

THE RAYMOND WILLIAMS WEEKEND SCHOOLS, 1986-2013

Throughout the 1980's, I was employed as Tutor Organiser for the Eastern District of the WEA in Bedfordshire, and Derek Tatton, my predecessor in the post, was Warden of Wedgwood Memorial College at Barlaston. We kept in touch after Derek's departure from Bedford to Staffordshire, and one recurring theme in our conversations was the question of how Adult Education might provide a platform for discussion of social and political issues. Such subjects were the bedrock of the WEA in its earlier days, and they remain one of the things that distinguish it from other providers. This was (and remains) particularly relevant at a time when opportunities for discussing such topics are probably less than they have been at various times in the past.

As AE professionals, we had both struggled with a decline in the number of volunteers and a partial atrophy of WEA branch life as a result. There are many reasons for this, but one consequence has been a need for Adult Education providers to look beyond the traditional evening course format. Residential courses have also been under pressure, but at their best they offer a 'total immersion' experience which can be highly rewarding. When the WEA in the Eastern District was approached by Jeremy Seabrook in the Spring of 1986, following publication of his book *A World Still to Win: the Reconstruction of the Post-War Working Class* with Trevor Blackwell, it was agreed that we should try a weekend school at Wedgwood Memorial College April 18/20 1986. This was attended by about twenty people, drawn from local WEA branches and from several Bedfordshire WEA branches. Everyone who came felt it to be a success and a decision was taken to try and make such schools an annual event.

Subsequent schools were held in 1987 and '88. Again, these were modestly successful, with similar numbers of students. In January 1988, Raymond Williams died suddenly at the age of 66. Williams had been a pivotal figure as author, academic and adult educator, and following a commemorative article by Derek Tatton in *Workers' Education*, the WEA journal, an appeal was made in August, 1988, for donations to buy a tree and memorial bench for the garden of Wedgwood Memorial College. Any money surplus to this would be used to set up a fund which would help disadvantaged adult students attend WEA and other residential courses. It was also felt that subsequent Wedgwood College weekends should be dedicated to Williams' memory and that they should focus on themes suggested by his work.

The 1989 school was held on the weekend of March 17/19; tutors included Raphael Samuel from Ruskin College who spoke on Williams and history, David Lusted of the BFI and Graham Martin from the OU on the interaction between social history and Williams' own life story, as shown in his novel *Border Country*. On the Saturday afternoon, about thirty people braved bitter wind and driving rain to attend the tree-planting ceremony in the college garden. At a subsequent meeting, a draft constitution was adopted for what became the Raymond Williams Memorial Fund and subsequently the Raymond Williams Foundation.

In subsequent years, the Wedgwood schools attracted a growing number of students, frequently drawn from WEA members but also from those hitherto uninvolved with adult education. Principle tutors at the 1990 school were Christopher and Bridget Hill, who developed the theme of revolution as raised by Williams' *Long Revolution*. For the first time, money from the Memorial Fund was made available to provide bursaries for unemployed, unwaged or first-time attending students. In 1991, culture, nations and national identity were discussed by Dafydd Elis Thomas, then a MP and leader of Plaid Cymru, and by Peter Lawrence of the Economics faculty at Keele University. Pursuing the themes of locality and community, members of a near-by ex-mining town talked about the community play which they had written and produced, commemorating the life of a local woman, Fanny Deakin.

The 1992 school focussed on Williams' book *Towards 2000* and its prescient examination of relations between economic production and ecological damage. This year saw an innovation in the structure of the school, because it began with a special lecture at Keele University given by Professor Terry Eagleton, whose most recent book, *Ideology*, revisited many of Williams' themes. Seminars went on to discuss issues of gender, technology and the politics of post-industrial society.

The Keynote lecture format had proved highly popular – about sixty people had attended the Eagleton lecture – and it was decided to continue with it whenever possible in subsequent years. The 1993 school again focused on nationalism and cultural identity, and this time the lecture of that title was given by Professor Stuart Hall of the OU. Other speakers discussed Polish and Eastern European nationalism (Andrew Dobraszczyk), and that of the Indian sub-continent (Parita Mukta of the University of Staffordshire). Bob Fryer, Principal of Northern College, led a session on Adult Education, and Chris Prendergast, Professor of French and Comparative Literature at CUNY Graduate Centre, New York, talked about nation, community and modernity.

