

Herstories: The Novels of Raymond Williams

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In the comprehensive interviews he gave for *New Left Review* in 1979, Raymond Williams spoke candidly about the significance of his own novel writing, a literary project that spanned his whole adult career. It is clear from what Williams said that this writing of fiction was never just a sideline to his work as a radical cultural critic, but something that was both unique and indispensable to his life:

It's certainly true that I have given relatively far more time, in comparison with what became visible and valued, to fiction than to any other form of writing. In the late forties, I regarded the novels as the work which I most wanted to do. Now I feel differently about them. All along there have been certain things pressing on me, which I could simply find no alternative way of writing; today, however, fiction is something I'm prepared to work on a long time without feeling any urgency to finish quickly.¹

Williams viewed this writing of fiction as a constant political and aesthetic challenge, as part of the context of a working-class literary tradition, in particular the Welsh industrial novel.² In contrast to the limited depictions of the working class in the bourgeois novel, Williams sought to develop a radically realistic portrayal that would give a more sustained and subtle expression of the lives of ordinary people:

The general problem, which has exercised many producers—perhaps more often in plays than in novels—is whether to break with the realist tradition altogether or to try and extend it. I think there is a case for seeing how far certain areas which the bourgeois form typically excluded could now be integrated in the novel. The experience of work is a good example. Before Hardy the work of the majority of people never got into fiction as an important experience at all. Of course, the work of the bourgeois world is sometimes rendered as in Balzac's fiction, but not that of the labourer, the industrial worker. Their experience still offers the possibility, with all sorts of difficulties, of seeing whether the realist form is capable of extension and transfor-

mation. I myself think the project is worth attempting, and I've tried to explore it in my novels.³

Williams's own ideological point of entry into this alternative literary tradition was to apply his critical insight to the relationship between culture and society, to dramatise in fiction the actual experiences and feelings of what it is like to be on the receiving end of the forces of class society. This dialectical link between the systemic movements of history and their impact on individual people is what he tried to capture in the seven different novels he wrote. Indeed, one could argue that this tension between social, political and economic structures and the corresponding subjective feelings they produce in everyday life is what makes Williams's novel writing such a fascinating and singular achievement. As George Snedeker concludes: "Williams' influence ... remains powerful in contemporary cultural studies, with their emphasis on the counter-hegemonies of feminist, Third World, and working-class movements."⁴ The task of combining these concerns was however not an easy one, not least in the context of the novel, although Williams tried to solve it by narrowing the fictional focus down to one particular area: the country along the borders between Wales and England where he was born and grew up. Williams saw the potential in this specific geographical location as a critical juncture where contact and conflict could be most acutely represented in terms of history, politics, culture, language, ethnicity, region and nation. These are certainly recognizable concerns in postcolonial writing and have also informed most of the previous criticism of Williams's fiction. While such spatial considerations of centre and margin were without doubt important to Williams, I think they can be illuminated in a more revealing way by shifting the critical focus onto the lives of the female characters in his novels, since that is where I think the ideological implications of these tensions find their most decisive expression.

By applying a gender perspective to Williams's fiction, I hope to shed light on the way the personal and the political are shown to intertwine dramatically in the narratives. Williams's novels depict a man's world and it is easy—as critics have generally done—to focus on this male aspect of the text. However, ignoring the function of the women in the stories has made critics oblivious to the ways in which the female presence becomes a touchstone for both narrowly existential and broader political conflicts. Moreover, because these women represent tangible relations in the everyday, they often appear more aware of the nexus of displacement, estrangement and recovery that forms the subtext of the narrative. Given the ambition of Williams's fiction to span whole historical epochs, this critical focus on the female characters will argue for a greater recognition of their role as active agents in the process of change, producing what I call the "herstories" of the novels.⁵ There is also support to be found for this more specifically gendered approach to Williams's fiction in his comments about the importance of women's liberation, as well as in his own wish to move away from the more conventional "male hegemony" in the

novel:

It's really all in my second novel, *Second Generation*; that's what it was really all about. But at about the same time I was writing *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, where I describe the Brontë sisters as representing interests and values marginalised by the male hegemony. Not only that, however, but representing human interests of a more general kind which showed up the limits of the extraordinary disabling notion of masculinity. I remember how I used to embarrass students in my lectures . . . by suggesting it would be interesting to locate the historical moment when men stopped crying in public. The suppression of tenderness and emotional response, the willingness to admit what isn't weakness—one's feelings in and through another; all this is a repression not only of women's experience but of something much more general. And I suppose I found it easier to explore that in more personal terms, in my novels.⁶

Despite this declaration of a gender consciousness, very little attention has been given to its consequences in the critical discussion of Williams's fiction which, as has been indicated, focuses mostly on the trials and tribulations of the male characters, without much reference to the role of the women. Moreover, while most critics have situated Williams's novels mainly in the context of a liminal geographical place, expressing a particular Welsh border viewpoint, there has been no real critical engagement with the corresponding effect this has on the relationships between the men and the women.⁷ Although Laura Di Michele signals the need for greater acknowledgement of the "structure of feeling" in, for instance, *Border Country*, the gender implications of this remain vague, while the female characters are ignored altogether. Instead the novel is reduced to autobiography—"the story of Matthew Price *is* the story of Raymond Williams"—and Williams's own Welsh origins are seen as the real subject of the novel.⁸ More promisingly, Wendy Kohli claims to "break from [Williams's] gender-blind assumptions" in his "cultural and social theory" by shifting attention to the "open spaces . . . that Williams provides in the novels" where these questions are addressed.⁹ Certainly, Kohli's subsequent elaboration of the liberating effect Williams's work had on her own troubled experience of class migration is important and revealing, but her critical treatment of the significance of these subjective feelings focuses exclusively on the reactions of the male characters in *Border Country* and *Second Generation*, and the women are once again forgotten.

Also very disappointingly, in the most substantial critical study of Williams's fiction—Tony Pinkney's book, *Raymond Williams*—an awareness of gender or even class has disappeared altogether, presumably as two discredited grand

narratives. Pinkney's overall argument is that Williams was really a "postmodern novelist', meditating intently upon place, space, mapping and the socio-spatial dialectic ... a 'postmodern geographer'."¹⁰ This radical critical re-orientation appears, however, even more reductive, not only because Williams himself was extremely sceptical about postmodernism, which he thought had created an "establishment [that] takes human inadequacy, self-deception, role-playing, the confusion and substitution of individuals in temporary relationships, and even the lying paradox of communication of the fact of non-communication, as self evident routine data."¹¹ Pinkney's postmodern turn away from gender and class in Williams's writing is also highly questionable when one considers how important Williams considered the fight for gender equality to be to the whole cause of socialist liberation—something he thought was seriously neglected in the movement and to which his own work was dedicated.¹²

These repeated critical lapses seem to be comprehensively remedied in Gwyneth Roberts's article, "The cost of community: women in Raymond Williams's fiction." However, already in the introduction to the collection in which it appears, the response seems alarmingly damning. Referring to the Welsh working-class community that Williams portrays, the editors Jane Aaron and Teresa Rees write: "Williams's fiction tends to endorse its reactionary repressiveness: in his novels women who attempt to win some freedom for themselves are punished for their hubris."¹³ Gwyneth Roberts confirms this characterisation of Williams as a basically anti-feminist writer in her own discussion of the three novels of his Welsh trilogy, claiming "Williams's attitude toward gender issues [is] ambivalent at best, and arguably even at times regressive in nature."¹⁴ Thus, according to Roberts, *Border Country* "silences the women," *Second Generation* also "seems to renew [Williams's] desire to return women to the silence he attempted to impose on them in *Border Country*," while in *The Fight for Manod*, there "is the male community which has access to money, information and varying degrees of power, and the female, or sub-community which operates in a state of powerlessness and ignorance."¹⁵ In conclusion, Roberts states that "Williams's treatment of the women in his fiction seems to suggest that the ideal community, as he saw it, relied upon the continuation of existing gender inequalities." In his novels, it becomes "evident that he also saw women as a threat" to "the family and the working-class community."¹⁶ I find this categorical rejection of Williams's gender politics highly contentious and will argue instead that his novels significantly challenge the conventions of traditional gender roles, both masculine and feminine. Many of the female characters also personify the traditions of working-class solidarity and struggle that Williams sought to promote. Thus, in contrast to either the above critical omissions or reproaches, I want to take Williams at his word and reassert the defining social patterns of gender, in power structures and personal relations, to examine more systematically what I consider to be a crucial though neglected aspect of his fiction.

