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## Reviews

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# REVIEWS

## Stephen Woodhams (ed.), *Raymond Williams: From Wales to the World* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2021). Pp. 265. £10.99.

Raymond Williams, regarded by many as one of the most important intellectuals to come out of twentieth-century Wales, belonged to a political tradition that may be traced back through the Enlightenment to the Protestant Reformation: a tradition that was concerned with mediating and nourishing the intellectual connections between Wales and the wider world. As its title suggests, Stephen Woodhams's edited collection of essays takes this process of interplay as one of its central themes. It comprises nine essays, four of them penned by Woodhams himself.

In the opening essay, 'Wales and Beyond', Woodhams makes the point that Williams was necessarily a writer that transcended the 'compartmentalisation of knowledge imposed by the academy' (2), a thinker that 'wrote across intellectual boundaries, pursuing his own path as an original intelligence' (3). 'Raymond Williams was himself a crossroads', Woodhams asserts, 'through which moved ideas connecting people and places, while at the same time he independently fashioned his own often more penetrating analyses' (11). This sense of liminality is indeed the key to understanding Williams's life and work. The life's journey of this railwayman's son from Pandy, Monmouthshire, into English academia and ultimately back again involved not just passing between two countries but between two worlds. Williams's journey took him across borders that were simultaneously physical, social, cultural and psychological. Even after having established himself within the academic world, he continued to occupy a position on the margins, working within the Cinderella discipline of adult education, precariously positioned between the academy and wider society. The way in which this sense of liminality shaped Williams's view of the world may be seen in all aspects of his work. It is etched into his fiction, from his first novel, *Border Country*, to his last, *People of the Black Mountains*, and it informs his cultural analysis, most obviously, perhaps, in *The Country and the City*. His position on the interface between different classes, nations and cultures is what gave Williams's work its distinctive cutting edge, and it

goes a good way towards explaining his enduring appeal to academics, many of whom have by necessity made similar life journeys.

Stephen Woodhams's collection is evidence of this appeal. Having opened by introducing the essential liminality of the 'Welsh European' Williams, in the second essay Woodhams seeks to place his subject within a 'longer history' of Wales. This sketch of Welsh history from the early-eighteenth century up until the inter-war period will doubtless be useful to those with little or no previous knowledge of Welsh history, but, approaching it as a historian, I must admit to baulking slightly at its somewhat superficial treatment. Based upon a relatively narrow range of secondary sources, it contains some questionable assertions (the statement on p. 41, for example, about urbanisation precipitating 'movement away from Chapel', ignores the enormous boom in chapel building that came with urbanisation) and the book might have been better served by a more specific contextualisation of Williams with closer reference to his immediate social and family background.

The next essay, 'Crossing the Border' by Elizabeth Allen, moves the book's focus more directly onto Williams's work itself, and starts to get to the heart of some of the complexities of Williams as a writer. Allen picks up on the themes introduced in the book's opening chapter, tracing the way, particularly through analysis of the themes in *Border Country*, in which consciousness of borders informs Williams's work, imparting both a sense of pain and, crucially, a sense of power. In the fourth essay, 'A culture where I can breathe', Stephen Woodhams expands the focus to sketch in a wider intellectual context, examining Williams's place in the development of cultural theory and modern Welsh historiography, before handing the field back to Elizabeth Allen, who in 'Dream of a Country', examines Williams's sense of place more closely, notably through an analysis of his novel *The Fight for Manod*. These essays contain some interesting themes. 'Dream of a Country' tackles one of the central themes of our times: the relationship between the universal and the particular in a globalised world. It reveals Williams to have been acutely aware of the crisis that capitalism was creating as its development homogenised the world around him. His responses to this, what he termed 'militant particularism', a recognition of the 'need to negotiate the relation of the particular to wider networks' (131) and a 'refusal of any false binary between the local and the global' (131), might be seen as some of the most vital of all the 'resources of hope' that Williams bequeathed to us, and Allen is right to draw attention to them.