The following year's theme was Class and History. The keynote lecture was given by Dorothy Thompson, historian of Chartism, who talked about the circumstances in which popular movements succeed and fail. These themes were also pursued by Andy Croft of Leeds University Adult and Continuing Education Department, who spoke on working class writing in the 1930's and '40's. This led to a fascinating discussion on various writers – some well-known, other virtually forgotten. At this school, Fred Inglis from the University of Warwick talked about his forthcoming biography of Raymond Williams, and of the issues and problems involved in the writing of biographies.

Student numbers at the various schools continued to rise through the '90's, though by 1994 there was a core of regular attenders who came back from year to year. Initially, they had mostly been drawn from WEA branches in various parts of the country and from those who had attended other events at Wedgwood College. Many regular attenders at the weekends have continued to come in these ways, but as the Schools became more widely known they also began to attract recruits via national publicity – both paper and more recently, web-based. From 1996 until 2001 there were also groups of students from the Politics Department of Luton University, and since 2009 new students have been recruited through the Philosophy in Pubs (PiP) network. Money from the RW Memorial Fund has been used offer a subsidised fee for these and other students. The presence of the Luton University students introduced a noticeably younger element to the weekends, but their attendance depended on personal links with the University which were subsequently lost. Ways and means of widening participation in the weekends remain a constant issue, to which to date no conclusive solution has been found.

The 1996 School continued the tradition of an initial keynote lecture, this time with Anthony Barnett of Charter 88 talking on Democracy after the Cold War. That was followed up with contributions from Ralph Ruddock of Manchester University on Democracy and Learning, Owen Granfield of the GMB Union on Democracy at Work, and Monty Johnstone on Lenin, Democracy and the Russian Revolution.

The 1997 School was held in an atmosphere of some excitement following the recent election of Tony Blair's Labour government. The title this time was New Government – New Horizons, and it included a lecture by Roger Seifert, Professor of Industrial Relations at Keele University, on the crisis of European Social Democracy – were Social Democratic parties bound to acquiesce to a neo-liberal agenda and values if they wished to win elections, and if not, what might be the alternatives – and other sessions on nationalism and ethnic conflict (led by Sita Bali from Keele University), and Steve Munby on possible futures for the Welfare State, Dave Goodman on Pensions and Grey Power and Pat Devine of Manchester University Economics Department on the Single Currency.

By 1998, some of the excitement of the previous year had been dissipated.

The 1999 School focused on issues of community and mobility` - in a world of mobile populations, how may settled communities be formed? And how much were the purportedly stable and traditional communities of the past, such as those of the industrial working class towns celebrated in their decline from the 1950's onwards, actually fairly recent creations? Sessions were led by Ian McKeane of Liverpool University on the Irish diaspora in Nineteenth Century Liverpool, by Chris Williams of Cardiff University on the idea of community in Raymond Williams' fiction and on actual community formation in early 1900's South Wales, Joan Smith of Staffordshire University on issues of social exclusion (what it is, how it might be tackled) and (to complete the international focus) a session by Margaret Kenna of Swansea University on Communist Castaways – the experiences of members of the Greek Left exiled to remote islands by the Metaxas dictatorship of the 1930's.

The School held in May 2000 looked at Utopias. As Williams had noted in 1980, Engels' well-known distinction between 'utopian' and 'scientific' socialism had received some critical (and sceptical) attention of recent years. At the same time, speculations and projections about future societies seem a permanent feature of the human condition, and sessions were held on utopias in literature, on feminist utopias (Irene Heron, Leeds University), on Utopian (and other) views of work (Len Holden), and on Green perspectives on Utopia (Lucy Sangisson).

