Border Country: 
a visit to the grave of 
Raymond Williams 
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I’m no stranger to this. I used to take visitors to see Sylvia Plath’s grave at Heptonstall church. This continued until a friend insisted I take his photograph with one arm around the headstone, while the other gave a ‘thumbs up’, with an accompanying cheesy grin. He was making a comment about the bizarre nature of what I was forcing him to do, turning it into a surreal, ‘Hello!’ magazine snap. Visiting graves is seemingly justifiable if the person in question was known to you, as a family member, friend, or as a famous person. Or perhaps if you’re affiliated to a gothic subculture. Placed outside these categories, it is possible to feel like a morbid lurker. But graveyards are also great levellers, signifying the mortality we all share, flattening celebrity. Of course, graveyards can also be monumentalising fields of spectacle, posthumous stages of ostentation. In this sense, identities can be as saturated with class relations in death as in life.

Raymond Williams’s grave at Clodock Church quietly replaces him in his formative landscape, among some of the residents of his beloved Black Mountains. This site is a mesh of the present and landscape, biography and history. Clodock is a medium walk, or a short drive, from Pandy, Williams’s birthplace. I walked here on the day BBC Radio Wales broadcast Dai Smith’s discussion of ‘Border Country’, Williams’ novel about:

‘...a scholarship boy going away from his working class village and finding his relationship with his father. [which] became a universal experience for a generation of working class people from the 1930s.’ (Smith, 2007).

‘Border Country’ shadows my visit, literally, as the England/Wales border is within scrambling distance, up along Hatterall Ridge, the looming horizon to be seen in the photographs here. This line has always been contested territory and is part of the Offa’s Dyke path, which is now popular as a leisure route for walkers. It was once a defensive earthwork, longer, although less substantially constructed, than Hadrian’s Wall. It is thought to have been built due to trouble with the Princes of Powys, having a relatively short period of employment before being abandoned. King Offa apparently dabbled in overseas politics and economics, having links with Charlemagne in Francia, as well as contact with the Papacy. He established

Raymond and Joyce Williams’s gravestone, situated in a field opposite Clodock churchyard, which is now full. Hatterall Ridge can be seen on the horizon, it marks the line of Offa’s Dyke and the border between England and Wales (we’re in England here).
the use of the penny as a standard in England, with the same silver content as coins in Francia, creating national and international trading.

The remains of conflict cover Wales. Here, in the Black Mountains, and in its many castles. Not ‘just’ symbols, but previous sites, of inter-national, inter-cultural, power struggles. Loaded locations, now defused with their gift shops, romanticised, aestheticised information points, interactive displays and tearooms. The relatively recent widening of recognition for, as well as access to, the Welsh language, bears testimony to its politicized suppression. Largely unrelated to Mediterranean forms, trying to learn it, as I am, effectively puts you in a trench between cultures. A short distance from Williams’s grave is Ewyas Harold, site of the first castle of a Norman lord on Welsh territory. This castle was short-lived, but the Norman conquest shattered and re-formed the power networks of the area. In 1073, the Normans ravaged Ceredigion and Dyfed, moving into areas the ‘English’ had never penetrated. By 1086, the ancient kingdom of Gwent, emerging from Roman Britain and the Silurian people, was erased from the map. Clodock Church itself is of Norman origin. This area is steeped in both the folklore and reality of cultural imperialism and displacement. Further up the Ewyas valley, it is not unusual to see huge Hercules aircraft flying almost impossibly low. Even further up, near to the church at Patricio, lies the torso of a passenger airliner, used in a different era of political resistance, for the SAS to practice on. These themes are certainly relevant to Raymond Williams, both academically and personally:

‘How do people go away from a home? How do they, through education, retain links with a community? What is it about certain human values that make you want to cherish them? These are questions you could ask on the borders of Spain or Afghanistan. Of course it’s a specific Welsh issue, but it’s a passionate world story that he tells.’ (Smith, 2007).

Jonathan Harris, one of the few writers to attempt a rehabilitation of Williams’s tarnished image, has described how a young Edward Said drew comparisons with Williams’s Welsh identity politics, cathecting them into his ‘own Palestinenness in America’ (Harris, 2004: 64). Fred Inglis, in his biography of Williams, situates Said ‘at the intersection of so many borders - Palestine, Columbia University New York, wealth and poverty, man of the idealistic Left in a country where Leftism is intolerable…’ (Inglis, 1995: 14). Williams’s work is translatable, into other languages of course, but other places, cultures and situations too.

