

'Raymond Williams and Me'

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Chair, The Raymond Williams Foundation.

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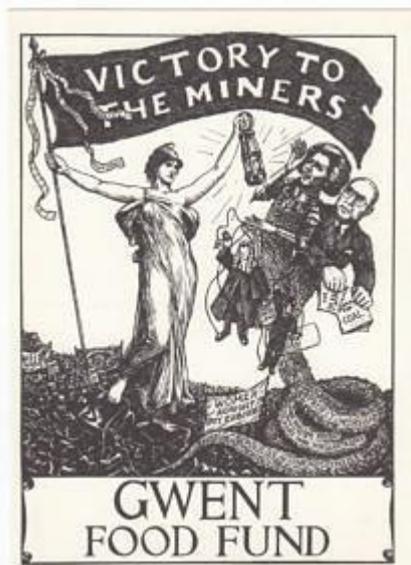
By the time I came to Cambridge University as a (very) mature Ph.D student in 1984 Raymond Williams had just retired from the English Faculty but he was around and visible now and again. I felt, and that is a common feeling, that Cambridge University should have rejected me but the reality was that Cambridge, or at least the people in Cambridge whose opinion I cared about, did not. This was in part because Cambridge University at 18 is very different from Cambridge University at 38. By that age I'd fathomed that the best way to cope with all the public school blokes who were trying to make me feel like an intellectual clodhopper was to fall about laughing with a glass of (I think it was aqua libra in those days) in the company of two or three feminist friends with the 'behave badly' badges that so many of us had taken to wearing. Like everyone else, I had my own border crossings to make, although I don't think I thought of them in this way at the time (I was teaching day release students in the old dilapidated FE huts in York Street to make a bit of money and then rushing back to the dinners in my college, New Hall).

Among the new friends I made in Cambridge were two other postgrad students Morag Shiach and Julia Swindells; Morag, the last Ph.D student that Williams was to supervise, had come from rural Aberdeenshire via McGill University to Cambridge. Julia, a teacher like myself, had come straight from teaching mature women on access courses in Southampton. Raymond Williams examined her Ph.d. Both were to take the legacy of Raymond Williams on in their own writing and lives in different ways; Julia with her work on autobiography and working women 'on the other side of silence' and Morag in her many sophisticated theoretical interpretations of his work.

Then Raymond Williams died. It was Julia who told me the news and she had looked ashen. He was sixty-six. He had gone into hospital for a straightforward op to which she hadn't attached much importance. Nobody had been expecting this. Cambridge is a very small place as well as a large one. Within a week the news had rippled everywhere and in the tiny world that seems so much larger when you are a part of it we were all in a state of deep shock. We knew that we had had to do something to commemorate his death. The question was 'what'?

I had been teaching classes for the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) including a week-end residential course at the Wedgwood Memorial College in Barlaston on working-class writing (not just *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists!*) with my old friend, Andy Croft. The WEA Tutor/Organiser for Bedfordshire was Tony Dennis who had taken over from Derek Tatton. We launched an appeal in Cambridge and Morag was the Treasurer. I can't remember how much we raised but it was in four digits and the cheques still kept coming in. Morag, Tony and I drove to Barlaston to present the Principal, Derek Tatton with a cheque and the request that the money should be used for work to help educationally

disadvantaged students in adult education based initially on the college. That is how the Raymond Williams Memorial Trust which has morphed into the Raymond Williams Foundation started, with Derek Tatton as our Founder. And it is that commitment to adult education to combat educational disadvantage that differentiates us from the others who are doing work on Williams's legacy today in other ways which we value and respect.



I vividly remember one of my two conversations in Cambridge with Raymond Williams. It was about auctioning a miners' lamp. This was at the height of the miners' strike of 1984/5 and we had 'our own' miners, Martin, Emrys, Jim and Alan from Abertillery staying with us, sleeping in the Labour Hall, and collecting for the Gwent Food Fund. There was another border crossing going on for me at this time. I was part of the Cambridge Miners' Support group that was driving from Cambridge to the Nottingham villages to take food, clothing, money and basic necessities to the miners' families every week. Raymond Williams was from Monmouthshire, from Pandy, across the valley from the Six Bells pit in Abertillery, and supporting the strike behind the scenes, making up parcels for each of the 200 babies born in Gwent during the strike. His

thoughtful essay 'Mining the Meaning: Key Words in the Miners' Strike' came from around this time. After I left the university it was lovely to have Joy Williams' sister, Ruth, who lived in Newport (Essex not Wales), as one of my students on a literature course I took in Saffron Walden for three years and to stay in touch with the Williams family in that way.

The one book of Raymond Williams's that I have found myself returning to time and time again, is his wonderful, lucid, insightful and, yes, *readerly*, *The Country and the City*. This has deeply affected the way that I respond to the world around me whenever I've been struggling to understand the complexities of Englishness, Welshness, national identity, and what has made us who we are. It was from *The Country and the City* that I learned that a 'working country is hardly ever a landscape', that those living in the city can never be seen in a single way: as a 'crowd', as the 'masses' or as a 'workforce'; that the notions of pastoral innocence and urban civilization have a history and a literature that can be appropriated and turned around for radical and democratic purposes.

I don't think I have ever taught Austen's *Emma* without pointing out that Highbury was a 'knowable community' -- that there were plenty of people (characters) that one did not know, largely because Austen never knew or cared about them herself, and that Austen was so much better about income which is disposable than about land which has to be worked. Nor have I taught Hardy's *The Woodlanders* without pointing out that Hardy was NOT a provincial writer, usually at the point when Marty South has to get her hair ('a rare and beautiful approximation to chesnut') chopped off for an unnamed 'client', or walked around an elegant stately home without asking what was cleared away to make all this breathtaking beauty, tranquility and order possible? *The Country and the City* is a great work

of cultural criticism and Raymond Williams would have been a great literary critic had he written nothing else, but luckily for us he did.

When I shut my eyes I can see the arboretum at the Wedgwood Memorial College in Staffordshire, the 'People's Tree', the oatcakes for breakfast, the bedroom that I shared with Sheila, Jean and Mary (the shabbiness didn't matter the long talks did), the walks along the canal – Stafford one direction and Stoke the other -- the women painting by hand on delicate porcelain vases and workaday china plates at Etruria, the old canalside factory, and the Esperanto Association map of places where Esperanto was spoken with Bonn, Brussels, New York and Barlaston at the centre of the world. I have found an old black-and-white photograph of Joy Williams, Morag and myself taken at the first of the annual Raymond Williams residential weekends in 1989 planting the tree that was donated to the college gardens by the Bedfordshire WEA Federation. In the photograph it is Joy who is doing the heavy digging and Morag and I who are watching her (I never have been any good at hard physical work). Those wonderful residential weekends, each themed on one aspect of Raymond Williams' work, went on for twenty-two years, and I attended all but two of them. The last which was focused on another amazing book, Wilson and Pickett's *The Spirit Level*, was in 2011 just before the college was closed.