In May, 2001 the focus shifted to film. The weekend begun with a showing of Jimmy McGovern's *Liam* at the Film Theatre in Stoke – a vivid look at the 1930's depression and the rise of fascism in Liverpool. Subsequent sessions looked at Cinema in Ireland (Ian Mckeane), the Czech Cinema in the Sixties (Peter Hames of Staffordshire University), the work – especially the TV plays – of Dennis Potter (Derek Tatton), German theatre in the Seventies (Ulreka Siegiohr, Staffordshire University) and Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America* (Richard Godden, Keele University).

May 2002 saw a School on the General Strike and the 1920's. This time the tutors were Roger Seifert, Mary Joannou, Derek Tatton, Ray Johnson, Bob Fyson and David Lyddon. Roger Seifert delivered the keynote lecture putting the 1926 events in an historical context, and Mary Joannou led a fascinating session on women and the Strike and subsequent lockout, drawing on Ellen Wilkinson's novel *Clash*, published in 1929. There were obvious resonances here with the 1983-84 coal strike, and both sessions led to discussion about why and how strikes fail, or sometimes succeed, and more general questions about the nature of state power and the role of ideology, and the relations between class and culture which preoccupied Williams. Derek Tatton discussed these themes as they arise in *Keywords*, Williams' magisterial examination of a range of cultural and political definitions, and particularly in *Border Country*, his autobiographical novel set in a Welsh village, with its flashbacks from the (1950's) present to the period of the General Strike and its aftermath. Roy Johnson, Bob Fyson and David Lyddon continued the discussion on the origins and nature of strikes, and on debates within the broad Labour Movement between syndicalists who saw the general strike as an essential tool of social change, and those who looked to more obviously political means through parliament or elsewhere.

Under the intriguing title of Education by Collision, the 2003 School commemorated the WEA's centenary by looking at the life and work of Richard Tawney, with the keynote talk on Tawney and changes and developments in the WEA and adult education generally given by Derek Tatton with contributions from Jack Taylor, and sessions on G. D. H. Cole by Tony Dennis and on Women and Women's Education in the WEA (Zoe Mumby). It was felt that the resilience of the WEA after a hundred years was demonstrated by its ability to host events like these schools at a time when residential schools

in social and political subjects were becoming rare. It was also apparent that debates about the form, content and purpose of adult education as discussed by Tawney and by Cole, and returned to by Williams, were as relevant now as they had been in 1903.

The School in May 2004 looked at the highly contemporary issue of globalisation – what it is, if it really exists, and if so what its consequences might be for issues like welfare provision and cultural identities. Roger Seifert and Peter Lawrence (Keele University) talked respectively on neoliberalism and the end of the welfare state and on economic perspectives on globalisation. Jane Krishnadas (Keele) spoke on the impact of globalisation on identities, religious and otherwise, and Dave Lidden (Keele) on its consequences for child labour. Philip Whitehead, East Midlands MEP, former Westminster MP and TV producer led a discussion on the EU and globalisation. The focus then shifted to the impact of globalisation on specific cultural areas: Derek Tatton talked about changes in football ('From Working Class game to Iconic Multi-National, Capitalist Enterprise?').

The title, People Power - Democracy Old and New, of the seventeenth School in May 2005, revisited one of Williams' recurring themes – that of the meaning, nature and future prospects of democracy. Williams had written in *Towards 2000* that '*many people – some reluctantly, some cynically – are now losing faith in or actually rejecting democracy*'. It was felt that experiences since 1997, and in particular events surrounding the invasion of Iraq, had given particular point to this observation. Different speakers, including Robert Colls from Leicester University, David Stewart from Berwick Trades Council, Karen Ford, Peter Good and Chad Goodwin of the Thomas Paine Society, looked at different aspects of democracy – what might the term mean, was there a place for direct as well as representative democracy, how might it be applied in the workplace, should we be looking towards a *deliberative* democracy in which decisions would be informed by informed debate and discussion what might be the meaning and implications of global democracy?

