student not found with the hard subjects of political economy and industrial history in the inter-war years. The reasoning is that, where study of industrial history had direct access to events and changes, to understand these same processes through, in particular, literature required first that the forms of writing be understood before any use be made to better gain appreciation of a period. Evidence for Williams's assertion of added complexity may be with a tutors' conference he convened at Oxford in

1950. The participants consisted of literature tutors and historians, and afterwards Williams wrote scathingly of the latter for their inability to recognise not only the distinctiveness of literature but also the wider social and cultural life that people lived, and through which they experienced their world. Historical scholarship in England at the time was well behind that of France and elsewhere. Under the sway of Lewis Namier, political events remained the prized nugget once history had been sifted through the historian's sieve. The focus for the conference had been a decade of the industrial revolution, and Raymond Williams's report, as Dai Smith notes, is something of a manifesto for the social and cultural history that was to come only years later (1).

## Determination

Williams went on to address a range of theoretical issues, including the problem of determination, posed by Marxism in the image of a base and superstructure. In 1950 Williams was inclined to hold a radical flag for literature and to deny that it could in any simple sociological manner be read-off from exterior forces that not only determined content but pre-determined the form of writing that came to be literature. To accept this second premise would be to agree that forms of writing, even perhaps the novel itself, were results of external modes of production that were already given and restricted in type. Over time, Williams worked through a singular original understanding, in which writing was integral to change; such as emphatically occurred and came to be called the industrial revolution. It followed therefore that literature, drama, film, television etc no longer sat outside a limited base wherein the motor of history whirred away, but were forms of production

in relations that constituted society. If, then, in WEA classes after 1945, there was a move toward representation which in turn introduced division between tutor and student, it brought in the case of Williams a creative conflict that set going a densely complex mode of reasoning, that shapes *Culture and Society*.

Whether, however, concern with representation was after 1945 a new departure in working-class culture is more debatable. It may be instructive to examine a history of cultural learning for insight into what has been learnt, who has done the learning, and how have they learnt. The question bears on circumstance as between WEA and independent working-class learning, and it is insightful to again look at the example of Raymond Williams. If between 1946 and 1961 he worked officially in the former, initiatives in independent learning were perhaps more characteristic of his life. Between 1956 and 1962, New Left Clubs grew in many cities, often building on existing adult learning classes. A sense of a network was made possible through the pages of, first, *Universities and Left Review*, and, subsequently, the early *New Left Review*. Parallel were meetings organised through the *New Reasoner* group who, it is fair to say, had, in the north of England closer contact with a 'traditional' labour movement. Williams was the vital link between generations, being, as he remarked, closer in experience to those around the *New Reasoner*, yet spontaneously empathising with the world of the younger group in London.

Typical of Raymond Williams, a repeat formation emerged around what became *The May Day Manifesto*. The first edition in 1967 was expanded into a popular Penguin the following year and re-issued by Lawrence and Wishart as an ebook in 2013. The *Manifesto* carries far-reaching arguments that of course would have to be amended but otherwise remain prescient to understanding contemporary Britain and beyond. The *Manifesto* thrived in a network of groups sharing activities and proposals through a *Bulletin* published by the independent publisher Merlin Press, and successfully lasting some 23 issues between summer 1967 and June 1970. A National Convention of the Left formed, holding a highly successful conference in 1968 at the University of London. The long-planned full Convention took place in April 1969, centred on St Pancras Town Hall, attended by several hundred people and a kaleidoscope of organisations, and officially chaired by Raymond Williams. The *Manifesto* group, whose efforts produced the Penguin edition, was an early example of a planning and policy group that later Williams was to think through alongside Rudolf Bahro's *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*. An account at a local

level of New Left Clubs and Manifesto groups could prove of benefit to a history of cultural learning.

A different means for independent workers' education is offered by *Keywords*, which Williams described as providing an understanding of how language was embedded in society. Changes in experience might then be expressed through shifting meanings in words. Demonstrating that the language we use has a history, where the use or meaning of words has been contested, is something Williams saw as a fully political act and sign of allegiance. The historical semantics he proposed is likely to be of immense value to independent learning, and might profitably be used as a basis for meeting and discussion. *Keywords* can be sourced in different forms, a note on which can be found below (2). A last example comes from late in Williams's life. *Towards 2000* carries a telling insight into economic trends and the direction of contemporary capitalism, notably through Williams's now well-known formula, 'plan X'. The plan encompasses a scenario of a whole future that might be examined and tested against perceptions of the present century.