Williams published seven novels from 1960 to 1990, although more were planned. They fall naturally and thematically into three unified groups. The first—*Border Country* (1960), *Second Generation* (1964) and *The Fight for Manod* (1969)—makes up what is sometimes called his Welsh trilogy. Both in terms of character and plot, Williams clearly wrote these as connected stories, looking backwards and forwards at the conflicts among people who come from the borders between rural Wales and industrial England. Williams has himself confirmed the thematic affinity of these three novels in terms of a temporal connection:

Yes, I had a trilogy in mind from the beginning. The first two were locally unconnected, but the links between Glynmawr and Trawsfynydd—a few miles apart—had been put ready for use. And thematically the shape of the trilogy was clear. They were interconnecting versions of a specific kind of change, across borders. *Border Country* was the present, including and trying to focus an immediate past; *Second Generation* a true present; *Fight for Manod* a present trying to include and focus a future. There was even a linkage through the successive means of mobility: *Border Country's* railway; *Second Generation's* car traffic and factory; *Manod's* potential electronic technology. And in each, through these different situations, the decisive problem of the relation of learning to labour, taking different class and political aspects. All of this, of course, as the infrastructure of the trilogy; the human specificities had to be dominant at each stage.¹⁷

Williams's last two novels were also conceived as a trilogy: an epic, fictional portrayal entitled *People of the Black Mountains*, beginning with the first settlers in prehistory 23,000 years ago and ending in the present. Only two volumes were finished, however, before his death—*The Beginning* (1986) and *The Eggs of the Eagle* (1990) which ends in the 1400s, both of which were edited by Williams's wife, Joy. The challenge of writing such a comprehensive account of the Welsh people was for Williams part of a life-long urge to reconnect with his own working-class roots, to help readers see history as part of a dialectical process of slow accumulation and sudden revolutionary change. In 1979, before the work was begun, he wrote candidly about the problems in using the genre of the historical novel with a view to recreating a radically alternative image of the past:

From a socialist philosophical standpoint, writing a novel about history ought to be a possible form. But I don't know yet whether it can in practice be done. The great problem is obviously to find the necessary unity. I thought of trying to achieve it through continuity of place rather than of people—taking the

same place as it is inhabited in different periods (I would be very selective about these) by different kinds of people, manifesting different social relations, and exercising different ways of using the land. It happens that the district I know best in Wales would be suitable for this kind of continuity, because of its very long agricultural and industrial tradition, going back to communities of neolithic shepherds. I could begin there and end in the 20th century, or a bit ahead.¹⁸

The remaining two novels—*The Volunteers* (1978) and *Loyalties* (1985)—appear at first to be rather different from one another. The former is a political thriller dealing with terrorism and state repression, while the latter is a generational novel about a group of left-wing activists whose lives intersect and whose commitment to the cause of socialism is tested over time. It could, nevertheless, be argued that Williams reworks elements of the thriller in both cases in order to depict the moral challenges of political engagement. A key question in this context is that of the ends and means of radical aspirations, both individual and collective, and if certain actions can be justified in terms of the common good. The novels are also psychological studies in political avantgardism and the lure of what Williams called the “adventurism and substitutionism” of elitist group loyalties that lead to the betrayal of both comrades and causes.¹⁹

In light of the above division of Williams’s novels into three separate groups, the broad thematic range of his fictional work might seem both disparate and difficult to bring together in a unified discussion of gender. However, by directing the critical spotlight onto the women in each of the stories, I want to point to a pattern of female reaffirmation and resistance as being one of the defining narrative elements throughout the whole of Williams’s oeuvre, beginning with his Welsh trilogy.

The Welsh Trilogy

The three novels that make up Williams’s Welsh trilogy—*Border Country*, *Second Generation* and *The Fight for Manod*—can most fruitfully be discussed together, not only in terms of their shared group of characters, but also in the thematic link that connects them. In *Border Country*, the focus is on Matthew Price and his father, Harry, and their immediate family—Matthew’s mother Ellen and his wife Susan. In *Second Generation*, a similar concentration is to be found around the family of Peter Owen and his father and mother, Harold and Kate, as well as that of his girlfriend Beth and her father and mother. The final novel in the trilogy, *The Fight for Manod*, brings several of these characters together when Matthew and Peter return to Wales as government planning consultants. Throughout the trilogy, there is also an exploration of the psychological trauma of separation experienced by the two main male characters, Matthew and Peter, as working-class scholarship boys who have left

Wales to go to study at English universities and who have difficulty in knowing where they really belong, both socially and geographically. This latter aspect has certainly caught the attention of previous critics of the novels, who have discussed their complicated personalities exhaustively.²⁰ As mentioned, there is an imbalance in the plots between the main action involving the male characters and the supportive role of the women, as mothers, girlfriends, and wives—something that makes it easy to relegate the latter to the margins of the critical debate. However, closer scrutiny of the role of these female characters will show that it is towards them that the divided loyalties of Matthew and Peter are directed, not just emotionally, but also in their attempts to bridge the gap between their academic world and the Welsh working-class community they have left. This process is also translated into a rivalry between the women who are their closest companions and other, more independent female figures that have a more liberating impact on their lives. This pattern is most clearly repeated in both *Border Country* and *Second Generation*, although the figure of the emancipated other woman is also present in *The Fight for Manod*. I want to discuss these aspects of gender relations in some detail, since it becomes a recurring trope throughout Williams's fiction.

In his chapter on Thomas Hardy in *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, Williams writes on a surprisingly personal note about the connotations of class migration in post-war Britain:

But the real Hardy country, I feel more and more, is that border country so many of us have been living in: between custom and education, between work and ideas, between love of place and an experience of change. This has a special importance to a particular generation, who have gone to the university from ordinary families and have to discover, through a life, what that experience means. But it has also a much more general importance; for in Britain generally this is what has been happening: a moving out from old ways and places and ideas and feelings; a discovery in the new of certain unlooked-for problems, unexpected and very sharp crises, conflicts of desire and possibility.²¹

This identification of a paradigmatic break is what characterises the underlying theme of all three novels in Williams's Welsh trilogy. The conflict is established in *Border Country*, where Matthew represents the first generation that not only leaves Wales but also moves up socially as a university student. The experience is repeated in the next novel, *Second Generation*, where Peter's Welsh parents have themselves left in search of work in the car factories of Birmingham, while Peter has gone on to university. The ensuing dilemma of the first two novels, which is even more pronounced in the third, *The Fight for Manod*, is not so much a question of leaving but one of return: a re-encounter with their Welsh cultural roots in an at-

tempt to re-connect their fractured selves. What is significant, however, is that this process of emotional self-recuperation is in all three novels linked to their involvement with another woman—Matthew with Eira and Peter with Rose, both previous girlfriends. In the final volume of the trilogy, the figure of Gwen, another feisty Welsh woman, appears in a similar way as the source of inspiration the men need in order to recover a new sense of direction. Whereas in the first two novels, this female encounter is overtly sexual, in the last volume there is only an indirect erotic charge between Matthew and Gwen, but the contact between them has the same transformational impact. The sexual involvement is also illicit—Matthew is already married to Susan, while Peter is engaged to be married to Beth. The main function of these other women is not just to release these two repressed Welsh men on a conventional physical level, but to help them regain an ideological wholeness of being in their mixed-up set of social identities—as two ex-patriot Welsh, working- and middle-class academic males.