The School in May 2006 returned to another of Williams' themes – that of lifelong learning. By now, it was apparent to those who had attended a number of schools that we were reprising subject areas that had been discussed in earlier sessions. There were good reasons for this, as the topics could hardly be said to lose their importance however many times they were discussed, and it is an indication of Williams' prescience that themes which he raised in the '60's had often become more urgent and topical in the time since his death. It did nevertheless raise questions of how the topics should be approached – were there new aspects that had not been apparent when Williams was writing, or perhaps even when earlier schools were held? And were there new ways in which familiar topics could be presented? The 2006 School tried to engage with some of these issues; Sue Jackson of Birkbeck College explored some of the implications of lifelong learning – what did it mean? Who was it directed at? What influence might it have, and on whom and for what? How might it be funded? These same themes were taken up by Zoe Munby, Louise Williams of the WEA and Jill Ward from Wedgwood Memorial College, and in a later session by Janet Dann and Keith Chandler from ARCA, the co-ordinating organisation of adult residential colleges. Another session looked at the experiences of Scandinavian Study Circles and Folk High Schools, and on the Sunday morning Granville Williams of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom talked about the Media, Education and Culture, with particular reference to Williams' book *Communications*. In particular, he highlighted the pressures, commercial and otherwise, to which public service broadcasting was increasingly exposed. This session ended with a discussion about the potential for the use of new media for education in its broadest sense; did the OU's experience with distance learning offer lessons for what could be done, and how might the internet be used in distance learning?

Borders – between countries, between social classes, in our own heads – were one of Williams' regular themes, and the 2007 School heard from Raymond's daughter Merryn on their significance in his work.

This was followed by a session from Professor Andrew Dobson of Keele University on the implications of green political thought, significantly entitled *Borders are Outdated*. On the Saturday evening, Chad Goodwin led a session on ways that social borders and boundaries might be crossed. He cited the anarchist-derived tradition of direct democracy and mentioned some recent examples, such as participative determination of budgets in various South American states. There was an interesting discussion on the implications for democracy of the internet – did it facilitate participation in discussion and decision-making, or lend itself to abuse and hate mail – ‘the tyranny of those who shout loudest’? Subsequent sessions returned to the theme of new media and its possible influences, and on the Sunday morning Ian McKeane of the Institute of Irish Studies at Liverpool University talked about the influence of borders, real and symbolic, for Irish culture.

The May 2008 School returned to some themes from Williams’ last book, *Resources of Hope*, which as not published until the year after his death. This time, the Friday evening keynote lecture format was revived, once again with Terry Eagleton speaking on Williams’ essay *Culture is Ordinary*, first published in 1958 and, as with so much of Williams’ work, sounding amazingly relevant and contemporary. Further sessions were taken by Andrew Dobson and Karen Hunt from Keele University (*Socialism and Ecology and Women, Old Labour and New Social Movements*). Next day, Mark Fisher, MP for Stoke Central and former Arts Minister led a session on *The State, Arts and Architecture*.

The publication of an updated version of Williams’ *Keywords* provided the theme for the 21st School in May 2009. Mark Fisher returned with a session on democracy and representation, and Dai Smith, author of a new biography of Williams: *Raymond Williams – A Warrior’s Tale* (2008) talked about some issues involved in biographical writing. The theme of culture and meaning – in both literature and fine art – formed the themes of the remainder of the weekend. Catherine Belsey, Chair of the Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory, Cardiff University, talked on realism and anti-naturalism in literature with particular reference to the work of Berthold Brecht, and Erica Brook, in a session called *Unweaving the Rainbow*, illustrated some of the underlying debates about perspective and technique in painting.

The 2010 and 2011 Schools took place against a sombre background in which the future of Wedgwood Memorial College was in doubt. The 2010 keynote session was delivered by Mike Rustin of the University of East London, who focused on Williams’ thoughts on the environment – significantly, Williams had been thinking and writing about environmental issues many years before they featured in mainstream political debate. The subsequent discussion, involving Malcolm Pittock and Tony Dennis among others, ranged wide over issues of political strategy and perspective as well as those of the environment, and in some ways reflected the breadth of Williams’ interests. Subsequent sessions revisited issues of democracy and the media with Chad Goodwin and Granville Williams, and gender equality with Eileen Elkin.

