

Professor Terry Eagleton is Distinguished Professor of English Literature within the Department of English and Creative Writing at Lancaster University. He obtained his PhD at Cambridge where he was a student of Raymond Williams, and went on to become the youngest Fellow of Jesus College since the eighteenth century, before moving to Wadham College, Oxford in 1968. Celebrated for his creative writing as well as his theoretical and critical work, Professor Eagleton has kindly provided this heartfelt personal memoir as a contribution to the Raymond Williams centenary commemorations.



As a truculent young socialist, I was invited by Raymond Williams to help teach his students in Cambridge. My main preoccupation with Cambridge at the time was how to find the nearest exit back to reality, having spent three undergraduate years cowed by the braying willowy young aristocrats who read a little Law between parties and shouldered the townsfolk off the narrow medieval pavements. Even so, one doesn't reject an offer from the greatest socialist thinker of post-war Britain, so my plans to become a village postman were put on hold.

I knew Raymond a little, already, mostly from his lectures. He lectured without a script, effortlessly producing a stream of impeccably grammatical sentences which were entirely improvised. You get him to speak into a tape recorder (I did, once or twice), and the transcript would require no editing whatsoever. Yet there was nothing automated about this extraordinary eloquence. On the contrary, it was as though it sprang from the depths of his body, the ideas inseparable from feeling and experience. He detested glib, smartass speech, though he was characteristically tolerant of those who indulged in it. In fact, it is his generosity of spirit which springs to mind when I think of him. He had an enviable air of authority and self-composure, but also a certain warmth and humility, beneath which one could occasionally glimpse a flash of steel. He struck you as a man deeply at ease in his own being, which given the fact that he was encircled by malicious dons and openly hostile colleagues was quite an achievement. This was in part, I think, because he had a core of solitude or inner detachment, a self-protective distance from his surroundings which he probably needed to survive, but which could sometimes bemuse and frustrate others.

He was also impressively practical. Materialism with him was as much a lifestyle as a doctrine. He had a quick, intuitive sense of how things worked, which among other things made him a superb chairperson and political organiser. He could plant hedges and dig ditches, and it was an ominous sign when this devoted gardener retired to a house in Saffron Walden which he had chosen partly because it had no garden. The weak heart which was to cause his death was already proving a problem. The house was the scene of my last meeting with him, when I came to interview him for *The New Statesman* and his mind was full of the fiction he was writing. The next thing I heard was that he had died. A few days later, I stood between Robin Blackburn and

Tariq Ali in the graveyard of a tiny Welsh chapel, looking out over the Black Mountains as we laid their most distinguished son to rest.