One concrete expression of this psychological confusion, which is evident throughout the trilogy, is that when the men talk to other people, they fail to communicate. It is not that they are reserved or inarticulate, it is just that they never seem to be able to say what they mean—what they really feel. This is particularly the case when they speak to the women, who are often left perplexed about what the men want, a mutual deficit of never fully understood feelings and desires that underpins most of the personal relations in the novels. The men also behave in other enigmatic ways. In *Border Country*, for instance, Matthew comes to stay with his parents after his father has had a stroke. He leaves his wife and two children in England without much ado and they do not really re-appear until the father's funeral at the end of the novel. Matthew seems more concerned with his own unfinished emotional business at his parental home, perhaps predictably in the circumstances, but still another sign of his social disorientation. Moreover, his unexplained frustrations are directed mainly at the women: his mother and his former girlfriend, Eira. For example, after a courtesy visit by a neighbour, he appears strangely upset that his absence and career as an academic are talked about in the village, as though there is a community of feeling that is outside of his individual, male control:

As the door closed behind him, he stood in the passage, fighting down his anger. He had learned very thoroughly to be ashamed of anger, and certainly it could be blamed, here in this anxious house. Yet he could not much longer go on accepting the unacceptable terms in which he was received. But the thread of this anger was confused. If he worked it loose, he could not know where it would lead.²²

In contrast, the man-to-man talks he has with his father are more forgiving, but less candid. It is, therefore, the women who play much more of an actively therapeutic role in his life. Another example is when he finds out that Eira is married, something that really shouldn't surprise him, but which makes him repeat the paranoid suggestion about certain personal things being generally known while other things are kept hidden in the village. It is obviously not so much what people—even strangers—know about him, but that it reminds him of his own ambivalent status, symbolised by his two names: Matthew is his real name he uses in England; Will is the nickname he is known by in the village. Again, his mother, Ellen, has to bear the brunt of his personal suspicions: “‘This is supposed to be a place where we all know about each other,’ Matthew went on angrily. ‘But a thing like this, it’s almost as if it were concealed.’ ‘Well, there wasn’t anything to conceal,’ Ellen said.”²³ A similarly accusatory tone re-occurs when Matthew tries to project his own lack of authentic self onto Eira, who instead uses their names as a sign of affirmation, of who they really are: “‘You make me mad, Will. Look it’s me, Eira. You don’t have to pretend.’ ‘We do damn little else, seems to me.’ ‘Pretend? Us?’ ‘What else, Eira? What else do we do?’ She turned away, putting her hand up to her face.”²⁴ The crisis comes to a head when Will and Eira quarrel openly about Eira’s marriage, clearly something that Will resents. The outcome is unexpectedly cathartic when Eira identifies the real cause of Will’s pain and anger, at the same time opening up to a possible reconciliation of his conflicting loyalties:

‘What’s happened to you, Will? What’s happened to make you like this?’

‘The usual things. I’m not quite so naïve as I was.’

‘You’re not quite so human either. You seem to have forgotten every ordinary feeling.’

‘No, I’m not joining in, Eira. I nearly broke myself once, trying to keep up every kind of relationship, responding too much. I’ve learned now, anyway, most relationships have to be left unfinished, for it is really that they *are* finished. Then let’s accept that. Don’t try to make talking a substitute.’

‘Is that what we’re doing?’

‘I wanted to see you. But I shouldn’t have come. I came back to be with my father, and for no other reason.’

‘I know.’

‘But the pressure on all sides is so intense. The real pressure, that I should come back.’

‘I’m not dragging you back, Will. Only I’ve known you so long, I half know what you’re thinking. You went away from us, you had to. And we accepted that, though in fact it meant losing you. It’s just that it hurts, now, when you come back as a stranger.’

‘Not as a stranger.’

‘Yes. To yourself even. You’re being drawn back, through your father, but can you come, even to him, if you turn from everything else?’

‘What should I come back to?’

‘To your own world, Will. Bringing your other world with you.’²⁵

Here we see Eira, a Welsh woman, counterposing a community of “we” and “us” of both family and village to what Will only sees as his own individual predicament. It is a conversation Will could never have with his father, who also represents introversion and stasis. It is the women who point to a way out of his crisis—“Bringing your other world with you.” It seems a rather vague suggestion at this stage, but one that proves prophetic, since this will be the alternative that provides the basis for both Matthew and Peter returning to Wales later in *The Fight for Manod*. Before this happens, however, Williams felt the need to fill the narrative gap by writing an intermediary novel, *Second Generation*, which would not only deal in more depth with the experience of living in England, but where the gender complications of this move would be the main focus of the story.

The 1926 General Strike and subsequent defeat of the miners casts a long shadow throughout *Border Country*, resulting in a withdrawal from militant trade union activity on the part of the men and the cultivation of one’s garden instead, both literally and metaphorically in the case of Mathew’s father Harry. The process is reproduced in *Second Generation*, where the movement of Welsh families to England for work in the post-Second World War period has not resolved this trauma, either politically or emotionally. The anguish is again expressed within the family: Peter is now a university researcher who has lost his motivation as an academic; Peter’s father Harold is a disillusioned trade union representative working in a car factory; and his mother Kate’s involvement in the Labour Party seems to be another form of escape from a sterile marriage. The situation becomes acute, however, when the workers come out on strike against job losses, actions that have personal repercussions within the family. The interconnection between public and private conflicts of *Border Country* is also reiterated in the gendered plotlines of this second novel.

The key figures in this crisis are once again the women—Beth, Rose and Peter’s mother, Kate—who have to deal with Peter’s erratic search for some sort of cohesion in life. In a narrative shift from public to private, the turbulent relationship between Peter and Beth comes to dominate the novel—a clash based on Peter’s inability to commit to their intended marriage. Ostensibly, there is the issue of not having sex before marriage (despite this being the 1960s), although Beth insists that this is just a symptom of a deeper divide between them: “It’s not just the sex, Peter. You could have that, now, there’d still be the delay. You’d wake up next morning you’d know nothing had been done. Except enough disturbance to leave

it emptier than ever.’”²⁶ At this point Williams creates another parallel between Peter, Beth, and his parents, Harold and Kate, whose relationship is similarly dysfunctional, impelling Kate to become involved with another man. The novel suggests that in such an intersectional continuum of conflicting identities, the confusions of class also have a knock-on effect on issues of gender and ethnicity. When the narrator writes: “From the beginning, shaped by his experience, Harold had worked hard and bitterly in politics and his union,” the word ‘bitterly’ reflects the forced nature of Harold’s trade union involvement, more like an individual penitence for something in his personal life rather than a genuine commitment to class solidarity.²⁷ The same could be said of Peter’s own academic research, which was initially an act of loyalty to his father, but then becomes something that has no intrinsic meaning to him.

Beth experiences a similar dearth of emotional response that Peter’s mother feels about her husband, once again the word used here is “bitter”: “Knowing him so well, she could recognize something else: the old, bitter withdrawal and concealment.”²⁸ However, the psychological deadlock is once again broken by the intervention of a woman. In Peter’s case, this involves the renewal of his affair with Rose, at one point pleading with her to run away with him to America, another unrealistic social and geographical escape that she rejects. Instead, Rose compels him to face up to the real cause of his emotional frigidity and fear of commitment: the move from Wales that his parents made has been reproduced in his own class migration as a “second generation” immigrant and university student. These two consecutive displacements produce similar symptoms of repression, resentment and guilt. Significantly, Rose confronts Peter with the reality of his own condition of social inbetweenness for which their relationship is merely a substitute:

‘I wasn’t a person, I was just this class in your head. When we were going to get married, it wasn’t a girl you were taking, you were just moving out of your class.’

‘And what should I have done?’

‘When you were nineteen, Peter, after your first year, you were so lively, so full of yourself, so wanting to live. But every new term, it had to begin all over again. After a week with me you were yourself again, but you didn’t think it was yourself, you thought you’d just pulled up your roots—and you were guilty about it. Guilty about being excited. About just being alive and not being political. About dancing and being together. About everything we were doing and were going to do.’