By May 2011, the closure of WMC seemed certain, and this year’s school had a sense of finality to it, at least so far as the College was concerned. The twenty third keynote lecture was this time delivered by Professor Richard Wilkinson, joint author with Kate Pickett of *The Spirit Level*, the investigation of the effects of inequality first published in 2009. The Friday evening session was led by Tristram Hunt, historian, MP for Stoke Central and (now) Shadow Education Secretary. Drawing on his recently-published biography of Friedrich Engels, Tristram Hunt talked about the significance of equality for the socialist tradition. He emphasised the important distinction between equality of outcome and equality of opportunity, pointing out that the latter is frequently at the expense of the former – he felt that the Blair government’s toleration of excessive financial inequality had stemmed partly from its focus on equality of opportunity. This theme was taken up by the Saturday morning speaker, Peter Kent-Baguley, a (dissident) Labour City Councillor for Stoke –on–Trent. He described the effects of deindustrialisation on a city like Stoke, and the ways in which cuts in spending power had led to a circle of decline.

The second Saturday morning session was devoted to the lecture by Richard Wilkinson. He demonstrated how unequal societies experience more distress and less social cohesion than more equal ones, and how this applies to almost every conceivable aspect of social life – life expectancy, mental and physical health, teenage pregnancy, anti-social behaviour or drug and alcohol dependency. Levels of trust are higher in more equal societies, as are rates of social mobility. The discussion which followed the lecture asked why inequality had increased in British (and other) societies and at what might be done to reverse it. Some guarded hope was expressed that the opposition under Miliband would take on board the lessons of *The Spirit Level*, or even that the new coalition government might be sufficiently concerned by the socially disruptive consequences of some kinds of inequality to address at least some of the more blatant symptoms. Cameron is a long way from Thatcher, it was said – a judgement which some may feel the need to revise in the light of subsequent experience!

The afternoon session was led by Alexandra Delaney, who talked of her experiences with women's development projects in rural Nepal. She made the point that debates about inequality and poverty take on new meanings when one experiences a desperately poor society in which many women in particular are virtual slaves. The subsequent discussions wondered how much poverty in societies like Nepal is systemically linked to over-consumption in other parts of the world, and what role had been played by globalisation in increasing inequality within and between societies. As so often, the debate came back to questions of agency – what social formations (political parties, campaign groups, trade unions, governments) were capable of combating and reversing the evident pressures towards inequality within market economies?

Following the sudden closure of WMC in Autumn 2011, the RW Schools have taken on a certain peripatetic aspect. A successful weekend was held at Wortley Hall, Barnsley, in May 2012, and again at the Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool, in November. Numbers held up well on both these occasions. The Wortley Hall school focussed on Anthony Barnett's introduction for the new (2011) edition of Williams' *Long Revolution*, and on Barnett's lecture for the AGM of the Raymond Williams Society in November 2011. Barnett had pointed to the Occupy movements as symptomizing exasperation with conventional politics, and also to the continuing relevance of Williams' themes in the *Long Revolution* – 'difficulty, complexity within wholeness and humanity'. This time, the weekend was organised exclusively around discussion groups, ranging from some of Barnett's themes ('The Long and Quick of Revolution' and Agency and the Labour Movement) to a research workshop on the French Presidential Election, although a (partially successful!) skype online interview was conducted with Anthony Barnett.

In 2013, two Raymond Williams Schools were held at Wortley Hall. The first, called Democracy and the Future of Political Parties, followed the familiar format with a combination of lectures and seminars. Chad Goodwin, longtime WEA tutor and Chair of the Thomas Paine Society, gave the keynote Friday evening lecture, in which he discussed the development of the idea of democracy and some of its possible meanings and implications in the contemporary world. Subsequent sessions pursued these ideas, looking at representative and participatory forms of democracy, the anarchist tradition of direct democracy and the cultural implications of democracy. In all of these discussions, the influence of Williams' seminal work *Keywords* was very apparent. The other lecture of the weekend was given by Roger Seifert on the EU, Neo-liberalism and Democracy; this highlighted the implications for democracy of transnational organisations like the EU, and led to much discussion about whether, and how, democratic principles could be extended beyond the confines of the nation state.