Here in the Black Mountains, the landscape also frames the culture. The potential for the mining communities of South Wales to exist was formed thousands of years previously, latent in the chaos of volcanic eruption and glaciation. Bloenenge, one of the Black Mountains, changes geologically half way through. Blaenavon, on the southwest side of it, mined coal and produced iron from the one side rich in minerals. But the nearby towns of Abergavenny and Pandy - on the other side of the mountain - are culturally very different, partly due to this geological accident. So, Raymond Williams’s father worked on the railways, not in the mines. Williams’s concept of ‘cultural materialism’ can be applied here in macro.

James Hamilton described Williams’s ‘popular characterization as a mushy “culturalist”, ostensibly interested only in an impressionistic recovery of “experience” and culture as simply “a whole way of life”’ (Hamilton, 2005: 812). Yet standing in this landscape, there is nothing which is separable. Splitting things into neat, discrete packets, isn’t the point and this ‘popular characterization’ loses its stigma, becomes a merit. Of course, there are dominant themes, border lines, be they geographical or class-cultural, but they are constructed precisely so that we can manage the absolute, the total. Taking myself to this astonishing spot suddenly brings the sum of the area’s narratives together in a huge, overwhelming surge.
Pandy is where Williams was first exposed to class struggle, in the form of a General Strike action during which his father Harry - the signalman at Pandy and more politicised than most - lost his job with GWR in 1926. The event is fictionalised in 'Border Country'. Raymond Williams was only a child when this happened, but the waves of influence rippling out from the event are obvious. It is no surprise that 'Border Country' and 'The Long Revolution' were published virtually back-to-back. Again, Jonathan Harris states that "Williams was exploring representations of merged personal and collective pasts and futures: how both are made and remade in real and varied "discursive forms"" (Harris, 2004: 65). The General Strike framed him as much as the geology framed the industry of the area, and the railways themselves were inseparable from that. Fred Inglis described how, "all his life, Williams simply hated that softening, even tone of the English ruling class even when it was truly meant well, that class drew the best people of the opponent class away from the strong, living webs of connection, and located them at an unbridgeable remove from the places and the people to whom they belonged." (Inglis, 1995: 37).

Yet Inglis is also careful to point out that "Williams himself answered to those voices when they called" (ibid) heading off with a scholarship, eventually becoming 'a Don'. But it's what Williams said when he answered 'those voices' which is important, something true of his contemporaries, Richard Hoggart and later, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, to name some obvious examples. Inglis cites Terry Eagleton's 1988 memorial speech at Conway Hall, describing how Williams routinely said things nobody expected to hear in the upper echelons of privileged academia. Inglis goes on to say that Williams 'broke with the established, calmly superior assumptions and way of talking in England, but did so with a manner, an idiom and diction themselves so unassailably assured that those on the wrong side of the break couldn't see how to stop him. And then, into the space made by the break, he dropped his own calm commonplaces about human connection, about solidarity and equality, about those things we had been most fired by as young idealists...'

Williams stood against conservative literary traditionalism, formulating a new model in 'cultural materialism', which in turn partly gave birth to Cultural Studies as a subject. Jeff Browitt gives as good a potted summary of Williams' project as is possible: He reminds us of 'Williams's central concern with "culture": how it is deeply and unavoidably implicated in the workings of social domination, but also, importantly, of social resistance.' (Browitt: 118-9). This tells us 'not only to how to go about oppositional cultural criticism, but also about how to fashion theoretical responses out of the lived experience of the present and, just as importantly, the moral-political example set by Williams.' (ibid).

Inglis opens his biography with Williams's funeral and reception at the Angel Hotel, Abergavenny. A theatrical gathering of the 'New Left', with walk-on parts by Terry Eagleton and Tariq Ali. For me, the account of Williams's funeral, with its sometimes agonistic, academic celebrities, is much less interesting than the context Inglis places Williams's death in. The sudden shock of his passing in 1988, very near to Margaret Thatcher's third term, heralding trade union defeat and the dawn of a more instrumentalised era, has left its mark, even if that mark takes the shape of an absence for subsequent generations:

'The values that come through at the end of Border Country are the ones that Raymond Williams wanted to emphasise in the 1950s. Could an industrial working class survive the new consumer world of the 1950s, the world of mass advertising, of television? And if it could, then what was the nature of those values beyond particular institutional descriptions, the nature of life lived in detail in the 1940s and 50s? And his answer is in some senses ambiguous, which is that things are changing and that there is no point in simply trying to take that forward in a mechanical fashion.' (Smith, 2007).

I teach Cultural Studies in an art college and show first year undergraduates Williams's very lengthy entry on 'Culture', from Keywords. Culture as a 'way of life' can be a frighteningly wide concept, but from this I try to explain how we might break it down over the coming weeks. One student complained that there was 'too much culture' in one of his lectures. On that day, for his purposes, he had a point. Many of the students are trying to gain entry to the production sites of mass communications and consumerism, the emergence of which both Williams and Hoggart tried to account for. Yet visiting this landscape made me realise the absurdity of such a statement under Williams's terms, as though the student had suddenly complained about having too much water in his water.