He lay back in the chair, and covered his face with his hands.²⁹

The other decisive confrontation is not between Peter and his father, however desirable that might be, but with his mother, Kate, especially after the revelation

of her adultery. Despite Peter himself having an affair with Rose, he reacts with conventional disgust at his mother's behaviour. It is only towards the end, when his mother has returned to his father and he himself has gone back to Beth that they can both reach a more balanced acceptance of their wayward love lives. At this point Peter can begin to comprehend that what his mother says about herself also applies to him:

'I need to tell you about Arthur,' she said.

'No, Mam. It isn't my business. Dad said it wasn't my business.'

'He was just trying to be kind.'

'He was being kind.'

'Yes, every time. He's been kind to me.'

'Well then?'

'It released me, Peter. For the time it released me. From myself. From my world. And I needed release. But now it's sprung back at me. It's hit me in the face. Not just being found out, though that was bad. But finding myself out.'

'This happened to me'.³⁰

Not only does this moment of mutual recognition allow Peter to open up towards both Beth and his mother, it also leads him to turn his research attention to the conditions of the workers in his father's factory. It is therefore a profoundly symbolic act of cultural repatriation. Thus, his commitment to Beth, whom he now intends to marry, represents a retreat from male intransigence and a corresponding recovery of his Welsh working-class connections. To begin documenting the lives of the workers is not only an intellectual choice, it is a return to a reality that feels more like home. The last scene of the novel is therefore characterised by personal reconciliation, a reunion where Peter's determination to help give a voice to the workers is also a way for him to deflect the guilt he feels about the failed expectations about his university career:

'Only one thing, Peter,' Gwyn said. 'You'll have to try it, down there in the works. Nobody else can tell you, just watching.'

'I mean to, Uncle. If I can get Dad's permission.'

'After eighteen years,' Harold said. 'Eighteen years' education, and you want to go back to where I started.'

'Not to where you started. Where we all now are, because you started.'³¹

Thus, as in *Border Country*, the novel ends in another shift of direction back to beginnings, a physical and spiritual journey that characterises the whole trilogy. As young academics from working-class backgrounds, Matthew and Peter both

change their personal and research trajectories, setting themselves up for a return to their roots in Wales. In each case, the women in the story have precipitated this re-encounter: a move that Peter describes in more inclusive terms as a rediscovery of “continuity, loyalty, memory.”³² However, in the final volume of the trilogy, *The Fight for Manod*, this desire to reconnect with the past also puts them at odds with the much less sentimental forces of capitalist modernity.

Between the publication of *Second Generation* and the final volume of the trilogy, *The Fight for Manod*, there was a period of fifteen years during which Williams published two of his most significant critical works, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970) and *The Country and the City* (1973). These two studies focus not only on the relationship in both literature and society between the rural and the urban. They also explore the link between different English authors and the regions where they lived and worked and how this influenced their writing. This is something that Williams himself experienced most profoundly at the time:

Yes, a big change started to happen from the late sixties. There was a continuity in a quite overwhelming feeling about the land of Wales; as feeling and writing that stays through. But then I began having many more contacts with Welsh writers and intellectuals, all highly political in the best tradition of the culture, and I found this curious effect. Suddenly England, bourgeois England, wasn't my point of reference any more. I was a Welsh European, and both levels felt different.³³

Another point that Williams raises in the same interview that relates directly to *The Fight for Manod* was that this novel not only turned his attention back to Wales, but also to the postcolonial threat that “capitalist Europe, capitalist England” posed to the country.³⁴ There were, for example, governmental schemes for huge new urban developments in Wales that would accommodate the excess populations of the manufacturing cities across the border in England. This also forms the fictional basis for the fight for Manod, a Welsh farming valley that is the object of extensive urbanisation plans proposed by a secret Anglo-Belgian conglomerate. The other key narrative connection with the first two volumes of the trilogy is the concentration of attention on Matthew and Peter together. They reappear now as two mature researchers who are brought in by the British government to prepare the ground among the rural population for the implementation of this urban transformation of the countryside, but who end up exposing the mercenary economic interests behind the plans and their negative impact on the Welsh community. Unlike the previous novels, however, there is no attempt to link this local struggle to any broader movements of the working class such as the trade unions or the Labour Party. Instead these two men seem to stand alone against the multinationals, something that perhaps could be explained by Williams' own growing feeling of “sad-

ness” about what he described as the “terrible disintegration of what was once a labour movement” in Wales.³⁵

There is a recurring image throughout the trilogy of a working class on the defensive, a narrative trope that is linked to the existential crises of individual characters. It is therefore very much a male world of bureaucrats and planners that becomes the battleground in the fight for the future of Wales. However, such a predominantly masculine narrative bias almost inevitably invites a resistant gender reading that looks more discerningly at the significance of their relationships with the seemingly marginalised female characters: most certainly their wives, Beth and Susan, but perhaps even more so, Gwen, a Welsh woman, who personifies the people’s resistance to the ruthless commodification of the land. What is much more engaging, therefore, is this grassroots response to the scheme for the Manod valley, where the figure of Gwen comes vibrantly alive, despite her being a minor character. In this local context, Williams succeeds in creating an independent female figure around which the whole fight for Manod comes to revolve, not least through her contact with Matthew, a more dynamic gender relation to which we will now turn.

Predictably, we see at first more of the male bonding between Matthew and Peter as they join forces to pluck Manod from clutches of foreign developers. However, as before in the trilogy, this masculinist project begins to falter, requiring the help of a woman to continue. In this case Gwen plays a pivotal role in the struggle, as a Welsh farmer who is identified with the land and the fight to save it from the sell-out. Her dramatic first appearance in the novel establishes her as a tangible down-to-earth presence, as she literally comes riding on a horse into Matthew’s life, creating an immediate confused reaction in him:

A horse and rider were coming down fast. As Matthew watched, he found the urgency of the gallop startling. Soft turf was flying on the wide green verge by the church.

‘Gwenny,’ Dance said.

Matthew was still watching the extraordinary gallop. The horse was a tall roan stallion, very powerful. Gwen Vaughan of Pentre looked across at them and shouted. She reined in suddenly, swerving across the lane. She brought the stallion to a stop just beyond the green Jaguar. Then she smiled, looking down. She was in her late thirties, with cropped black hair, dark eyes and a very pale skin. Her clothes were rough and mudstained: brown jacket and breeches, high boots and a black jersey. Matthew looked up at her, his attention caught by the strain of her face. The lips were still working from the urgency of the ride. Across the cheeks and temples there were disfiguring spots and patches of reddened skin ... Matthew was looking intently at her, and she caught his look and was at once embarrassed. Her face

coloured, making the disfiguring blotches stand out more angrily.

He looked quickly away, ashamed to have disturbed her.³⁶

There is something superficially contradictory about Gwen's entrance, her mixture of strength and female vulnerability ("like a child brought into the room"), but this could also be a reflection of Matthew's conventional male gaze.³⁷ Gwen is nevertheless a further example of a female character that draws the men back to Wales and the shared values it represents. It is significant therefore that she is the one who reveals that there is a behind-the-scenes power struggle in Manod, in which a group of rich landowners are buying up the land in order to sell it all at a higher price to foreign developers. These are the men that are willing to betray the long-term interests of the rural population whose cause Gwen defends: "'Only these changes have to come,' she said, still looking at him. 'The local changes?' 'Yes, local. We don't want the other.'"³⁸ In other words, things should be decided by the people themselves and not by the bureaucrats in London or Brussels. If Matthew and Peter want to find out what the villagers really think about the Manod project, they turn to Gwen. Throughout the novel, she is shown to be a female force of nature, not least when saving her brother when the tractor he is driving tips over and traps him underneath, symbolically riding to his rescue on her horse. Finally, it is Gwen who supplies Matthew with the documents that prove the political manoeuvring going on. It is Gwen who insists that this evidence be used, even though Matthew is initially doubtful of their legal right to do so. The scene in question is not only a determining one in the Manod plot, but also an encounter in which Williams reveals both the tensions between the male and female characters, as well as Gwen's pivotal role in the struggle against the multinational take-over:

She stopped. She looked away. Then she reached in her pocket and took out a sheaf of papers.