The second School, also at Wortley, was held in November, 2013, on the subject of Scandinavian politics and culture. This topic had arisen from discussions at the May school, when after various references to Scandinavian welfare and economic arrangements it had been felt that there should be

further informed investigation of these topics. The lead lecture was delivered by journalist, writer and broadcaster Lesley Riddoch, who from her Scottish base has developed numerous links with Norway in particular. She gave a fascinating and well-informed overview of Scandinavian social and political culture, and coped resolutely with the non-functioning of Wortley's computer and projection equipment! The second lecture of the weekend was given by Jim McGuigan, Professor of Cultural Analysis at Loughborough University, who discussed Williams' *Towards 2000* in the light of social and political developments since it was published, and in particular the degradation of public life under the impact of neo-liberalism. Jim McGuigan gave a well-structured and thought-provoking lecture, even though he could have been more visible – he preferred to remain seated to deliver his lecture, which meant that in a room of perhaps sixty people, most had the slightly eerie experience of listening to a disembodied voice coming from the front of the room. Both lectures stimulated much discussion, and this was assisted by Kristin Ewins, of Orebro University, Sweden. It was unfortunate that Lesley Riddoch had to leave early in the morning following her session, as it would have been useful to have engaged in further questions and discussion with her.

How to sum up the overall experience of the RW schools over more than twenty five years? One of my recurring thoughts is how resilient Raymond Williams' insights have been, dating as they have done in some cases from the 1950's. Democracy, social change, the relationship between material forces and ideas, a determination to respect people and to see them as potentially active agents in their own lives, the social organisations which might help them to do that – all of these things are as relevant today as when Williams first wrote about them. Additionally, his prescience in highlighting issues about the environment at a time when most saw these as having little if any political relevance, remains one of his abiding achievements. Williams is said to have felt pessimistic about the immediate future in the last few years of his life, because the neoliberal juggernaut seemed to have crushed everything in its path and to have marginalised most possible forms of resistance. Now, in 2013, five years after the implosion of the world financial system, there are widespread doubts about the sustainability of the world economy in its present (capitalist) form. Williams' ideas, and his example of a lifetime of intellectual rigour and political commitment, keep his memory green.

It is difficult to do justice to the loyalty and commitment of all the people who have been involved as students and tutors with the Schools over the years, many of them travelling long distances to be there. Inevitably, in that time, some people have died, and others find that age or illness now prevent them from attending. In the first group, I wish to remember Edith Bull, Barbara Bowden, Ernie Butlin, Dudley Pretty, Ray Raikes, Bill and Vera Raffell, Ellen Rooney and Harry Sculthorpe. In the second, and happily still very much with us, Clive Edwards. I also wish to record the crucial role of Derek Tatton as Warden of WMC between 1979 and 2003 and Course Co-Ordinator of the Schools throughout their existence. Without Derek's efforts, the Schools would neither have happened in the first place nor survived over this length of time – that much is evident.

Numbers have grown throughout the period – from around twenty at the earliest schools, through to more than forty five at the most recent ones. The age profile has varied, with a preponderance towards older students, but that has been leavened at various times by influxes of younger people – the Luton University Politics students in the 1990's, recruits via PiP over the last few years. Still, as older members age, new recruits and wider publicity for the Schools are perpetual matters of concern, and as such they are a recurring item for discussion by members of the Foundation.

Throughout the period of the Schools the RWM Trust (now the RW Foundation) has gone from strength to strength. About £8k was raised following the initial appeal for funds in 1988, and that has been greatly enhanced by subsequent legacies – from Joy Williams in, and crucially from Dudley Pretty in

Dudley, a regular attender at WMC and a student at many of the schools, left the proceeds of the sale of his bungalow to the RWM Foundation. This was an enormous boost to the Foundation, and it has helped to ensure a future for the annual RW School, no matter where it might take place.

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