It's due to Williams' and Hoggart's creation of the subject as I understand it, as well as some of the political and social processes they were beneficiaries of, that I am teaching at all. This is an important strand of Williams's 'Long Revolution' (1965):

'Williams says that cultural and social formations, deep structures of life within these societies are translatable from one generation to another provided that questions of power and empowerment, of priorities and decision making, are understood to be about conflict. And that conflict is a class conflict.' (Smith, 2007).

Harry Williams, Raymond's father, was eventually re-employed, but Pandy Station itself is now gone, eclipsed by the new road from Hereford to Abergavenny. This road seems to turn Pandy into 'a few, separated clutches of buildings' (Inglis, 1995: 2). Williams's term 'mobile privatisation' (1974) seems painfully literal here, enforced even. Pandy is a location to be missed in a blink as you speed past, on the way to Abergavenny, where shop windows currently display 'SUPERTOWN OR SUPERSTORE' posters. It is clear that Abergavenny has, with its Caffe Nero,
Williams and projected Asda, both yielded to and attempted to resist homogenising pressures. Again, Jonathan Harris has described some recent studies of "placelessness" and the corresponding "placelessnesses" and "displacements" inherent in processes of modernisation, which he relates to Williams's project as a whole (Harris, 2004: 66).

Discussions of class are much more nuanced these days, drawing together complex webs of identity politics, gender and race issues. Jonathan Harris, while attempting to rescue Williams from ignominy, outlines how the expansion of cultural studies into identity politics and globalisation, has both absorbed and overtaken Williams's legacy. Harris claims that he was '...oblivious to virtually all the aspects of identity, body and 'life-style' politics that have come to dominate the interests of cultural studies scholars' (2004: 64). Yet Harris also writes of Williams's optimism, his perhaps historically-situated ability to speak of culture as a connected whole, brimming with possibilities. Williams's project was concerned with the transformation of society. Harris then goes on to describe the fractured, individualistic state of our contemporary cultural discourses (ibid). Elsewhere he has described, via an unfortunate metaphor, how Terry Eagleton's 'The Idea of Culture' finally called time on Cultural Studies' vaunted radicalism: like an exhausted pit, he wanted it closed down.' (Harris, 2001: 109).

Western cultural identity may now lie with how we mix our gender and sexualities with our blend of national identities, ethnicities and single-issue causes. With our Nike and tweed even, or how our iPod shuffle unfolds. All are legitimate, progressive, or at least highly pleasurable, discursive postmodern forms. But I would argue that all of them are linked to wider processes of nature and culture, which do unite us all. The links to broader notions of cultural materialism are explicit, though often, as with many ideological forms, hidden from immediate view. In this way, I see Williams's older, unitary project of cultural studies, now 'discredited' as capitalized 'Cultural Studies', as merely on hold, or latent. It is no coincidence that such an interregnum should occur during our current era of western individualism, underwritten by our often ethically impulses will be as essential to our coming decades as they were to his, and much of his writing remains effective as a set of approaches to them.

The struggles in 'Border Country' may be different to ours, but Williams tried to give us frameworks to address 'struggle' as a subject, which have much more longevity than his own lifespan:

'I think for each generation to rediscover this is to understand that perhaps your grandparents had a sex life and that your uncle and aunt went to the pub, and things happened on the mountain tops, that the worries and fears and psychological difficulties you had were also theirs, in a recognisable location and within recognisable walls. At some level it's quite simply the rediscovery of a family album. You can see the lineaments, it's what in posher society, aristocracies you would call heritage. This is our heritage.' (Smith, 2007).

The intellectual legacy of Williams, coupled with my visit to his final resting place and the landscape it is situated in, yields an acceptance of the temporary, shifting nature of both society and culture. But it also speaks of the importance of understanding and being suspicious of what we are told of the 'natural' or 'normal' processes via which culture, society and their landscapes morph, as well as the often unseen sites of struggle which engender these constant, painful rebirths. I suspect these contrasting impulses will be as essential to our coming decades as they were to his, and much of his writing remains effective as a set of approaches to them.

References:
Clodock and Longtown history.

Williams's fiction has had a rough ride since his death. Yet his unfinished People of the Black Mountains project can retrospectively be seen to shadow Alan Moore's lauded novel 'Voice of the Fire', which also mines layers of time in one location: Iain Sinclair's main excursion from London, Landor’s Tower, also explores many of the ancient and contemporary myths of the area, especially those surrounding the Vale of Ewyas.