'It's all here,' she said. 'All the papers Ivor got.'

Matthew looked at her curiously.

'Yes,' she said, 'I took them. I saw where he put them, like a boy hiding a secret.'

'But then I can't take them.'

Gwen breathed out angrily. Her eyes, suddenly, were unusually bright.

'Why Mr Price? You afraid to dirty your hands?'

'No, these are private legal papers. They're not yours or mine to look at.'

'So we can let people cheat us but we mustn't know how?'

Matthew hesitated. In the sudden silence of the room he could hear Susan coming downstairs. She opened the door and looked in on them. They were standing facing each other. Then as Susan came in Gwen moved and put the papers on the table.

'I'm sorry,' Susan said, 'I'm interrupting.'

'No, you're not, Mrs Price,' Gwen said, quickly. 'I just brought some papers for your husband to see.'

Susan looked at Matthew. His face was still set hard, but now he smiled suddenly.

'Yes,' he said. He picked up the papers and put them away in a drawer.³⁹

Despite the promise of a possible legal challenge against the multinationals, *The Fight for Manod* brings the theme of Wales, its neo-colonial present and future, to an unresolved end in the trilogy. There is no guarantee that the people will be able to resist further encroaches of domestic and foreign capital. The novel also provides no closure as to the frustrations of the two main characters, Matthew and Peter, about how to redirect their personal and professional energies towards best serving their parents' land. Therefore, the closing image of the novel is again one of individual isolation. Ostensibly, they have both made a commitment to Wales, but the structures of bureaucratic power that confront them would clearly require a broader movement of popular resistance. In lieu of this, as I have tried to show, there are still the women in the three novels who have helped the men reconnect with the tangled web of their contested Welsh origins. Thus, at the end, when Matthew tries to imagine some sort of childhood link with the "defining history" of the Welsh borders, an ongoing clash of male class interests lingers as the closing image:

He remembered now, as from a different existence, the boy on the mountain, looking down at Glynmawr, seeing the history of his country in the shapes of the land. He saw the meeting of valleys, and England blue in the distance. On the high ground to the east were the Norman castles, and the disputed land in their shadow. On the limestone scarp to the south was the line of the ironmasters, the different frontier: on the near side the valleys still green and wooded, on the far side blackened with collieries and slagheaps and grey huddled terraces. That history had been clear, at the moment of going away.⁴⁰

If *The Fight for Manod* points to future battles, there is also the suggestion of a need to understand them in light of what has gone before: the earlier settlement and contestation of that same border country that has shaped the lives of its inhabitants. There is therefore a natural logic in moving along a direct line from this first trilogy to the last one that Williams started to write towards the end of his life—a fictional history of the Welsh people from distant times to the present.

People of the Black Mountains

Williams's second Welsh trilogy, *People of the Black Mountains*, remained unfinished at his death in 1988. Published posthumously, two volumes were completed—*The Beginning* and *The Eggs of the Eagle*—mainly due to the editorial efforts of his wife Joy Williams. She also wrote a postscript to indicate how the third volume would have developed, pointing to the basic ecological message that underlies the whole work: “[P]eople can only survive if they live in harmony with each other and their land.”⁴¹ The time span of this most ambitious historical work was to be 25,000 years—from the beginnings of human settlement to the present day. In some ways, it can be read as a prequel to his first Welsh trilogy in that it depicts the earliest struggles of Welsh people along the border country as they faced enormous changes in their living conditions—climatic, agricultural, technological, social and political. It remains moreover an act of narrative recovery, viewing the transformation of society through the eyes of the people who are normally hidden from history:

But the key point throughout for me is that the novel presents a history written very much, as it were, from below. The people chosen as the central characters are the working people of the mountains. In the earlier period you know what the economy was like, you know to some extent what the society was like, but they are anonymous, and the people you can choose as the leading characters of your stories are naturally of those communities. As you get on into historical records, the bias is immense towards the chiefs, the kings and lords. But at best they appear off stage in the novel.⁴²

One might add that while most of the prominent figures in this fictional account are once again men, Williams often illustrates the past in the form of alternative herstories: social changes are seen to have a direct impact on the women throughout the narrative, both as victims of a male-dominated society, but more often as active agents in the struggle to adapt. Thus, an individual zooming in on the women at significant moments in time is something that Williams was clearly keen to adopt when writing the stories:

I know enough theoretically to be fascinated by some of these very early societies, how they were socially organized, but I want to understand enough to be able then to ask: what is it, for example, to face a problem of female infanticide; or somebody's reaction to an arranged marriage; or a story I have just been writing of the difference when two men are killed in an accident and one is free and the other unfree? What happens to the widows in each case?⁴³

This gendered focus is particularly important in the first volume, since it covers the period in history when human beings made the transition from a hunter-and-gatherer society, where women had a central role and equal status to men, to the cultivation of the land and the domestication of animals, both of which laid the foundations for an agricultural economy that was divided into propertied and propertyless groups: priests, kings, warriors, landowners and slaves. Williams re-enacts in fiction the materialist conception of history, whereby an initial stage of primitive communism was replaced by patriarchal class society, something that had a devastating effect on the conditions of women. In Engels's famous words in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*:

The overthrow of mother right was the *world historical defeat of the female sex*. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children.⁴⁴

This dramatisation of a materialist interpretation of history was also something that struck reviewers of the novels. As Fred Inglis records, "There is also the pre-history present in all Marxism, present indeed in all pursuits of the millennium, in which a classless people turns hardship into a garden with enough work and food for all its families."⁴⁵ It is also a point that certain readers found less appealing—Carmin Callil complained, for instance, that Williams's "didacticism is wearisome," while Inglis himself comments that "the achievement is so effortlessly joyless, even when gripping, so repetitious."⁴⁶ In contrast, a more radically inclined critic like Terry Eagleton described the work as "marvellously written . . . Williams's major literary achievement."⁴⁷

People of the Black Mountains is a conscious attempt to write a collective portrayal that puts the emphasis on the material lives of ordinary individuals. It therefore reveals a fragmented picture, concentrating on one set of characters and then leaping ahead, sometimes thousands of years, to others. The groups of human beings are nevertheless always individualised, while the events that take place among them are everyday ones, interrupted by sometimes violent changes. They also represent different stages in history, moments when culture and society take a leap forward, not least in people's relationship with the land. Significantly, the female characters make up the core of many of the stories, more so at the beginning of the narrative when there is an equal division of labour between the women and the men and everything is shared. As Rano explains to her daughter Pani in one of the herstories:

'We live as a family, Pani. The men hunt and trap, but they do not eat where they kill. They bring the meat back to us, as we women bring shoots and berries. We live as a family, we share within the blood. If we were not so we should die, for we can none of us live on our own, looking only to ourselves'.⁴⁸

In this collective community, the voice of the women is an authoritative one, backed by a belief system that is matriarchal and based on mythical female figures like Danu: "[O]ur mother is with us. In all grass and trees, in all birds and fishes, in all animals and men."⁴⁹ Key survival skills and knowledge are also passed on through the women, represented by the figure of Sila, the teacher:

There was then the woman Sila,
 The third of the great ones.
 The woman Sila who looked close and who taught the children.
 And the children of Danu made needles
 To fashion clothes from the skins of the animals.
 The children of Danu made weirs of stone,
 Made traps of hazel wands, made knotted nets,
 Made new lines and hooks for the silvery fish,
 ...
 Watched the red deer in the forest, and strung feathered arrows.
 Watched the trees fruit, and the bushes,
 Watched the plants to eat and the plants to heal,
 Watched the dog at the edge of the campfire and tamed him,
 Watched and learned all the ways of the mother'.⁵⁰

Among the stories of these women and girls, there are several that illustrate their high level of independence and control over their own lives. Thus, Cara defies the traditional group wedding ceremony and waits to pick her own husband separately, as does Lirisa, a girl from one tribe, who chooses to live with Tarac from another, so that "from the shepherds' huts on the mountain and from the hunters' shelters by the lake, the two peoples grew ever closer, sharing their lives."⁵¹ This merging of different lifestyles is of enormous symbolic importance in the whole novel since it pinpoints the transition from nomadic to a settled existence and the unforeseen social consequences this will have for women.