In chapter six Derek Tatton explores another crucial facet of Williams's work: his role in adult education. Tatton places Williams's views on the politics of adult education in the dual context of the history of adult education in Wales and Williams's wider intellectual development as a 'Celtic radical'. This is an important theme. Williams's work in adult education at the Oxford Delegacy for Extra Mural Studies from 1946–61 was one of the formative influences upon some of his most important work, most notably *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961). Nor was he alone in this. His close contemporaries, Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thompson and Stuart Hall, all shared a commitment to adult education, which, in an age when admission to universities was restricted to a small minority of the population, was a crucial agent in sustaining the 'long revolution' towards an educated democracy that Williams narrated and advocated. The extent to which Williams brought a distinctively Welsh or Celtic dimension to his advocacy of adult learning is nevertheless debateable. Tatton argues that he did, drawing attention to his professed aspiration, stated in an interview in *New Left Review* in 1978, that he wanted 'the Welsh people – still a radical and cultured people – to defeat, override or bypass bourgeois England' (148). The connection between this aspiration and Williams's adult education work remains, despite Tatton's efforts to situate Williams within a distinctively Welsh adult education tradition, speculative. The essay nevertheless does service in raising the issue, and Tatton is right to direct readers to John McIlroy and Sallie Westwood's collection of Williams's writings on adult education *Border Country: Raymond Williams in Adult Education* (1993), where they might start to explore this important theme for themselves.

The following chapters by Hywel Dix ('Welsh European' and 'Sowing the Seeds of Change') enlarge on the theme, latent in Tatton's contribution, of the connection between Raymond Williams's thought and its wider European context. Dix explores the interaction of Williams with the thought of Louis Althusser, Lucien Goldmann, Jürgen Habermas and Rudolf Bahro, both in terms of the development of his theoretical approach to 'cultural materialism' and his aspirations for political change. These chapters elucidate some complex ideas and explore some of the influences that made Williams an important and creative Marxist thinker, seeking, as he put it, 'to replace the formula of base and superstructure with the more active idea of a field of mutually if also unevenly determining forces' (177). Of particular interest, perhaps,

are the ideas that Williams derived from East German dissident Rudolf Bahro's concept of a 'League of Communists', outside of the official political structure, as an alternative focus for political initiative and change. The potential relevance of these ideas was underlined by events in the last decade of Williams's life when cross-party and cross-cultural collaboration was developed in Wales in response to the crisis of the 1984–5 miners' strike (a process narrated by the late Hywel Francis in *History On Our Side* (2009)). Dix's suggestion, building on Williams's elaboration of Bahro that a League of *Communalists* (rather than communists) might drive forward political change in Wales is interesting, in that it harks back to much earlier Welsh debates on the definition of what we currently understand in English as *socialism* (a term that, as I have explored elsewhere, has in Welsh many different potential meanings). Dix's contribution underlines, as he puts it, Williams's insistence on 'the importance of avoiding inherited binary models which restrict more critical thinking than they promote' (212). This is needed now more than ever, and Dix should be commended for bringing this aspect of Williams's thought to our attention.

The book closes with a survey of resources for research into Williams, curated by Stephen Woodhams. This will be a very useful starting point for those contemplating serious engagement with the work of Raymond Williams, and Woodhams has done scholars good service in assembling it. I do nevertheless have some reservations about this book. Many of the essays are thought-provoking and engaging, but I am not convinced that they form a coherent whole. The focus shifts from detailed commentary on Williams's work to contextualisation and back again (sometimes within individual essays) without, to my mind, a strong enough connection between those two essentially different missions or a firm enough sense of editorial control. I also found myself (and again this is the historian speaking) irked by the lack of detailed footnotes. Raymond Williams was not an easy writer. His ideas were difficult and his prose often dense and uncompromising. This book does not make his work significantly more accessible. It will appeal to confirmed Raymond Williams scholars, but I would not recommend it unreservedly (with the notable exception of the final chapter) as an introductory text. Those approaching Williams for the first time might be better advised to go directly to his own works. Personally, I would recommend his last (alas unfinished) novel, *People of the Black Mountains*, as a starting point. This communicates his Marxist sense of

history, his profound awareness of liminality, his sense of place and his 'militant particularism' simultaneously with both brilliance and charm, and it is the ideal place from which to 'read backwards' (a process advocated by Williams himself) into Williams's earlier work.

We must acknowledge that many of the intellectual forces at the heart of Raymond Williams's work have been under attack in the Britain of recent decades. Adult education, intellectual engagement with Europe, the strength of connection to place, the integral nature and value of culture as a democratically created and ordinary artefact were all under threat during Williams's own lifetime, yet all prevailed as 'resources of hope'. Things have become bleaker since his death. At times this can give Raymond Williams's work an air of anachronism. Read carefully, however, Williams has a great deal to say to us about our current predicament. In this respect, the interest that Stephen Woodhams's collection represents should be warmly welcomed.

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