### Division

Raymond Williams, then, does not sit on one side of a supposed division between an institutionally supported WEA tradition and another tradition that valued independence to pursue, in the phrase revived by Richard Johnson, 'really useful knowledge'. Rather, he worked in ways that used the means available. That a Welsh background would have made him aware of the Plebs League and Labour College is something Derek Tatton has addressed in his 'The purposes of Adult Education'. Yet the job with the Extra-mural Department and the WEA would have been an enviable position to a young man returned from war and with a new family. Most importantly, he made it the means by which the writing got done. *Border Country*, his first novel, was the outcome, along with a series of critical and theoretical works. The independent tradition ran clearly through his engagements with others: the New Left and *May Day Manifesto* groups, the Socialist Society and Socialist Environment and Resources Association. *Keywords* was a very different but no less important outcome. Raymond Williams is infamous for the difficulty of his writing; he is also famous for seeking to move beyond division.

In the 21st century, struggles over learning have transcended the old binary opposition of institutional versus independent. The internet has become the new site of conflict, as not-for-profit groups battle

with state and corporation to, in Raymond Williams's words, keep the channels of communication open. Recent republishing of Williams's books, and the availability of his essays on line, are part of an emergent culture that is part virtual, part spontaneous gathering, part institutional. The Occupy Movement, Bank of Ideas and Free University might seem to exemplify the first two characteristics, yet networking through institutions may in fact be more possible than ever. The internet does not stop at walls, real or virtual, and the possibilities of sharing knowledge beyond the academy that in the process transforms its use, which in turn alters its content, means we may have channels of communication that can, through struggle, be kept open. Raymond Williams's capacity to look forward was quite uncanny. We may then with profit use Williams to think through the potential landscape ahead, to, like him, develop the best means for democratic communication that contributes to a culture in common – wherever they may be found.

A record of the years 1946-1961 can be found in *Border Country: Raymond Williams in Adult Education*. The collection of pieces ranges across Williams's teaching methods, subject matter, relations with colleagues and, beyond these, wider arguments as to the purposes of adult learning. One essay late in the collection may be of special relevance. Given originally as a lecture in tribute to his colleague Tony McLean, 'Adult Education and social change' explores some of the phases of adult learning, making the argument that the process should be understood, not as only an effect of history, but as integral to that past and at times pressing a direction for society.

### Notes

1. The post-war decades were without doubt intellectually brilliant. Early attempts to bridge the Cold War divisions were Freddie Batson's *Essays in Criticism* and *Past and Present*. That the two journals came from literature and history is clue to where the intellectual hub lay. Raymond Williams sat in the centre. The 1950 *Report* and the printed outcome of a Communist Party Historians Groups school in 1954 at Netherwood, to which Williams was one of only two outside speakers, are two documents that might serve as insight into the crux of the period.

2. *Keywords* is the title of a seminal work, variously celebrated since its second edition in 1983. BBC Radio 3 broadcast *Raymond Williams: Keywords*, with contributions from a number of friends and critics, on 16/03/2008. For several years a joint

project between the University of Pittsburgh and Jesus College Cambridge has continued the book through an online project extending the number of 'keywords' with newly written essays. Much publicised is the present visual keywords devised by Iniva, exhibited at Rivington Place in 2013, and presently on at Tate Liverpool. BBC Radio 3 are to explore the exhibition as part of the *Free Thinking* series.

### Selected further reading

Raymond Williams:

'Culture is ordinary', 1958, reprinted in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, Blackwell, 2001  
*May Day Manifesto*, 1967; Penguin, 1968; ebook, [http://www.iwbooks.co.uk/ebooks/mayday\\_manifesto.html](http://www.iwbooks.co.uk/ebooks/mayday_manifesto.html), 2013  
 'Reflections on Bahro', *New Left Review* 120, 1980  
*Border Country: Raymond Williams in Adult Education*, edited John McIlroy and Sallie Westwood, National Institute for Adult Continuing Education, 1993  
*Cobbett*, Oxford University Press, 1983  
*Towards 2000*, Chatto and Windus, 1983  
 'Adult Education and social change', reprinted in *What I Came to Say*, 1989  
*Keywords*, 1983, Routledge Revivals 2011  
 Dai Smith, *Raymond Williams, A Warrior's Tale*, Library of Wales, Parthian 2008

The Raymond Williams papers are archived in Swansea, with an online catalogue at <http://archives.swan.ac.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=WWE%2f2>  
 A further collection is in Aberystwyth, the catalogue for which is at <http://archives.swan.ac.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=WWE%2f2>

Other references:

Rudolf Bahro, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*, New Left Books, 1978  
 Josh Cole, 'Raymond Williams and education – a slow reach again for control', *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, 2008 [www.infed.org/thinkers/raymond\\_williams.htm](http://www.infed.org/thinkers/raymond_williams.htm)  
 Derek Tatton, 'The purposes of Adult Education' and Stephen Woodhams, 'A culture where I can breath' in *Raymond Williams: Wales and Beyond*, Welsh Academic Press, forthcoming.