The turning point in the lives of these mountain people, in particular for the women, is the development of agriculture, beginning with the taming of wild animals—pigs, cattle and sheep—and finally the cultivation of crops. Not only does this transform the domestic work of women, it also radically undermines their status in the tribe. The increased surplus of food begins to be creamed off as a right by a male élite whose economic privilege forms the basis for the creation of a ruling

class: patriarchal, warmongering, property- and slave-owning. The concomitant power structures of a state apparatus with laws, punishments and persecution also begin to emerge:

‘First the Great Order and then the Company, Menvandir itself, selected young men and called them its guards. They were strong and they carried fine spears. In Menvandir we had no need for a guard. We had never been threatened. But like the sign of darkening the sun the guard would overawe and frighten the people. If the food was not brought they would go out and take it’.⁵²

As in all his novels, even in this one depicting the pre-history of Wales, Williams is not primarily interested in exploring the growth and influence of dominant groups, but more particularly the resistance of the underdogs: the ongoing guerrilla war that ordinary people have fought in a rearguard action against the powers that be, not least through women’s indirect subversion of patriarchal privilege.

Two contrasting yet complementary stories illustrate this theme of a sporadic female fight back, “Seril and the New People” in *The Beginning*, and “The Gift of Acha” in *The Eggs of the Eagle*. They depict the precarious condition of women in agricultural settlements as household servants under the rule of men, a condition of dependence that was shared by all women whether they were slaves or free. Williams also creates no illusions that the Welsh were in any way different from the English in their slave-owning oppression of women. The story of Seril, for example, which is one of the longest and most sustained in the novel, is a tragic one, but also one of hope. Seril is an orphan girl taken in by another family who then abuse her: she is beaten by her foster-mother and sexually assaulted by her foster-father, a pattern of violence that makes up a daily routine:

All the everyday work was being done in the ordinary life of late summer. But could she now be expected to go over and join in; carrying hay, going for berries, crushing the seeds? That must be done to live but how could she live now, with such people? Live and wake any morning to that animal coming and hurting her? For this was how it would be now. It was why she had been kept. At night there would be the hitting and beating from Laran, and in the mornings Kevil attacking and taking her. Moon after moon, year after year. Her only midsummer. She would not stay for that. She would sooner die.⁵³

The same oppressive situation faces Acha and her daughter Hilda in *The Eggs of the Eagle*. They are English slaves captured by the Welsh, but their situation as women is just as vulnerable. In both stories, there is however the possibility of

escape. Seril flees her family and is taken in by another tribe in the mountains where she eventually finds Anailos, a partner she loves. There is also the appearance of an outsider in Acha's story, an Englishman on the run who she helps and who offers to take her back across the border. Acha realises that it is really only possible for her young daughter, Hilda to go with him, even though Hilda is at first reluctant to leave. She is finally persuaded when Acha shows the reality of the slave life that awaits her:

'But what will happen to you here? Some Welsh slave will take you, and you will have his children and grow old.'

'They are my friends here, mother. They are the people I've grown up with.'

'And they are all slaves. If Idwallon has a bad harvest, or when he dies and that Guruth succeeds him, you could be sold off in a day. And not just to Cornou or Elchon. There are ships all the time up the Severn Sea and they sail away heavy with slaves. Talk of strangers then, girl! You would be with foreign men who cared nothing for you.'

'Mother, why are you trying to frighten me?'

'Because I am my age and you are your age. Because I know the world and you don't'.⁵⁴

In the two stories, Hilda escapes but Seril is punished for her disobedience when Kevil, her foster-father, takes his revenge by murdering her lover with an axe. However, independent to the end, Seril chooses to kill herself rather than return to her former tribe. These two herstories form part of an urge to write back at the invisibility of women in the past, as Williams indicates in *The Beginning*: "Actual stories are told by both winners and losers. Yet what becomes history is a selection by the winners."⁵⁵ In the end, the bodies of Seril and her lover Anailos are laid symbolically together in a stone burial cist. One actual cist in Olchon, Wales, containing the bodies of an intertwined young couple, is also mentioned by Williams in *The Eggs of the Eagle* as the source of inspiration for the story—a narrative divide between fact and fiction that the historical novel blurs. It is also a political move on Williams's part, revealing the persistence of struggle over time that is usually obscured in collective historical memory:

People can be very blank about their own history; the physical stones, ruins, landmarks, names which represent the continuity of it are quite often incomprehensible to them. The point of the novel would be to show that these connections had been broken, but hopefully one would be showing that in this process of disconnection certain things can be reconnected.⁵⁶

In the final section of this article, I want to turn, again unchronologically, to Williams's two political "thrillers"—*The Volunteers* and *Loyalties*—not only because they represent Williams's engaging in a very different novel genre, but also because they return directly to another intrinsic concern in his fiction: the question of political engagement and its impact on people's private lives.

The Volunteers and Loyalties

Williams always wanted to write a political thriller—in the end he wrote two. As his publisher recalled: "Years ago, you remarked to me that it would be perfectly possible to take a popular format like the thriller and put it to good use."⁵⁷ That ambitious use was to bring together several of the preoccupations that inform Williams's literary writing—the representations of the working class, of Wales and of radical political commitment—in a gripping mystery story that merges international power politics with the personal lives of his characters. This amalgamation of crime, conflict and social conscience produced two of the most powerful fictional works in Williams's oeuvre. In both *The Volunteers* and *Loyalties* there is a detailed examination of questions of solidarity and political allegiance, not least when people are under threat from the machinations of the capitalist state. The conclusion in both cases is that it is the repressive function of the organs of government that represent the greatest potential threat to democracy. Individual acts of political violence cannot compare with the organisation of state-sponsored force directed against the population. This dialectic of action and reaction is something Fred Inglis also sees as the unifying premise of these two novels: "Williams names and tries to grasp the condition of the governance of England for what it is, venal, poisoned, hateful and obtuse, while always searching for a counter-condition in which to live, in Wales, in a politics of opposition, in beleaguered nature."⁵⁸

Despite this insight, Inglis, like other critics, seems oblivious that this oppositional alternative is associated primarily with the female characters in the stories. They personify the values of solidarity and commitment to a socialist cause that the male characters often lose sight of. Thus, in *The Volunteers*, a politically renegade television reporter, Lewis Redfern, whose background is Welsh, experiences a rekindling of his radical ideals when he uncovers a conspiratorial connection between the shooting of striking workers by the army and an assassination attempt on the Welsh Secretary of State, Edmund Buxton. His suspicions are initially directed towards an underground anarchist group, which he thinks shot Buxton as a political reprisal. This leads him on a hunt for the most elusive member of the group: a young female activist called Rosa. His first meeting with her seems to confirm his own cynical impression that she is just another dilettante, middle-class rebel, posing in combat clothes:

She came through the doors and looked round. She was in grey jacket and jeans: a sort of battledress. I can just remember when

the hard types started wearing this, before it spread through the fringe and finally into the fashion photographs. Like the cord jackets and cravats the bohemian artists imitated from labourers until they became so fancy that serious artists went back to suits.⁵⁹

Instead, it turns out that Rosa has a much deeper and disturbing understanding of the covert infiltration of different levels of both civil society and government by members of a secret rightwing organisation that call themselves the Volunteers. The so-called “entrism,” that is infiltration by left-wing radicals within the trade unions and the Labour Party, is nothing in comparison to this sinister positioning of leading cadres in preparation for a reactionary coup at a critical moment of political breakdown:

‘To do what is the question?’

‘To go into the State apparatus: the modern State apparatus. Central government, local government, the army, the police, the law..?’

‘I know the list,’ I said, impatiently.

‘Management,’ she continued, ‘the public and private corporations. And of course the media.’

‘But this is fantasy, Rosa. You must know it’s fantasy.’

‘I may know it and you may know, but they don’t. This is exactly what they’re doing, at least what they’ve started to do.’

...

‘Of course. There are softs parts. The universities, the schools, the operative parts of the media. But the rest is very hard, at the levels that matter. And it’s just those levels the Volunteers want to get to’.⁶⁰

Redfern’s initial reaction is one of tired scepticism at what he thinks is a paranoid conspiracy theory, but Rosa’s evidence (like Gwen’s in *The Fight for Manod*) sends him in a new direction that eventually enables him to uncover this slow top-down take-over of society. In a parallel personal reorientation, it is a process that also puts him back in touch with his own radical affiliations:

Yet then, all the time, within this impossibility, were the inevitable commitments, the necessary commitments, the choosing of sides. Through the persistent uncertainly, within the overwhelming process, I had now chosen and been chosen, in what would be, in effect, a quite final way.⁶¹

Like Rosa, Redfern ends up on the run himself, a target of those hidden powers that want to prevent him from giving evidence of the Volunteers' existence at a public inquiry. Roles have been reversed and it is again a symbolic turn when he eventually leaves London and goes into hiding in Wales, back "among friends," now as Rosa's comrade.⁶² The *Volunteers* is a novel about a dystopian future in which Britain is verging on a police state, something that Williams thought might be a possible consequence of the repressive surveillance laws that were being passed in the wake of the terrorist threats of the time.⁶³ The function of individual dissenters is, however, always important in Williams's novels, not least in terms of the political and ethical choices with which they are confronted. At the same time, there is the suggestion that any determined movement of resistance would begin back across the Welsh border, the connection to which goes via the women.

In comparison, *Loyalties* is without doubt a more psychologically compelling and historically comprehensive portrayal, beginning as it does in 1936 with the international struggle against fascism, and ending with the great miners' strike of 1984. It portrays the lives of a group of activists—part of what became known as the Auden generation of the 1930s—who responded to the threat of fascism and war by becoming politically engaged in and around the Communist Party. But unlike Auden's iconic poem, *Spain*, where life has to be put on hold among people dedicated to "the struggle," the characters in *Loyalties*, as the title suggests, are faced with the prospect of a lifetime of surviving under capitalism, which appears more resilient and outlasting than their own lives. Therefore, the whole novel revolves around the question of how to maintain a radical political commitment when faced with the personal pressures and distractions of having to live within the belly of the beast. In this context, there is also the generational question of an allegiance to the cause of the working class presupposing an unqualified defence of the Soviet Union as the bulwark of socialism. How could one as a socialist rationalise that support when the Soviet Union remained in the grip of a reactionary Stalinist bureaucracy?

The pivot around which all of these personal and political conflicts revolve is the relationship between Norman Braose, a middle-class member of the British Communist Party, and Nesta Pritchard, a young working-class Welsh girl. It is Nesta who stays loyal to her radical beliefs throughout the story, despite being abandoned by Norman when she gets pregnant. There is also the issue of Norman's own contradictory political trajectory, which appears more and more right-wing, yet ends with his exposure as a spy for the Soviet Union—a moral paradox that Williams explores as one of the central motifs of the novel.

Nesta eventually marries Bert, a miner and dedicated communist, who is badly injured as a soldier during the Second World War, and together they bring up Norman's child, Gwyn, as their own. This is another expression of the underlying theme of working-class solidarity in everyday praxis. A further contrast involves the two main female characters, Nesta and Norman's sister, Emma, who is also a

Communist Party member and as unwavering in her radical politics. However, Emma's socialism is primarily an intellectual conviction, whereas for Nesta it is part of her whole class identity. It is moreover against this clash of theory and practice that the behaviour of the men is measured. Wales is also seen as the locus of a working-class militancy where the struggle against the attacks of capitalism is accepted as a basic fact of life. In contrast to the middle-class world of Norman and Emma, workers like Nesta are shown to be grounded in an everyday experience of the system that turns socialist theory into a reality. Thus, when Norman seems to be losing faith in his leftwing politics, he is told to revisit Nesta in Wales in an attempt to recover his radical bearings:

'She's a lovely woman,' Emma said. 'And she's painting again, did I tell you? She did a whole series of drawings of Gwyn and now she's going to classes for the painting. She said there were too many problems on her own.'

'Yes, I remember she was talented.'

'You remember more than that.'

He stopped, looking down.

'She's also very happy with Bert. He's still damaged, of course, from the war, but he's been a wonderful father to Gwyn. And now they've got this little boy of their own, Dic.'

'I see.'

'If you went down there, Norman, and saw the real working class ...'

'I can't imagine I'd be welcome.'

'I don't mean that. I mean to see real working-class people again, to set against your kinds of doubt.'

'I was thinking of the other.'

'Well, don't.'

'Another line across the past?'

'That was drawn years ago. So leave it.'

'If you say so'.⁶⁴

Part of the lack of feeling that disables the middle-class men in the novel comes from their social background, and this affects their ability to translate their commitment to socialism into more liberated and egalitarian personal relations. At the same time, it also seems to be something that allows them to adapt more easily to a double life of appearing loyal to the establishment in Britain, while passing on scientific secrets to the Soviet Union. Williams suggests a middle-class person might pull off this sort of personal playacting more convincingly, in order to remain unsuspected by members of their own class. At the same time, Williams also shows the political paranoia that develops in a context where many radicals were forced

to repress the fact that the Soviet Union was a place where the revolution had been brutally betrayed, as the Moscow show trials of left oppositionists had revealed. This collision between the personal and the political comes to a head when Gwyn finally confronts Norman, his real father, about his total absence in his life, but also about the question of what moral grounds radical political convictions can be based upon. The contrast between different class mentalities is indicated using abstract ideological categories, as Gwyn remarks: "Where Bert or Dic would say 'our people' or 'our community', the Braoses would say with a broader lucidity, 'the organised working class', even still 'the proletariat' and 'the masses'."⁶⁵ Later on when referring to his mother, Nesta, who is active in supporting the 1984 miners strike, Gwyn makes a similar point that solidarity for Nesta is not just an idea but the tangible expression of the mutual support between ordinary people that is a way of life in Welsh mining villages:

'She's well. She's working very hard in the village.'

'The emergency feeding? Of course. After four months of the strike!'

'They're very close in Danycapel. They look after each other.'⁶⁶

In many ways, Gwyn represents another example of the familiar figure in Williams's novels: a young, male, working-class intellectual who is torn between his personal affections in Wales and his public affiliations in England, and between commitment and career. These tensions, as we have seen, have their origins in the social and psychological insecurities of class migration. This was certainly part of Williams's own private predicament: a sense of loss he rehearsed time and time again in his writing as an act of literary solidarity with his own past. In this search for authenticity, Wales and the women who live there provide the point of reference and support to which the men are inevitably compelled to turn. Real life is there, as well as a community of shared values that help clarify what is at stake elsewhere. Thus, when he also returns to Wales, Gwyn's individualist self-preoccupation is immediately deflected by the more urgent priorities of living in the wake of another defeat, this time of the last great miners' strike of 1984-5:

'Well, I'm glad your Mam isn't here, to see you like this.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Gwyn, look where you are. These are people with real troubles.

You can't come here brooding on them.'

'You know what the problem is,' he stirred himself to say.

'No, I don't, not compared with what they've gone through'.⁶⁷

The lesson is a basic one: the necessary reassertion of who "them" and "us" really are; a gut feeling that finally helps Gwyn orient himself when the political

ground starts to move. As Nesta reminds him: “Down here we stand by each other’.”⁶⁸ It is this image of the survival and struggle of Wales and its working people that Williams captures so consistently and lovingly in his novels. However, it is not just a question of which side you are on politically, but also where you belong spiritually and emotionally, despite any physical separation. Thus, in an exchange that sums up what Williams sought to communicate throughout his fiction, Gwyn tells Norman when they make their own journey to Wales that this is where they have to go back to in order to move on:

‘In my world,’ Gwyn said, as they turned into the steep drive, ‘the personal and the political come in the same breath. We have no space to separate them.’

Norman looked down as they walked.

‘Your world?’ he said, quietly. ‘A world I visited and left, a world you grew up in and left. It’s there, yes, but not for either of us. Why don’t you admit this? Why can’t you be honest?’

‘I am trying to be honest,’ Gwyn said, angrily. ‘I am trying to carry this forward. I am trying to get beyond this rejection of socialism which you and all the rest have arrived at.’

Norman stopped and faced him.

‘As a fighter, would you say? For it requires that, your socialism.’

‘It isn’t just an inheritance, that’s all I’m saying. It isn’t only an obligation. It’s a position now. It’s a contemporary direction. It’s a way of learning our future’.⁶⁹

It is both a strength and weakness that Williams returned repeatedly with dogged determination to this basic theme of an estranged Welsh condition of social and geographical diaspora. It meant that his literary treatment of the subject through several novels of differing genres, while rich in scope, remains somewhat repetitive in content. Nevertheless, in the process he also managed to fundamentally challenge the view of working-class fiction as being sociologically simplistic or politically reductive. Fusing as he did the existential and the aesthetic into psychologically complex narratives, Williams also succeeded in subverting the claim that literary critics make inferior novelists. It could indeed be argued that it was the very nature of his unique personal combination of critical acumen and working-class experience that gives his novels such a continuing relevance and resonance. This might very easily have remained a masculinist enterprise, focusing primarily on the conflicts of the men in their own male world. However, as I have tried to show in this intersectional analysis of gender, class and ethnicity, Williams always seemed to sense in his writing that those “structures of feeling,” as he called them, where ideology has a direct impact on the individual, can often be most meaningfully investigated through the function of women, who experience this correlation of patriarchy and power in

their everyday lives. As a writer, he consciously sought to dramatise this convergence of and conflict between individual and collective interests through the alternative herstories of women that are interwoven throughout all his novels.

NOTES

¹ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: New Left Books, 1979), 271.

² In his discussion of Gwyn Jones's working-class novel, *Times Like These* (1936), Williams writes: "There is then a characteristic tension of this generation of Welsh writing: that the family is being pulled in one direction after another and yet that the family persists, but persists in a sense of defeat and loss. The bitter experience of that period—of the massive emigrations to England and yet of the intense and persistent family feeling of those who stay and those who remember—are then powerfully but always temporarily articulated: the moment of a very local sadness" *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 1980; 2005), 224. As is shown in this present study, these are themes that Williams himself returned to throughout his own fiction.

³ Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 276.

⁴ George Snedecker, *The Politics of Critical Theory: Language, Discourse, Society* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2004), 62.

⁵ The term "Herstory" was a concept first used in the debates within second wave feminism about women being excluded from the male-dominated history of the past. See Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London: Pluto Press 1973; 1990).

⁶ Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989), 319.

⁷ See for example Dennis L. Dworkin and Leslie G. Roman, eds., *Views of the Border Country: Raymond Williams and Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993); Gustav H. Klaus, "Material Grounds: Border and Place in Raymond Williams's Fiction" in *Socialist Cultures East and West: A Post-Cold War Reassessment*, eds. Dubravka Juraga and Keith M. Booker (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 123-138; Daniel Williams, *Who Speaks for Wales: Nation, Culture, Identity* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003); Dai Smith, *Raymond Williams: A Warrior's Tale* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2008) and David Harvey, *The Ways of the World* (London: Profile Books, 2016), 214-244.

⁸ Laura Di Michele, "Autobiography and the 'Structure of Feeling' in *Border Country*" in Dworkin and Roman, *Views of the Border Country*, 27.

⁹ Wendy Kohli, "Raymond Williams, Affective Ideology and Counter Hegemonic Practices" in Dworkin and Roman, *Views of the Border Country*, 116.

¹⁰ Tony Pinkney, *Raymond Williams* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1991), 110.

¹¹ Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989; 1994), 130.

¹² Williams wrote very specifically about this need: "There is the very active area of new practices and definitions of personal relationships, and especially the changing relationships between men and women, where socialism even in theory, and notoriously in practice, has not only had little to say but from a residual base in the male worker is openly obstructive. Yet liberal or psychoanalytic responses to these issues as private are insufficient. Every act of the regulation of employment, every definition of forms of social benefit, every taxing system, joins with specific capitalist economic pressures to shape the social patterns within which personal and family relationships are reproduced or changed." *Resources of Hope*, 293-294.

¹³ Jane Aaron and Teresa Rees, eds., *Our Sisters' Land: The Changing Identities of Women in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994), 9.

¹⁴ Gwyneth Roberts, "The cost of community: women in Raymond Williams's fiction" in Aaron and Rees, *Our Sisters' Land*, 215.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 218-223.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁷ Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 292-293.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 302.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 301.

²⁰ See for example, Dai Smith's *Raymond Williams: A Warrior's Tale* and the essays in the collection, *Who Speaks for Wales: Nation, Culture, Identity*, edited by Daniel Williams.

²¹ Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto & Windus), 98-99.

²² Raymond Williams, *Border Country* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960; 1978), 78.

²³ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 228-229.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 273-274.

²⁶ Raymond Williams, *Second Generation* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964; 1978),

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²⁷ Ibid., 30.

²⁸ Ibid., 150.

²⁹ Ibid., 157.

³⁰ Ibid., 341.

³¹ Ibid., 345.

³² Ibid., 305.

³³ Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 295-296.

³⁴ Ibid., 296.

³⁵ Ibid., 294.

³⁶ Ibid., 41-2.

³⁷ Ibid., 42.

³⁸ Ibid., 148.

³⁹ Ibid., 143-144.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 36.

⁴¹ Joy Williams, Postscript to Raymond Williams, *People of the Black Mountains 2: The Eggs of the Eagle* (London: Paladin, 1990; 1992), 323.

⁴² Raymond Williams, *Who Speaks for Wales*, 168.

⁴³ Ibid., 170.

⁴⁴ Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1972), 120-121. Williams's most fruitful and challenging engagement with the ideas of Marx and Engels can be found in his critical study, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). See further, George Snedeker, *The Politics of Critical Theory*, 51-63. For a more recent scientific corroboration of Engels's anthropological conclusions, see M. Dyble et al., "Sex equality can explain the unique social structure of hunter-gatherer bands," *Science* 348 no. 6236 (2015): 796-798.

⁴⁵ Fred Inglis, *Raymond Williams* (London: Routledge, 1995), 292.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Inglis, 292; Inglis, 303.

⁴⁷ Terry Eagleton, *The Observer*, 17 September, 1989.

⁴⁸ Raymond Williams, *People of the Black Mountains 1: The Beginning* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), 55.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 127.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 129-30.

⁵¹ Ibid., 115.

⁵² Ibid., 180.

⁵³ Ibid., 194.

⁵⁴ Williams, *The Eggs of the Eagle*, 131-132.

⁵⁵ Williams, *The Beginning*, 325.

⁵⁶ Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 302.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 297.

⁵⁸ Inglis, 290-291.

⁵⁹ Raymond Williams, *The Volunteers* (Cardigan: Parthian, 1978; 2011), 126.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 148-149.

⁶¹ Ibid., 239-240.

⁶² Ibid., 219.

⁶³ In the 1979 interviews he gave, Williams comments rather pessimistically on the political background to the novel: “*The Volunteers* plays out one set of consequences, if the British working class were contained into a local militancy, managed and by-passed and pretty thoroughly defeated by a repressive right-wing government. Then I think you would probably get violent clandestine actions. I wouldn’t want them. But I have endless arguments with Italian friends who are in a situation where these options are being taken by increasingly significant if very small sections of the young. I didn’t want to underwrite that model—call it terrorist, if you will. But neither did I simply want to oppose it with the old pieties, because I don’t think we can rely on them. The prospects, of course, could change.” Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 301.

⁶⁴ Raymond Williams, *Loyalties* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985), 113.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 293. This is something that Williams himself discusses in his book, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, as being a problematic terminological correspondence (Glasgow: Fontana, 1976), 158-63.

⁶⁶ Williams, *Loyalties*, 312.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 331.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 349.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 364-365.